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COEXISTING GENRES IN
SERBO-CROATIAN EPIC
SONGS (JUNAČKE PESME)

1. One of the fundamental features of a poetic text, as indeed of any esthetic artifact, is the tension between the work as a structured whole and the relative autonomy of its constitutive parts. The dialectical tension between the whole and the parts is implicit in the very nature of a work of art which is built on the dual, yet complimentary principle of the diversity and interdependence of the parts that enter into a broader whole (a com-position), a principle that largely accounts for its unstable equilibrium. The interplay of diversity and interdependence of the parts, which involves the co-presence of discreteness and continuity, of coordination and subordination, of closure and openness may vary according to individual text, literary genres or entire literary traditions. Thus even the highly heterogeneous, "centrifugal" structures which characterize a great deal of contemporary learned (written) poetry exhibit a subtle, latent or camouflaged, form of compositional unity, whereas the distinctive character of the parts is never relinquished even in these more classical literary texts which aim at an integrated, "centripetal" composition.¹

The tendency towards centrifugal structures comprising loosely related, additive and replaceable parts, as well as indeterminate closures (openings and endings), is particularly pronounced in oral, folkloric poetry. The disjointed, mosaic-like fabric of such works was seen by Mukařovský as the "very principle of the semantic structure of the folkloristic work(s) of art." Such works are, according to him, built from "partial units which are relatively independent of one another" and which are "capable of migrating from one whole to another." Mukařovský

cites also the opinion of Gebauer regarding the variable forms of
the openings of folk songs that "besides beginnings with fully re-
alized images [employ] disfigured, stunted and corrupted be-
ginnings and images."²

The above conclusions of Mukarovsky (based primarily on the
study of Czech and Slovak folksongs) are also applicable to the
Serbo-Croatian epic songs whose themes, preambles, epithets and
metaphors do easily migrate from song to song. The relatively
free patterning of their parts has been repeatedly emphasized by
students of the junačke pesme, especially by T. Maretić and Albert
Lord.³ The structure of these songs hinges, according to the latter,
on the highly codified, traditional formula which occurs as a
pervasive and recursive feature in all types of epic songs.

Although Lord restricts unduly the concept of the formula to the
individual line,⁴ it is clear that the oral tradition depends on the
availability of this type of prefabricated poetic material, and that
the creativity of the singer is essentially limited to the variations
embroidered on the traditional forms. A serious shortcoming of
the last two studies is, nevertheless, the lack of attention to the role
of the poetic devices (including the formula) in the structure of the
epic songs, and the general neglect of the constants and variables
in the overall composition of the epic songs.

Another problem which has hitherto been ignored in the study
of the Serbo-Croatian popular epic, and which I shall try to
demonstrate in the ensuing remarks, is that these songs do not
represent a purely epic or narrative genre, but incorporate in their
structure a number of "minor" genres that pertain to the oral tra-
dition, such as the riddle, proverb, epitaph or curse. The highly

². See Jan Mukarovsky, "Detail as the Basic Semantic Unit in Folk Art," in The
Word and Verbal Art: Selected Essays, ed. and trans. John Burbank and Peter
Steiner (New Haven, Conn: Yale Univ. Press, 1977), p. 181 ff. See also J. Gebauer.
"O začátcích v jakých se libují národni písně, zvláště slovanské," Stati
literárnědějepisné, ed. A. Novak (Praha: publisher, 1941), pp pp. 80-81. The
framing devices of folk poetry are also discussed by J. Polivka, "Úvodní a
závěrečné formule slovanských pohadek," Národopisný věstník československý, 20
(Praha: Národopisná Společnost československá, 1927) and Iurii Lotman, "O
modeliruiushchem znachenii poniatii 'kontsa' i 'nachala' v khudozhestvennykh
tekstakh," in Tezisy dokladov vo vtoroi letniej shkole po vtorichnym
moderliruiuschim sistemam (Tartu: 1966).

³. T. Maretić, Naša narodna epika (Zagreb: Znanstvena djela,
Jugoslav. akademija znanosti i umjetnosti, vol 4, 1909); Albert Lord, The Singer of

⁴. Lord, Singer of Tales, p. 57.