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Mise en poeme: Epic (Auto)reflexivity and South Slavic Poetry in the Age of Romanticism

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This paper deals with the discursive phenomenon of reflexivity in the epic poetry of South Slavic romantic poets around the middle of the 19th century. Reflection is here understood as a kind of poetic self-formation procedure of romantic literary subject and his efforts to renovate epic mode in its original form. Starting with concept of "epic Romanticism", in a way specific to South Slavic literatures, the author proceeds by distinguishing basic modes: explicit, implicit, and intertextual reflexivity. While the first two are related to typical romantic affectivity (D. Demeter, F. Prešeren) and/or rhetoric identification with oral folk rhapsodists' tradition (P. P. Njegoš), the third one is marked with so-called "integration story" (I. Mažuranić), or *mise en abyme*, i.e. "the mirror in the text" effect as a medium of artistic auto-perspectivization and possible creative invention which leads to indications of the early pro-modern poetic procedures.

KEYWORDS: South Slavic Romanticism; epic poetry; (auto)reflexivity; intertextuality; integration story; *mise en abyme*

1. Introduction

What we talk about when we talk about literary Romanticism?

Of course, there are many things we can keep in mind (folk spirit, vernacular, or/and nationally oriented understandings of language and culture, emphasized emotionality, ultimate passion, cosmism, escapism, exoticism, etc), and what we'll put first depends on our way of thinking or research priorities. On the other hand, when it comes to modes and genres issues it is hard to disagree with widely accepted statements, such as the one which says that in the period of Romanticism lyric became the poetic norm, in particular when considering the claim that "the majority of lyrics consist of thoughts and feelings uttered in the first person, and the one readily available character to whom these sentiments may be referred is the poet himself" (Abrams, 1953, 85).

Summarized in the pithy German term "Selbstaussprache" (self-expression) and a suggestive English phrase about the "spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings" (W. Wordsworth), this new understanding of lyric poetry, therefore, was often brought into connection with the poet's own person and transparent writing about its inner mental/psychological processes and phenomena. It means that Byron, Shelley, Keats, Brentano, Lamartine, Heine, Leopardi, Pushkin, Mickiewicz, and many other significant or less significant romantic poets all over Europe didn't hesitate to write about their own longings, hopes, raptures, stumbles... testifying that way to the "growing emphasis on the artist himself and the ideal intention or inner spirit of artworks", but also to culturally significant "promotion of genius (...) or an individual form" of expression (Rajan, 2008, 228), in a way unknown until that time.

Thus lyric was promoted into a kind of sovereign verbal shape of modern subjectivity in the making. It seems that philosopher Charles Taylor wasn't wrong when he wrote about the identity dynamics of Romanticism as a "model of the self-realization of a subject, compelling and defining itself in the process of self-manifestation" (Taylor, 1989, 416). It is perhaps the most enduring, exciting quality of Romantic lyricism because even today it makes possible the reader's vivid understanding of emerging modern individualism, whether in general subjective or only personal, intimately experienced form. Hence, we really have

lyrical Romanticism in mind when we think about this turning point in modern literature and culture.

2. South Slavic literatures and the phenomenon of epic Romanticism

What we talk about when we try to talk about epic Romanticism?

First of all, it should be said that this kind of provisional understanding stems from the regionally understood poetic practice of South Slavic literatures, mostly of the second quarter and first decades of the second half of the 19th century. It means it is noticeable that in the aforementioned literatures – and primarily in Serbian, Croatian, and Slovenian artistically valuable poetry of the Romantic era – there is a tendency that is characterized by turning poetic attention from “the individual and private towards the collective and public form of existence” (Brajović, 2020, 276), it means from lyrical to epic vision and what is inherent in it.

That is why so-called small literatures from the age of Romanticism today sometimes have been named also as “literatures in the function of nation constitution” (Flaker 1986, 66–67), which implies the presence of politically and culturally more transparent collective features than in Western European literatures of the time. And although there are also significant and distinctive South Slavic lyrical poets of the era (B. Radičević, S. Vraz, P. Preradović, J. J. Zmaj, L. Kostić, etc.), in the literary memory of the region more prominent are the poets of the epic vocation.

Krst pri Savici (*Baptism on the Savica River*, 1835) by Slovenian poet France Prešeren, *Smrt Smail-age Čengića* (*The Death of Smail-aga Čengić*, 1846) by Croatian poet Ivan Mažuranić, and *Gorski vijenac* (*The Mountain Wreath*, 1845) by Montenegrin/Serbian poet Petar Petrović Njegoš – those are long, narratively structured romantic poems that are still considered exceptionally influential literary achievements of their time. Even despite the facts that Njegoš’s poem was actually written in dramatic form and that Prešeren’s poem has its lyrical counterpart in the form of his famous *Sonetni venec* (*Sonnet Cycle*, 1833), the three mentioned works even today are read and often vigorously discussed as a crucially important

and also controversial identity formative narratives about nationally defining topics and problems.

It is also possible to add to this corpus some perhaps less appreciated but in many respects epically representative poems, for example, *Grobničko polje* (*The Grobnik Field*, 1842) by Croat poet and Mažuranić predecessor Dimitrija Demeter, as well as *Glas kamenštaka* (*The Voice of the Stone Man*, 1833), *Ogledalo srpsko* (*Serbian Mirror*, 1845) and *Svobodijada* (*Freedom Poem*, 1854), early or posthumous works by Petar Petrović Njegoš the author of famous *The Mountain Wreath* and *The Light of the Microcosm* (*Luča mikrokozma*, 1845) poems.

Like, for example, Pushkin's *Ruslan y Lyudmila* (1820) and *Poltava* (1829) on the East Slavic side, or Mickiewicz's *Pan Tadeusz* (1834), and partly like Mácha's *Máj* (1836) on the West Slavic side, all those South Slavic poems also represent "efforts to create the genre of romantic and (particularly) national epic that was supposed to mark the end and/or beginning of a new era", because "these literatures regarded the creation of the national epic as indispensable for their emancipation" (Fried, 2002, 14–15). And all of that of course in contrast to the omnipresent awareness that "romantic epic as a genre appears a contradiction in terms, in that the poetical profile of the epic genre squares oddly with the lyric-oriented poetics of romantic poetry" (Leerksen, 2002, 21).

To put it succinctly, it is enough to say that "the Romantic epic remains outside the conventional generic definitions and distinctions due to the re-creation of the genre, which in a certain sense parallels the re-creation and re-writing of history" (Nikolova, 2002, 165). That's precisely why epic production in so-called national literatures of discontinuous development is possible to talk about the phenomenon of *mutual legitimization of epic poetry and historiography*. It means that – thanks to the famous freedom of the romantic imagination – selected historiographic data can serve as a kind of non-binding template to the poet and his aspiration to re-invent collective identity in new circumstances, just as thus shaped epic fiction to the reader can also serve as a culturally privileged kind of "testimony" about national past and its glory (cf. Brajović, 2020, 35–36).

That is exactly what we find in the notable works of South Slavic epic Romanticism. Whether those, often fragmentary exposed epics narrate about the acceptance of Christianity or battles with Mongolian/

Turkish conquerors in the range of nearly a thousand years, at their core is always recognizable the same issue – identity self-understanding of domicile community and prominent individuals faced with the trials of groundbreaking historical changes and their far-reaching cultural/political results.

Such an approach, which treats collective and mostly collectively representative individual urges, requires adequate narrative strategies. In the first place, it refers to a steady *epic storyteller*, who usually speaks in a steady epic meter and “does not indulge in any mood and does not feel one way or another from moment to moment” (Staiger, 1963, 84). That means “he wants nothing more than to be seen as a storyteller, a man who sees things and presents them in a certain way”, because “the epic poet does not delve into the past like a lyricist who evokes, he remembers (...) and maintains a spatial and temporal distance” (Staiger, 1963, 86). Whether we speak about Homer and Ovid, for example, this kind of detachment is a constant of classical epics. The ancient storytellers are not personally involved in the events, they are observers and possible commentators, but not participants in a direct or indirect way.

However, when it comes to epics of the new times, things are still different. The narrator’s distance is no longer the rule, and the change of tone and mode is no longer an exception or a precedent.

3. Explicit reflexivity and affectivity

So what we really talk about when we talk about romantic narrations of epic provenance?

First of all, it is hard to avoid the observation that the ontological position of the epic narrator in romantic poetry is not necessarily outside the world he is narrating about as was the case in classic antiquity and centuries later. Namely, he is often on the edge of that fictional world, which means he is the non-active but emotionally and cognitively often interested “inhabitant” of that world, someone who observes and knows a lot about the events he talks about as if he had personal experience with that world. Because of that fact, we are able to say that the epic storyteller in Romanticism – with a pair of characteristic exceptions that

will be exposed – is no more a figure whom we identify with the typical ancient wise old man, such as Homer or similar legendary folk rhapsodists, a kind of abstract oral tellers excluded from the narrated world.

This new kind of epic narrator is obviously much more sensible and thoughtful than the older one so it is possible to say he is a reflexive observer of what happened around him or what he still sees in his consciousness and imagination as representations of past events and people. A good example we can find at the very beginning of *The Grobnik Field* poem by Dimitrija Demeter, where the narrator says:

Ja od Brente vidjeh obale zelene,
 Čuh žuborit njene bistre vode,
 Pokraj kojih grleći se hode
 Umjetnost i narav ko sestre rođene.
 [...]
 U svoj hlad me mrkle primiše maslene
 Od arkvajskih brežuljaka milih,
 U ljubavi gdje svak listak cvili,
 U ljubavi cvate, u ljubavi vene.
 [...]
 Slatke uspomene, najmiliji dio
 Mog života! – Jedno samo polje
 U srce mi ustani se bolje,
 Na kojem sam jednom tako lijepo snio! (vers. 1–4, 9–12, 21–24).

[I saw the green shores of the Brenta river, / I heard the murmur of its clear water, / By which they walk, embracing each other, / Art and Nature, like two born sisters. (...) / The dark olive trees took me in their shade, / From the hills of Arkava, I drew them, / In a love where every leaf whimper, / In love they bloom, in love they wither. (...) / Sweet memories, the dearest part / Of My life! – One single field / Settled down in my heart better, / Field on which I once had such a beautiful dream!].¹

1 This one and the next translations of South Slavic poets and their verses to English are made by the author of the text. Poetic quotations are not exclusively

The storyteller here is obviously the man of new ages, who has his own sweet memories² placed in an idyllic Italian passage, so-called *locus amoenus*, a place of undisturbed joy. But at the same time, he has also a more permanent memory, that contains the collective past of his folk and the pseudohistorical, legendary memory of the Battle on the Grobnik field where Croats allegedly defeated the Tatar's/Mongol troops in the first half of the 13th century. And although because of that Grobnik field could be easily considered as a typical *locus horridus*, a place of horror, for the epic narrator it actually becomes *locus gloriae*, a place of glory, and as such it surpasses even the beautiful places of his youthful pleasures. "Tu nek Hrvat uči koja mu je cijena / Tu nek crpe hrabrost, ponos, volju" (vers. 53–54) ("Let the Croat learn his value there / Let him draw courage, pride, and will there"), the narrator will therefore say at the end of this introductory reminiscence.

Then it would not be an exaggeration if say that this situation is exactly what happened when the typical romantic and/or lyrical subject goes from personal "overflow of powerful feelings" to collectively and patriotic recognizable affectivity of basically epic kind, which almost always is related to imagined national past and recollection of its imagined and/or real, identity-defining moments. And although the epic genre "evolves in a process of constant negotiation with other genres", this interaction is not the usual one, because according to scholars the main generic relation through the history of literature is concentrated on "the impact of tragedy on the formal characteristics, the thematic focuses, and the political outlook of epic" (Ambühl, 2019, 186).

This new kind of involvement of the romantic poet or personally/collectively engaged subject in the poem, his positioning, be it just immediate and marginal, among other participants of a fictional world – or timely comparable worlds, in cases like this, which put as parallels past and actual experiences – could be thought as a poetic event of a special kind. While a lyrical poem, understood from the genre point of view,

marked with references to the pages but by the numerical status of the verses, so that the reader can easily find them in any available edition.

2 In this context it is symptomatic to note that in the first edition of *The Grobnik Field*, the poet felt the need to add "From the diary of Dr. Demeter" in the subtitle.

usually implies expressive mono-perspective (Lamping, 1989), this kind of transgression in a nominally epic poem, with its usual distribution of active characters and their mental or psychological poly-perspectivism, undoubtedly implies a kind of rhetorical and structural hybridity.

Although his sayings are clearly directed to *internal relations* in the autonomously presented world of poetry, right here it is reasonable to think about specific teller status as less reliable and also more suggestive than in classical epic narratives with their omniscient narrators, who by literary conventions see and know everything but also exist outside the fictional world and somehow are distant, a bit strange to the modern reader and his sensibility. "This narrative, my friend! Hath chiefly told / Of intellectual, fostering love, / Dispensing truth (...) / So was I favored – such my happy lot / Until that natural graciousness of mind / Gave way to overpressure from the times / And their disastrous issues" (Book XII, 44–46, 49–52), poetically confesses William Wordsworth in *The Prelude* (1805), unique kind of new age epic poem about different, not any more heroic topics on "growth of a poet's mind", thus marking the spot on which in certain works and in their own way stood also significant poets of the age, like Keats, Byron, Hugo, Goethe, and others.

It seems that this new, liminal modus of the poet's/narrator's emphatic presence is something that is characteristic of Romanticism, and also far-reaching influential, because it opens possibilities, later also used in early modern prose fiction as means of affectively mediated reflection which suggests emotional and mental closeness of subjects in the literary world and outside it. That is how initially lyric reflection in a changed context grows into a more comprehensive artistic mode of figurative identification of personal and suprapersonal, past and present, collective and individual instances.

But in the South Slavic context, as we already saw, it can function even when it comes to attempts at the re-creation of heroic modes and narrating topics on the parallel existence of archaic and modern circumstances or subjects. In Prešeren's *Baptism on the Savica River*, which is a narrative about the early ages of the 8th century and about the pagan Slavs' acceptance of Christianity on the territory of today's Slovenia, the reader is faced with an odd situation in which the poet-storyteller, the man of the 19th century and early liberal ages in making, with

personal affective investment comments the acts and decisions of fictional characters as his virtual mates or compatriots. After the stanzas about the happy reunion of the main character named Črtomir with his spouse and pagan priestess Bogomila, the narrator addresses enraptured lovers:

Naj pevec drug vam srečo popisuje,
 ki celo leto je cvetla obema
 [...]

 ki ni ko meni mu veselje tuje,
 ki srečna ga ljubezen v prsah vnema,
 pijanost njij'no, ki tak hitro mine,
 pregnana od ločitve bolečine (Prešeren 1987, 94).

[“Let another poet happiness describe / that bloomed for both of you all year long (...) / let him, who’s no stranger to joy, like me / who has no love happiness in the chest / let him describe rapture that passes quickly, / driven away by the pain of farewell.”]

At first glance, it seems that the poet-narrator doesn’t show typical romantic compassion to the happy couple. In fact, it is all about a kind of, let’s say, preventive negative empathy, related to the possible avoidance of predicted disappointment that Črtomir will experience later, at the end of the poem, after he finds out that Bogomila is lost for him because she became a Christian nun once forever. Exactly that is obvious if a reader takes a look again at the introduction sonnet – that precedes the poem itself – in which the poet says, summarizing all future events: “Pokopal misli visokoteče, / želja nespolnjenih sem bolečine, / ko Črtomir ves up na zemlji sreče” (“I buried high-flying thoughts / and the pain of unfulfilled desires, / like Črtomir did with all his hope for earthly happiness”).

In a way, the poet-narrator is a kind of early modern Črtomir, that Črtomir who looks at himself in the fictional, poetically reflexive “mirror” of his beautifully composed verses and sees all that is yet to come for the defeated pagan, or perhaps for the man of modern profane times who probably could be seen as a new “pagan” due to his wondering about the meaning of existence in a world where gods alternate with human

understandings. This is why it is possible to conclude that the whole narration between the “Introduction” of the poem and its end turns away from external action toward the hero’s spirituality and mentality (Paternu, 1977, 124).

Because of that, it would not be wrong to say this self-mirrored ancient-and-modern hero, who at the end of the poem must give up his personal desires to become a Christian missionary, i.e. to serve a newborn community of his age, marks specific epochal ambiguity. Such an outcome of the narrative perhaps allows us to think about the transformation of Prešeren’s work from the pattern of neo-pagan to a neo-Christian epic in a way, because it fits into the tendency that gave birth to the pre-modern vernacular epic which “continues the practice of structural imitation, transformation, and (in)novation of epic structures from (...) classical epic models” (Reitz, Finkmann, 2019, 6). But it also allows a conclusion about the ambivalent meaning of the hero’s personal transformation. On the one hand, he represents romantic, individual, and passionate individuum. On the other hand, he is also anti-romantic, self-denying, and self-subjugating – therefore perhaps the most contradictory character in the significant South Slavic poems of the age.

That is right what can be named as “*identical diversity*, which is irreducible and perhaps other than a narratively inexpressible measure of the romantic understanding of identity as a meaningful construction that arises in a constantly oscillating range from individual to universal dimensions of existence” (Brajović, 2020, 303). And such a constellation is crucially related to the very quality of the epochal vision of the world. “Reflection (reflexio) does not have to do with objects themselves”, explains Kant in his famous *Critique of Pure Reason* approaching his doctrine of *transcendental reflection*, “but is rather the state of mind (...) It is the consciousness of the relation of given representations to our various sources of cognition” (Kant, 1998, 366). Thus understood, the reflexively subjective and at the same time controversial power of our mind appears as one of the most important factors of romantic, i.e. idealistic thinking, which – from Kant to Hegel, and also further – identifies three complementary “‘essentialities’ of reflection, basically, the ‘laws’ of all reflective thoughts, as they sometimes called (identity, difference, and contradiction)” (Pippin, 1989, 210).

Understood in that context, and similar to the example quoted from Demeter's *The Grobnik Field*, the presence of the lyrically shaded, personally interested poet-narrator in the epic projected structure of *Baptism on the Savica River* in a suggestive way testifies to the ultimate urge for (auto)reflection as one of the most far-reaching features of literary Romanticism too. To reflect the Self, individual in collective, or collective in individual, with all that also implies – that was maybe one of the most universal traits of romantic poetics, which over and over again asks for its imaginative and rhetoric adequate expression.

4. Implicit reflexivity and orality

Considering the above, what do we have in mind when we want to talk about non-explicit (auto)reflexivity?

Openly self-transparent and self-referent subjectivity, like these manifested in the previous examples, could be the most noticeable, but not the only form of this poetic feature of Romanticism. As is already hinted, the will for recuperation and renewal of epic poetry was inherent to Romanticism. In the historical context of rising awareness about the importance of vernacular heritage that was a logical consequence of the romantic need to return to the beginnings, i.e. early and archaic ways of artistic representation which were closest to imagined origins of the folk spirit and its culture. This tendency in fact had two main purposes – “On the one hand it was an urge for the reconstruction of epic totality for the national ideologies needs, and on the other hand there was the making of epic poetry to find the balance between tradition and modernity” (Juvan, 2002, xxxii).

However, the fact is that in so-called great national literatures in Europe that urge didn't find its appropriate artistic fulfilment, because attempts to re-create the epic genre in its original spirit, so to speak, were far less successful than the accommodation of epic form, the contemporary topics and needs. But it has got realization in an indirect way – by mimicry in imitation of the exemplary epic mode. Already mentioned thanks to the modernization of the epic narrative interest, one of the pioneers of British Romanticism William Wordsworth also contributed

to writing in the manner of older epic production. At the very beginning of the 19th century, Wordsworth namely wrote a “modernized” version of “Selection from Chaucer” to try to slightly adapt the almost five hundred year old style and manner of the author of *Canterbury Tales*, adding at the same time that “no further deviation from the original has been made than was necessary for the fluent reading and instant understanding” (Wordsworth, 2006, 658).

Except for being stylish, the words about “deviation from the original” may also reveal an unquenchable longing for being “originally” epic in modern times, and of course also awareness of not being able to do that. Imitating old bards by intervening slightly in their verses to accept their immortal epic spirit could easily be seen as a kind of optimal retro poetic projection that aims to excerpt the best of past greatness and include it in a disguised supra-form of Romanticism. It seems right that in a romantic (auto)reflexive space in which, trying to see themselves in a symbolic verbal “mirror” as worthy successors of ancient bards, early modern or pre-modern poets only succeed to recognize the elusiveness of such a position.

Ambiguity is therefore once again an unavoidable outcome of this sophisticated ambition. Identification with Others is the best imaginable version of one’s own capabilities – it is romantic and non-romantic at the same time. It implies overcoming personal boundaries for the sake of something much greater, which was inherent to Romanticism, but it also means losing subjective autonomy and self-awareness in a way, which was typical for the age of idealism too. However, Wordsworth’s later poetic development shows that it is possible to use this ambiguity with good results in the changed forms of poetry.

There is at least one similar example in a South Slavic space – the poetry of Petar Petrović Njegoš, probably the most appreciated writer of Serbian and Montenegrin Romanticism. Like the author of *The Prelude* and *Lyrical Ballads*, Njegoš also tried to adopt a poetic manner of epical tradition, but in doing that he reached out to oral folk poetry and its treasure. “Our folk poems (...) some have compared to Homer’s and Ossian’s epic”, wrote he in the “Preface” to the *Serbian Mirror* consisted predominantly of Montenegrin oral narratives in verses, which were collected so that “if some [folk] singer (...) sang a song well,

he was immediately taken to the scribe to write it down" (Njegoš, 1967a, 11). The book is therefore made up of poems that have become a collective good, and actually represent recorded versions of what typical folk singers performed on certain occasions mostly with vernacularly characteristic instrument named fiddles ("gusle").

This is symptomatic in a way. Unlike Vuk Stefanović Karadžić, who was exclusively a professional collector of Serbian folk poetry, Njegoš was first and foremost a poet, a very successful poet, but here he appears also as an arranger and editor who has the need to publish oral poems in written form. It seems that it is not unreasonable to say that doing that the Montenegrin ruler and writer was guided by the kind of identification with the figure of the folk singer/rhapsodist as a kind of epic role model. After all, it is well-known that the author of *The Mountain Wreath* in his writing career also tried to translate famous folk epic poems such as *The Letter About Igor's Regiment* and *The Illiad*, although both of them were actually translated from Russian.

To understand this urge we probably can use the help of Albert Lord, well known interwar researcher and theorist of Balkan and South Slavic folk epic. In an often-cited scholarly book about Serbo-Croatian and Greek oral poetry within the so-called Homeric question, among other things he notices that "the singer of tales is at once the tradition and an individual creator", explaining then that:

[h]is manner of composition differs from that used by a writer in that the oral poet makes no conscious effort to break the traditional phrases and incidents (...) To him they are not merely necessary, however; they are also right. He seeks no others, and yet he practices great freedom in his use of them because they are themselves flexible. (...) His traditional style also has individuality, and it is possible to distinguish the songs of one singer from those of another... (Lord, 1971, 4-5).

A traditional and individual style at the same time, as well as "great freedom" in the use of epic tools, could be something Njegoš would subscribe to as his understanding of what attracted him to oral poetics. It is in fact the flexibility of the folk poetic manner which thereby interests him. And as it has been said, flexibility is related to the possibility of

variations in a recognizable and solid frame of metric, formulaic, rhetorical, and phrasal patterns of oral poetics. As it is known, oral folk poets or rhapsodists very often made so-called variants of already-existing epic poems by correcting their style, rhetorical solutions, some episodes, or even characters' features, and still firmly staying within the range of the same narrative universe.

Being *flexibly free* in this context above all means acquiring the skill of generally submitting to ways of speaking/writing that are much older than the poet/rhapsodist himself, with the final goal of recognizing one's own "voice" in a well-composed bundle of another similarly shaped epic "voices". If that sounds a little bit odd to the well-known romantic preference of a poet's individual genius it is necessary to know that South Slavic poetry of the epoch is calibrated to affirm the previously mentioned "*identical different* existence which in the field of epic Romanticism is, as a rule, loyally surrendered to the self-determining totality of common existence" (Brajović, 2020, 305).

That is exactly why the collector-and-author of *Serbian Mirror* searches for his own "voice" by carefully "listening" to previous "voices" of the collective tradition. The title metaphor – "mirror" – is a logical expression of such understood implicit and imitative poetic (auto)reflexivity. In a way, the epic romantic poet is merely a verbal "reflection" of the community's predominant heroic memory and its cultural agent in a figure of many times appeared folk rhapsodist and his verbal expressions. Auto-suspension of full personal artistic freedom thus becomes an aesthetically shaped, symbolic function of remembrance of the more important nation's social and political longing for freedom. He namely limited his own personal creative freedom up to a certain extent in order to express much more importantly the freedom wish of the imagined collective persona of his compatriots.

This imaginatively lavish freedom wish is the consequence of the centuries-long imperial subjugated status of South Slavic territories/communities under the rule of the Ottoman Empire or Habsburg Monarchy. Then the above-described retro-tendency in approximate analogy with internationally recognized colonial relations in postcolonial theory context perhaps could be also understood as "a peculiarly compensatory antimodern valence (...) given in the very form of the work", which

means that “the form in question – the neo-epic – was itself thoroughly riven from within (...) the contradictory currents of modern instrumentality, on the one hand, and romantic mitigations, if not negations, of clock time (...) on the other” (Sahota, 2018, 7–9).

Be it named *neo-epic* or simply *retro-epic*, the state of a poetic mind which produces this kind of phenomenon is also undoubtedly marked with ambiguity. Writing in a traditional epic manner for Njegoš – but also for some other South Slavic poets – was the first choice because reflecting an archaic way of heroic speaking was supposed to be a pledge of one and the same continuous libertarian impulse. And that impulse is the political and also subtle ideological background of the entire poetic adventure which leads the author to the ancient past and its cultural customs, testifying that way about *external relations* to the elder text but also to the contemporary freedom-will as his decisive creative impulses.

At the very beginning of *The Voice of the Stone Man*, his early attempt with long epic forms made a whole decade before *Serbian Mirror*, Njegoš noted that this work is “a poem about the heroic deeds of Montenegro, written with an unskilful pen but imbued with a free spirit” (Njegoš 1967b, 227). It seems obvious that “unskilfulness” here in the first place is semantically related to the exemplary manner of folk heroic poems because even a cursory glance at verses shows that they aren’t made in the vernacularly usual epic manner, as ten syllabus lines, but polymetrically (from six to twelve, fourteen or even eighteen syllabi), which means the author wasn’t yet able to shape the verbal content into artisanal solid and traditionally established meter and rhythm.

On the other hand, *Freedom Poem*, written almost at the same time but printed only just after the author’s death, shows much more formal skilfulness, for it is made consistently in eight-syllabi verses, approximately six thousand and five hundred, divided into ten parts, which makes it the longest epic work by Njegoš at all. However, reaching out to original oral poetic skill means here more than a technical achievement because it makes possible identification with representatives of that skill and its traditional use, i.e. the essential meaning of the form of the epic poem.

It would be not wrong to say that *Freedom Poem* is a really transparent product of the poet’s strong will to reflect faithfully letter but also the spirit of the oral tradition. “Daj mi pjevat slavna djela / otačastva

braniteljah, / njih junaštva kazat falna”) (vers. 10–12) [“Let me sing the glorious deeds / of the defenders of the fatherland, / let me say their heroism praiseworthy”] – that’s how the poem begins, at the same time invoking the Muse (“O visoka neba kćeri” [“Oh tall daughter of Heaven”]), which undoubtedly can be interpreted as the obvious influence not only of vernacular Serbian/Montenegrin but the wider, probably Greek oral tradition and its topic. And precisely that could be seen as Njegoš’s personal poetic mark, namely interpolation of the universal features and literary adaptations into the domestic contents or poetic manners.

That is also what he’ll constantly do later in a much more diverse way when he was writing famous long poems such as *The Mountain Wreath* and *The Light of the Microcosm*, mixing genres (epic and dramatic), cultural traditions (Serbian/Montenegrin, Hellenic, Biblical, esoteric, etc.), and concrete poetic influences (oral folk poem, Serbian poet S. Milutinović, Milton, Pushkin, and some other Russian poets, etc.). Yet here epic reflexivity is still structurally prominent and superior, for instance in the speaks of the figurative collective personality of “Kolo” (Circuit).

“Bog se dragi na Srbe razljuti / za njihova smrtna sagraženja. / Naši cari zakon pogaziše, / počеше se krvnički goniti, / jedan drugom vadit oči žive...” (vers. 198–202) [“Dear God made angry with the Serbs / for their mortal sins. / Our tsars trampled the law, / began to persecute each other, / put out each other’s eyes alive...”, etc.] – this is the beginning of the first speech of “Kolo”, made in asymmetric ten-syllabi verses typical for Serbian oral epic poetry, expressively reflecting, i.e. irresistibly evoking rhetoric manner, ethic attitude, and often used topics of the common-spoken folk from old times, in a way also similar to the ancient Greek tragedy-chorus as a collective literary character (cf. Brajović, 2020, 97–103). Verbally surrounded by the sayings and also narrated doings/acting of the individual actors of Njegoš’s work, that speech must acquire a different meaning than the one it would have if it were the only verbal content of an oral epic poem. That is just one little example of what happens when poetic reflexivity changes its original oral epic use. Multiplication of voices and personal attitudes unavoidably change the structure, meaning, and also understanding of what is said.

And although it’s not so obvious because above mentioned example is a matter of imitating an archaic manner, from a somewhat aesthetically

wider point of view that poetic procedure perhaps could be understood also as one of the inventive features of South Slavic epic Romanticism and its literary legacy.

5. Intertextual reflexivity and *mise en abyme* effect

Then again: What we talk about when we talk about poetic reflection “inside” the new-old epic structure of the age of Romanticism?

The last conclusion of the previous chapter implies that the appearance of folk-inspired epic (auto)reflexivity in the very “heart” of the romantic literary work is not necessarily to be thought of as the exclusive expression of retro-poetics. The real meaning of oral folk inheritance actually depends on its specific use in new cultural or literary contexts.

To show how it functions in the complex network of relations that can appear within the artistic literary structure we choose just a single, but exemplary case study. It’s *The Death of Smail-aga Čengić* by Ivan Mažuranić, another poem on the fight for freedom under the rule of the Ottoman Empire, which could easily be marked as the magistral topic of the South Slavic epic Romanticism poetry.

In the fourth part of the poem named “Harač” (“Tribute”) the anonymous auctorial narrator reports about the tribute torture of Christian people by Muslim forces, and right after that also about the will of the main character, Smail-aga, to listen to an oral poem, sung by the episodic character named Bauk who performed it accompanied with the fiddle. Introducing the recognizable figure of folk rhapsodist, the narrator then for a while delivers narration to him to shape it in the typical manner of South Slavic epic poetry:

Mili Bože, čuda velikoga,
 Kakav bješe Rizvan-aga silni
 [...]
 Kupi aga careva harača,
 Tvrda raja daje i ne daje.
 Gdje od glave po žut cekin ište,
 Otud često ni bakrena nema;

Gdje od ognja po debela ovna,
 Daju mu ga, rebra mu se vide;
 A gdje za noć mladanu djevojku,
 Otuda mu kužne babe nema (vers. 951–952, 961–968).

[“Dear God, look a great miracle, / How powerful Rizvan-aga was (...) / Aga collects the emperor’s tribute, / Hard people give and do not give it to him. / Where from every head the yellow sequins he asks, / There comes often not even copper; / Where from the domestic fire he asks a fat ram, / They give it to him, but its ribs are visible; / And where for the night he asks a young girl, / He barely gets a sickening old woman.”]

At least two levels of epic (auto)reflexivity are related to this telling within telling or this *text within the text*. The first of them concerns *external relations* to oral folk poems and their typical *incipit* (“Dear God, look a great miracle”, et cetera), that is, stylish and rhetorical formulas³ that make possible listeners’ identification with the specific world-view of ancient epic habitus and its contemporary reappearance for the purpose of restoring supposed original collective spirit and its values.

The second one concerns *internal relations* within Mažuranić’s poem itself. Namely, at the beginning of the same part of the poem, in which we read the above-mentioned rhapsodist’s saying in the oral folk manner, it is also possible to find very similarly formulated verses, but this time expressed by the narrator of the whole poem as the author’s linguistic agent of a kind. “Smail-aga krvav harač kupi”, says the epic narrator, adding “Pak rasturi haračlije ljute, / (...) Ter od glave po žut cekin ište, / A od ognja po debela ovna, / I za noću obredom djevojku” (vers. 488, 491, 493–495) [“Smail-aga bloody tribute takes, / (...) So he sends angry tributers, / (...) From every head the yellow sequins he asks, / From the domestic fire he asks a fat ram, / And for the night he asks a young girl.”].

Repetition of the very similar or practically identical formula(tion)s related to the two different characters, of which one, Smail-aga, is the

3 Citing Milman Parry, Albert Lord says that a formula is “a group of words which is regularly employed under the same metrical conditions to express a given essential idea” (Lord, 1971, 30).

action (anti)hero of the whole poem who really existed in the regional history (cf. Živančević, 1988, 194–208), and the other, Rizvan-aga, is the character who is only referred to as a kind of metaphoric Double of the first because he also represents Turkish Empire local/regional viceroy who terrorizes the common people – that is a very special situation which allows us to think and to speak about a poetic gemination of the oral epic figures.

The theory of epic narration recognizes this kind of concisely repeated and elsewhere transmitted plot with the name of *integration story*, that is “story which is narrated by some actor in a way that makes an impression of fully independent insert” but it is actually a kind of structural *pivot* because “it narrates more concise and general at the same time – with the help of other characters and opportunities – something crucially important about the main character or the main problem of the work as a whole”; in the sum, it means that “integration story puts the basic plot of the work in a wider framework, at the existential position of that which doesn’t happen to one isolated character (...) within his narrow world but to every man who finds himself in similar circumstances” (Flašar, 2017, 71).

Inside Mažuranić’s epic poem about a vain tyrant who believes that nothing can stand in his way *integration story* – whose center is Rizvan-aga’s arrogance towards other people – shows not only plot similarity with the main plot but also a deeper psychological and paradigmatical coincidence. As Rizvan-aga despises the common people and which later became the cause of his physical and psychological downfall (the scene with a horse jumping and falling over the lying villagers) so Smail-aga also has no respect for the Christian people but also for his own soldiers (the scene with the villagers being speared but the Turkish chieftain being wounded). That mental blindness for the value of the lives of the other, no matter if they are Christians or Ottomans, became the basis of the complete existential failure of both of them: fatal absence of human empathy and consequently an inability to see and understand what is necessary to do in order to escape a complete breakdown of their own personal ambitions. That’s why Rizvan-aga’s life story really becomes a symbolically summarized *integration story* about the fate of Smail-aga, and maybe every other cruel autocrat in all times and similar circumstances.

In a somewhat different theoretic context related not only to existential but also to the artistically essential status of characters and stories, this complex configuration can be easily observed as an *ontologically mirrored situation* of a kind that reflects the externally typical oral folk circumstances into internally doubled, i.e. identical plot figurations.

However, if we remind us that even the story related to Smail-aga has *incipit* ("Dear God, look a great miracle...") which evokes not really mimetic but fictitiously typical circumstances from the folk poetry and its rhetorical formulas at once becomes clear that there is possible to speak about ontologically multiple mirroring (folk poetry manner – art poetry about real events – "folk poetry" manner imitated within art poetry) as an immanent poetical principle of this especially interesting aspect of Mažuranić's probably most famous literary work. In other words, in *The Death of Smail-aga Čengić* we meet epic characters and (anti)heroes who in a way repeat each other life story, but also – on an artistically comprehensive level – they repeat or reflect linguistically and narratively constructive moments of great South Slavic oral tradition canonized by both readers and researchers.

This kind of ontologically based understanding of what we also knew as the formally understood *epic integration story* in the recent science of literature and art has often been named the *mise en abyme* or "the mirror in the text" effect. To put it succinctly, "The *mise en abyme*, as means by which the work turns back on itself, appears to be a kind of *reflexion*", and "its essential property is that it brings out the meaning and the form of the work" (Dällenbach, 1989, 8). In our opinion, the most important feature of this brief definition is *the manifesting connection between the reflexive act and the possible meaning(s) of the artistic work*. It seems that right in that feature both previously explained modes of epic (auto) reflection meet each other in inseparable unity – extratextual and intratextual, external and internal, explicit and implicit, rhetorically expressed and alluded to at the same time.

In fact, the *mise en abyme* is one of the ultimate, most transparent consequences of auto-referential artistic consciousness, and also undeniable testimony of creative capability for self-understanding and self-representing in a gesture of boundless auto-reflection. As some famous elder paintings of European art history, *Las Meninas* by Velasquez

or *The Arnolfini Marriage* by Van Eyck, for example, which literally stage mirroring potentials of artistic self-awareness, literary works can also create a self-reflecting effect. The truth is that this kind of (auto)reflection is a kind of verbal repetition which only in narratively specified *context* suggests situations-mirroring. That means: in difference to painting skills, which explicitly depict a “natural” visual reflection of things and beings, literature implies unnaturalness, i.e. metaphorization, and asks for the adequate reader’s conceptualization of complexly made linguistical contents.

In addition to this, it’s necessary to notice – as philosophers from Bergson to Deleuze did – that depicted or verbally suggested “Mirror A cannot reflect mirror B without being *always already* a different subject reflecting a different object”, which is to say that “the subject and object of the mobile mirror bear not a ‘coded’ identity (...) but only a ‘situational’ one, deriving from here and now constellation” (Dickmann, 2019, 25). In the outcome, it could easily mean that “in *mise en abyme*, as in the double mirror, a subject of reflection becomes retroactively its object” (Dickmann, 2019, 26).

That understanding can be of special importance for our topic because we’re dealing with temporally distant, at first glance quite different subjects and/or objects. By that, we mean the romantic narrating epic subject itself and concrete narrated constellations as a kind of anciently given epic “objects”. But we can also understand those very constellations as expressions of the vague, indistinct subjects in a way, hidden behind the rhetorical masks of the oral folk poems, from which much younger writerly narrative subject borrows its verbal manners and other means, creating that way its own complex epic structure of a new kind.

Of course, as we already know, *indistinctive oral subjects* are mostly known as aforementioned rhapsodists or “singers of tales” who take existing verbal formulas, patterns, or plots, making only small changes and thus creating sometimes numerous versions of the same poem as spontaneously reflecting and endlessly repeatable, so to speak virtual *mise en abyme* “copies” of the usually unknown “original” of the poem verbal content. It seems that this way mirroring effect in multiplied context – which starts from *intratextual* and leads to overall superior *intertextual* relations – exemplary, and in a specific oral context, here

outlines theoretically recognized possibilities of using *mise en abyme* effect from *simple duplication* to *infinite*, or even *aporetic duplication* (cf. Däl-
lenbach, 1989, 35).

Anyway, using in a reflexive way manners of ancient “singers of tales”, otherwise rudimentary in many aspects, South Slavic poets of the age of Romanticism clearly show their longing for a return to the origin of the famous poetic power of the collective, personally undis-
tinguished past. At the same time, as we saw, they unavoidably testify about the impossibility of reaching that desired position because their identity is quite different. Before all, it’s individual, in many ways relied on personal choices and their concrete artistic consequences in the age of (pre)modern liberal culture and its habits.

But it seems that the possibility of choices makes the romantic poet participate in the complex virtual artistic game: imitating epic poetry manners this kind of romantic subject puts himself at the same time in the situation of metaphoric “object” of constant epic (auto)reflection as a kind of identity re-confirmation or self-questioning by the help of suprapersonal and super subjective features which take place in the oral literature and its specific poetic genres.

Namely, identifying himself with a traditionally recognizable rhapsodist’s role, as Njegoš did in some of his works, but yet creating multiplied *mise en abyme* constellation, the narrator of Mažuranić’s *The Death of Smail-aga Čengić* indicates a really inventive possibility of *sophisticated and polysemic poetic auto-perspectivization*, up to the moment of publishing of the poem practically unknown to the South Slavic narrative poetry. The romantic epic narrator thus becomes a point of *dynamic identity turnovers*, moving quickly from hidden, rhetorically masked subject to implicitly object position, and vice versa, because characteristic verbal mirroring vocation makes him able to be *changing discursive representative*, a vibrant linguistic agent who oscillates between opposite and/or complementary *self-producing and self-alienating identity positions*, in a sense of romantic individualism/collectivism of the age.

It seems it is hard to overvalue this inventive dynamism in the middle of the romantically renovated epic worldview. Made under the auspices of the folk tradition and its high-level typified poetic features,

mostly related to so-called objective reality, it perhaps could be seen as one of the early and seemingly paradoxical signs of modern literary awareness in the making. As in other aspects of portraying the main, psychologically complex character of the Mažuranić poem, like expediently quick changes point of view of narration, from inner to outer, from individual to general (cf. Brajović, 2000, 14–17), which is really not a feature of the traditional epic manner, this *mise en abyme* proceeding actually and implicitly introduces what perhaps could be named as a *meta-epic narration* of a kind. By that, we crucially mean narration which uses almost all possibilities of the folk epic but with a transparent auto-reflexive awareness of the new times.

That means South Slavic Romanticism somehow has found a way to integrate not only old plots/stories and their new social understandings but also an appropriate artistic embodiment of the identity of poetical subjects and/or narrators of these stories which have roots in the long cultural memory of folks and nations. And if we take a brief look backward at relevant understandings we'll see that the general romantic theory of epos actually implies such restorative integration as possible and desired.

“This world which is to be made objective for apprehension by spiritual vision and feeling is not presented by the bard in such a way that could betoken his own thoughts and living passion”, wrote Hegel in the section of his epochally influential *Aesthetics* in which he extensively treats epic poetry as romantic art, right after that added: “For what he [bard] tells should appear, in manner and matter, as an actual course of events complete in itself (...) and *with it* [the world] *his mind should not be completely at one in respect of either the subject-matter or the delivery* [underl. by T. B.]” (Hegel, 1975, 1037).

The last remark could be what actually leads to romantic self-referentiality and meta-epic narrativity because Hegel's thought that a bard or rhapsodist *should not be completely at one* with his matter indicates a romantically underlined difference between old and new poetry and poets. As already Schiller has postulated, exemplary ancient bards were “naive” poets because they were one with nature, and modern poets are mostly “sentimental” for they long to reunite with it and hopefully become naive once again. Warning that the romantic epic poet must not be “at one”

with the world he intends to narrate about, Hegel in fact says that such a relation is not allowed if it is wanted to reach an exemplary position of the epic display in the new ages.

On the other hand, as we could see, romantic poets almost always participate in what they write about and verbally interfere with events they narrate about, in one or another way. Moreover, they often make themselves verbally or effectively participate *in* narrated events, as Byron, Shelley, Mickiewicz in European, or Prešeren and Demeter in the South Slavic context often did, so we can say that they create a rhetorically vivid position as a kind of *mise en poeme* effect. To be “in” a poem and not outside it, of course, in this context doesn’t necessarily mean to be physically active within the created epic world but to be psychologically close to epic characters and events, and at the same time to be at least partially distanced from them as a transparent individual consciousness that shows empathy or understanding, thereby still remaining singular in its mental/intellectual disposition.

Our provisional construction *mise en poeme*, “putting in the poem”, therefore doesn’t imply the undoubtedly autobiographic presence of the poet/narrator, even when he asserts so, as Demeter in *The Grobnik Field* or Wordsworth in *Prelude*, for instance. More important, that implies a kind of *changing epistemology of the subject*, understood as discursively and cognitively self-forming consciousness which is “less as a subject to be remembered in language than as a subject to be transformed by language” (Jay, 1984, 23), and that in the bottom line means “the dissimilarity between identity and discourse is understood as the epistemological context within which the self is produced, and its status as a product is what becomes central” (Jay, 1984, 29).

After all, it will not be incorrect to say that the *changing epistemology* we mentioned is a kind of pro-modern, literary dynamic phenomenon that enables romantic poets, in our context those ones who belong to the South Slavic cultural circle, to make steps from transparent personal/(auto)biographic subjectivity (Demeter, Prešeren), over the compassionate and yet ambivalent identification with exemplary figures of the collective oral epic tradition (Njegoš), up to the much more complex verbal configurations marked with the use of a *mise en abyme* manner (Mažuranić) as a discursive medium of implicitly modernized

(self)understanding or “mirroring in the text” of the narrating subject and his poetic/epic craft.

Because of all that we finally could understand *mise en poeme* as a tentative concept and the result of an attempt to appropriately present what was happening in the pretty wide range of narration of what we named *epic Romanticism* and its specific poetic phenomena which even today presents long epic poems we interpreted as intricate literary works that attract special attention of readers and researches as well. Although that range was obviously marked by the influence of traditional epic means, its internal dynamic on the other side still opened diverse possibilities which also manifested some not-really traditional narrative strategies and thus indicated the appearance of new times’ inherent creative impulses.

That’s how epic (auto)reflexivity in the outcome appears as one of the perhaps most interesting poetic features of South Slavic Romanticism. In that context, *mise en poeme* could be actually the conceptual synthesis of thus understood, a complete creative (self)reflection that is at the very heart of this renovated epic narration. Or, in other words: especially employed poetic autoreferentiality which serves not only itself but also the future development of the narrative art and its capability for representing important issues and problems of human collective and historical existence as such.

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