

## The Notion of Time in South Slavic Oral Poetry

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The idea of time in oral poetry expresses mythical time - the circular, the recurrent - birth, life, death - aiming at the upholding of tradition. At first sight an oral poem seems isolated, even opposed to the verticality of historical time. Yet reality, historical events and social changes are reflected in the narration process. On the basis of examples from Serbo-Croatian and Bulgarian folk narrative poetry a structural analysis will be attempted in which the complex and very often implicit ties with reality will be discussed.

The research into the representation of time in oral poetry is closely connected with the question of the connection between historical reality and oral narrative. The cultural heritage of the Middle Ages stressed *mythical time*, a cyclic return to the past, not a multitude of pasts but a mythical, ideal past.<sup>1</sup> The 18th and 19th century idea of time began to differ from the mythical idea of cyclic return and more often *historical time* was introduced, a linear projection from past to future.

The category of time is, of course, closely related to that of space in all forms of literature (oral or written). If we consider thus movement as the central expression of time, what then is the end point towards which the epic narrative moves? In the oldest heroic songs<sup>2</sup>, it is a mythical return to the ideal state before the intrusion of the enemy, or it ends with the wedding of the hero.

In general the songs contain scarce references to time. The historical relevance is a complex interaction between historical references (names, places, battles), social information (wedding rituals, folk customs, family behavioural code) and formulaic, symbolic language.

Epic is thus not concerned with new beginnings but with the preservation of the existing order. The future in the true sense of chronological order does not exist, only as the certainty of the renovation of the cycle.

The function of the narrative is not a historiographic rendering of certain events (even in the case of the Kosovo battle), but an esthetic one. The moral behaviour of the dramatis personae and their victory is of primary importance.

Time references in oral poetry are not elements of real historical fact, but rather a *frame*, a background carrying esthetic connotation.

In contrast with the fairy tale, which distinguishes between day and night activities, the action in the epic songs takes place in a sort of perpetual day. It starts

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<sup>1</sup>A. Ja. Gurevič - Čto 'est vremja? - Voprosy literatury, 1968, No.11.

<sup>2</sup>The material used here has been studied from two 19th century collections:

V. St. Karadžić - Srpske narodne pjesme - v. I, II, III, ed. V. Nedić, Belgrade, 1969.

Brotheres Miladinovi - B'lgarski narodni pesni, fotocopy ed. Sofia, 1981.

in most cases at early dawn: "rano rani prije jarkog sunca" (early before the hot sun...). The hero's getting up early is seen as a positive element in his behaviour: a symbol of activity, energy, doing things as one *should*. It also promises the audience a day of action and action is what we get, but in a fascinating way action suspended above the level of realistic time sequence.

This separation from realistic chronology allows a "play" with time. A time outside time, or as Lichačev calls it an "island" in the sea of historical time.<sup>3</sup> This attitude allows the singer to use time according to the emotional rules of the narrative - to *accelerate* (for ex. the building of a church overnight), or to *slow down* between actions - waiting periods vary from 3 days... 3 months... 3 years... 9 years... to 30 years.

What is of central importance in the narrative is not the accuracy of portrayal, but the moral justification that things are as they should be - "nostalgia for Paradise, the desire to find again a transfigured and invulnerable Nature, safe from the cataclysms brought by wars, devastation and conquests".<sup>4</sup>

Two conflicting tendencies with regard to time are at work in the epic narrative:

- a) the static "outside time" quality of the narrative;
- b) the historical credibility, brought about by the use of historical names, places, events. It is not just a means. Here is a general belief in the singer that he/she is telling the story as it was.

The same can be noted in the case of *biographical time*. Only certain ages are mentioned and the dramatis personae seem to be "frozen in age".<sup>5</sup>

Some songs deal with the supernatural strength and intelligence of child heroes and the tragic inability of the grown-ups to appreciate them. But mostly the hero is a young man in the full blossom of physical prowess. He is a static, *mythical age*. He won't grow old and feeble.

It takes a really legendary hero figure like the great Kraljević Marko to be given a "death". But even this is a mythical story - after 300 years of glorious battles, Marko throws his mace in the sea, takes his farewell of "this deceiving world" and falls asleep forever.<sup>6</sup>

Compared to the hero, the other dramatis personae are given only one age reference, if any. His faithful sister, who looks after his sword, horse and falcon, is a young girl of marriageable age.<sup>7</sup> His wife is young and what is more important faithful - "vjerna ljuba". The hero's mother is old and wise.

The hero is the central figure, which dominates the plot and only in relation to him the other characters are given a biography.

The enemy is the lowest on this scale of reference - he is most often denied "lifelike" qualities by not being given any age. Only a worthy adversary such as Musa Kesedžija<sup>8</sup> is allowed more. It could be also due to the fact that in the story he is also the Sultan's foe. We are given to know more about him. He is given a sort of a biography albeit a lesser one. This respect for Musa becomes obvious in the course of the battle between Marko and himself. Different weapons break without the clear win and it is almost by accident that Marko manages to hit him mortally and is almost crushed by dying Musa, who appears to have had 3 hearts - a truly

<sup>3</sup>D. S. Lichačev, *Poetika drevnerusskoj literatury*, Leningrad 1971.

<sup>4</sup>Mircea Eliade - *Myth and Reality*, N.Y. 1959.

<sup>5</sup>S. Ju. Nekljudov draws a number of fine parallels on the subject of biographical time between the bylina and the epic. S. Ju. Nekljudov - *Zeit und Raum in der Byline*, in *Semiotica Sovietica* 1 - Aachen 1986.

<sup>6</sup>V. St. Karadžić - *Srpske narodne pjesme*, vol. II, No. 73.

<sup>7</sup>V. St. Karadžić - *Srpske narodne pjesme*, vol. II, No. 24.

<sup>8</sup>V. St. Karadžić - *Srpske narodne pjesme*, vol. II, No. 66.

mythical attribute. This is a fine example of the best of the epic tradition of the South Slavs and reminds of the chivalric tournaments in the Middle Ages.

As time passes by and we approach the 19th century, epic themes acquire more a regional character - the exploits of the "hajduci", the rebels of the 19th century and the wars for the liberation from the Ottoman yoke. More historical facts - references to places, names. The end of the 19th century also shows a marked individualization of oral poetry, which has become the product of individual singers without the earlier possibilities of national scattering and gradual transformation through oral performance by different singers. Often the artistic quality of such songs is of a lesser degree, since they were not slowly moulded as in the case of the older heroic poetry.<sup>9</sup>

Finally we come to modern times. It seems that if any new songs are being made, they are purely an individual narrative. Many time references and everyday language dominate the narrative, but in the case of gifted, experienced singers, a blend of the old formulaic language can be achieved. I would like to quote here an interesting example of a modern folk song. This song was reported by Martha Forsyth at the Vth Congress of Southeast European studies in September, 1984 in Belgrade.<sup>10</sup>

Apparently this song was spontaneously created by eight Bulgarian grannies - folk singers on their way to a folk song festival in Zagreb in 1977. The song was "born" out of their frustration at having arrived at the wrong station (Piro) and not being met by anyone. So they sat down on their bags at the train station of Piro and bit by bit composed their song. In the view of the above discussion regarding time references, one is struck by the realistic linear storytelling in time:

They went to the train station  
They got on the train  
They took the wrong train  
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They waited all day till noon  
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It was rainy  
the 8 grannies got frozen.

Until a young man comes to them and rides with them on the right train to their final destination.

The song ends with their dressing up for the festival and their performance at the festival hall. This bit reminds strongly of the colourful descriptions of the dressing of the hero before the battle. And in their victorious singing, the exultation after the hero's victory is echoed.

Old formulaic language has crept up here also, only this time with modern connotations. The young man, who comes to "save" the grannies is a young man "unshaven" ("mlado momče neobričeno") and the girl who meets them at the house is a young girl with her "hair unbraided" ("mlada moma nepletena").

These epithets used to denote boys and girls not yet of marriageable age. Here the modern connotation is just what the words mean - a young man with a beard and a young girl with her hair let loose.

In conclusion, folk poetry has become more individualized, more a product of a personal expression, a personal narrative. Realistic time sequences show a strong tie

<sup>9</sup>P. Dinekov - B'lgarski folklor, vol. I, Sofia 1980. Prof. Dinekov discusses in detail the development of the Bulgarian historical oral songs until the 20th century and remarks on the regionality.

<sup>10</sup>Martha Forsyth - A new traditional Bulgarian song. Papers for the Vth Congress of Southeast European Studies, Slavica Publishers, 1984, pp. 158-169.

with the historical reality. The "escape from time", the fabulous, the trans-historical in the narrative belong to previous ages, when this was the only way out of an oppressive reality.

## Pojam vremena u južnoslavenskoj usmenoj poeziji

### SAŽETAK

Ideja vremena u usmenoj poeziji izražava mitsko, cirkularno vrijeme (rođenje, život, smrt), a služi održavanju tradicije. Na prvi se pogled usmena pjesma čini izoliranom, čak suprotstavljenom vertikalnosti historijskog vremena. No, historijski događaji i društvene promjene ipak se očituju u procesu naracije.

Na temelju primjera srpskohrvatske i bugarske usmene narativne poezije autorica razrađuje strukturalnu analizu kojom otkriva složene i često implicitne veze usmene poezije i historijske zbilje.