

Notes on the Poetics of Serbo-Croatian Folk Lyric

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Lyric folk songs in the territory of present-day Yugoslavia within its Serbo-Croatian language boundaries have a long history. As recorded texts they have existed for half a millennium, although historical data on singing and the playing of folk instruments go back much further. The phases of the historical continuity of the genre have been reconstructed according to sources known to us thus far by Vido Latković (1967:145-205), Maja Bošković-Stulli (1978:68-323), Vladan Nedić (1966), and others.¹ These studies also deal to some extent with the poetics of folk lyric. More comprehensive treatment of the subject, however, has been undertaken mostly by non-Yugoslav Slavists and folklorists, who are interested in the lyrical traditions of particular regions (Peukert 1961), or in cycles of songs within the context of Balkan folk poetry (Pollok 1964). But the texts, particularly of the more archaic songs, have not yet been assembled, systematized, and studied from the aspect of the poetics of lyric folk song. For example, there are no studies of the system of poetics of classical forms of ritual lyric (seasonal and family songs). Such research needs to be undertaken.

One of the most important theoretical issues is lyric composition, or the manner in which the lyric folk song is constructed. The basic and most frequent compositional models had been created centuries before Vuk Karadžić (1787-1864) began his work. However, his collections of lyric, published in 1814, 1815, 1824, and 1841—particularly the chronological divisions of material beginning with the earliest seasonal and family ritual songs right through to the love songs and others free from ritual dependence—offer the most comprehensive synthesis of stylistic wealth available in any anthology of folk lyric. On the basis of these sources, the present article will outline a number of characteristics that are crucial in the process of folk lyric stylization.

Indispensable to the study of the style and poetics of lyric folk song involving Slavic material is the comparative-historical work of A. N.

¹ For a more recent study of this aspect, with extensive bibliography, see Krnjević 1986.

Veselovskij (1940) on the primeval syncretism of artistic expression in general. For the study of folk lyric, of particular importance is his thesis on forms of “psychological,” “emotional” parallelism, a universal law on which numerous songs are based. Various types of poetic parallelism present either throughout the song or only in a part of it are genetically connected with an archaic animistic view of the world. Folk lyric has thus been impressed with “diffuse” mythical thought in the form of analogy and parallels, a process that does not separate man from his natural environment. Veselovskij reached his conclusions through a study of the genesis and the historical development of human society and consciousness—the heart of poetic language and imagery—from primeval syncretic artistic forms and collective performance to the gradual differentiation of genres, the separation of individuals from the group, and the individual performance. In that long process, each phase automatically inherits the patterns of the previous one and in this way a specific folklore amalgam is created. Components of the external context, which was responsible for determining the immediate life of the lyric folk song, have gradually been transformed into characteristics of the genre, that is, the structure, composition, and style of the songs.

Modern folklore research, especially among the Soviets, has elaborated on and developed Veselovskij’s views, but his fundamental contribution regarding psychological parallelism and its forms as the principles on which the world of lyric folk song is built has remained the basis of research. Thus V. I. Eremina (1978), one of the leading experts on the poetics of folk lyric, has followed in Veselovskij’s footsteps by starting with the genesis of lyric song, but has formulated the new thesis that repetition is the basis of lyric folk song composition. The traditional classification—monologue, dialogue, fusion of one or the other with narrative, and the like—has thus been assigned to a general category. Indeed, repetition is, as E. M. Meletinskij (1968) so convincingly argued in his analysis of the *Edda* and early epic forms, the oldest and most comprehensive law of the dynamics and aesthetics of oral forms. And psychological parallelism is, by its very nature, founded on the universal principle of repetition.

In the richly nuanced spectrum of Serbo-Croatian folk lyric, there are various compositional species: monologue, dialogue—most often in question-and-answer form—more complex modes of monologue within monologue, dialogue within monologue, narrative combined with dialogue or monologue, and lyrical narration without dialogue or monologue. The continuity of these forms, which are more or less developed and complete, and often intertwined, can be followed from the period of the earliest recorded songs, that is, from the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries up to the present.

Internal forms operative in those compositional schemes are, as a rule, based on one of the following types of psychological, poetic parallelism: triple repetition of parallel series of speech or action, a chain sequence of scenes or images in which the preceding one generates the one following, and a “gradual reduction of images” by starting with the broadest and ending with the narrowest (as formulated in Sokolov 1977), that is, the singling out of one detail crucial to a particular song. The internal form of the song can therefore be realized through different lyrical techniques applied within the framework of one compositional model.

The narrative element, one of the principles of compositional form of lyric folk song, is evident in a great number of songs and requires some explanation. In Slavic folklore research there is frequent reference to the *sujet* of lyric songs, or to “*sujet* situations,” as it is also known. The foundation of the greatest number of lyric songs in Slavic oral traditions is always an event, episode, or situation from human life taken from reality or dreams that is lyrically stylized as a “realistic” action in fictive space and time. Even when there is no concrete external action, one cannot generally speak of the absence of the *sujet*. But its nature is specifically lyrical. It is psychological in character, and expressive devices are subordinated to that basic, inner, true content of lyric song. Therefore, the lyric *sujet* is far from the epic’s gradually developed *sujet*, in which the event and the activity of the epic hero are central. In lyric folk song the briefly mentioned event, or just a suggestion of it, differs in quality and function from that of the epic. The former specifies, announces, or in the most succinct manner shapes a special reality: man’s inner life, his psychological states, and his experiences. The external event, in fact, paves the way to inner experience, and that is where both its role and meaning are to be found.

The narrative principle is expressed most clearly in the narrative-descriptive songs having no dialogue or monologue, in which an important role is played by various types of parallel repetitions. However, the narrative element is particularly interesting in songs whose composition is based on the fusion of a narrative segment (most often in the introduction) with a dialogue or monologue form (in the second part of the song). These two parallel planes, external and internal, divide the song into two parts: the first, using images from nature, prepares and announces the character of the content and describes the circumstances and scenes of the event; the second part consists of lyrical disclosures (monologue or dialogue) that carry the meaning of the entire song because both planes are united by a single emotion. Narrative form is also expressed by using compositional models in other ways: monologues and dialogues, for instance, can be shaped as detailed descriptions of some past event, experience, dream, or

prophecy.

Lyric folk song almost always contains a story in some form or other, most distinctly in the more complex forms of the lyrical *sujet*, in which it is varied in multiple series and in great detail. In any case, the *sujet* element of lyric folk song should be treated with caution and cannot be viewed as the highly elaborate *sujet* of epic forms, but rather as a reduced *sujet* that is confined to one lyrically characterized theme or lyric sketch, one that functions as the emotional content of the song and that is present in almost every single lyric folk song.

The simplest monologue form is considered to be also the earliest, and corresponds fully to the nature of the lyric genre, directly expressing lyrical content, emotions, and experience. The monologue form, as well as other forms of composition and style in lyric folk song, illustrates the rule that the technique of parallelism is inseparable from repetition in whatever layer of the song it may appear, whether such parallelism is literal or reduced, gradated or expanded, condensed or narrowed down (Karadžić 1891:No. 567 [No. 73 of *Mala. . . pjesnarica* (1814)]):

Čarna goro, puna ti si lada!
 Srce moje, puno ti si jada!
 Gledajući prema sebi draga,
 Gledajući, al' ga ne ljubeći.

[Black forest, you are filled with shade!
 My heart, you are filled with grief!
 Seeing your beloved next to you,
 Seeing, but not loving him.]

The clear parallel in the first two lines can develop in only one direction: by concretizing the second member in the form of a realistic disclosure of the girl, which is, indeed, the meaning of psychological parallelism. Since *jad* [grief] is a psychological state, abstract and shapeless, it must be made concrete and evident. Therefore, *jad* in the initial parallel construction is first foreshadowed (*čarna gora, lad* [black forest, shade]), then it is named, and in the third phrase its cause is specified. The poetic external image (l. 1) and the theme of grief (l. 2), apparently unconnected, are bound by an associative kinship defined from within. The gloomy mood (*jad*) in the symbolism of folk language, as studied by A. A. Potebnja (1860), conforms to characteristics of natural phenomena (darkness, shade). An undefined, vague feeling is conveyed by externally evident phenomena. The image of a bleak landscape is directly connected with human feeling, which is further intensified by sound correspondences, on which the key association and poetic semantics of other microformulas are based (*čarna-lad-jad*). Only after the process of identification of the objective and subjective is completed does the intimate

confession emerge in a condensed form. This monologue form is a parallelism consisting of only one member—just one of the existing types—and the repetition of one syntactic pattern strengthens the associative connection between two different themes. The lyrical monologue with the characteristic address to someone at the beginning, whether direct or rhetorical, is among the most frequent in Serbo-Croatian oral tradition.

The dialogue form, originally connected with dance and an archaic antiphonal principle, is founded on a parallelism in a series of speeches. Narrative links between them often do not exist in the text since the roles of singers were assigned beforehand. It was understood, in other words, that one singer would respond to another's text, enter into the same situation, and share the same perspective. This aspect of alternate singing (*na otpjev*) was described by the poet Petar Hektorović, who recorded folk songs in his *Ribanje i ribarsko prigovaranje* [*Fishing and Fishermen's Conversations*], which was first published in Venice in 1568. The need for two or more speech series to be connected by narrative certainly dates from a much later period when song became separated from its earlier manner of performance and one singer alone took on a number of roles, as Veselovskij has described in detail (1940).

The most frequent and simplest dialogue form is the question-and-answer pattern. As in monologue songs, it begins with an address accompanied by a direct or a rhetorical question (Karadžić 1891:No. 669 [No. 45 of *Mala. . . pjesnarica* (1814)]):

“Oj Dunave, tija vodo!
Što ti tako mutna tečeš?
Il' te jelen rogom muti,
Il' Mirčeta vojevoda?”
“Nit' me jelen rogom muti,
Nit' Mirčeta vojevoda;
Već devojke đavolice,
Svako jutro dolazeći,
Peruniku trgajući,
I beleći svoje lice.”

[“O Danube, you quiet river!
Why do you flow by so muddy?
Does the stag muddy your waters with his antlers,
Or does Mirčeta the duke?”
“Neither does the stag muddy my waters with his antlers,
Nor does Mirčeta the duke;
But maiden devils do,
Who come each morning,
Who pluck irises,
And who make their faces white.”]

This song is constructed on negative parallelism, which is very frequent in Serbo-Croatian folk lyric and which is based on thematic, syntactic, and lexical repetition. This is the essential characteristic of question-and-answer songs: total dependence of the first series on the second. Thus all members of the first series must be repeated in the second for the riddle posed in the first to be solved. As in the case of parallel images, parallel speech (or action) series are composed of two members, each of which can have a greater or lesser number of units variously arranged. The basic theme in this type of song is introduced at the very beginning: the question why the waters of the Danube are so muddy. The second utterance, the answer, necessarily results from the first, thus creating a unified text and a symmetry in the two narrative series.

The entire text is permeated by repetitions since the second speech series contains literal repetition of the first in negated form: every question contains in itself the possibility of an answer, but none is the true answer. When the negation is completed and all the elements of the first series are eliminated as possible answers, a necessary turning point occurs. Static images are pushed into the background and an entirely new motif (“Već devojke đavolice,” l. 7) becomes central. It is expanded and developed into a number of fresh and vivid forms. Further analysis of the unexpected reversal, which comes to its full realization at the point when flowers are mentioned, would show that this song belongs to the spring cycle of ritual songs and that it refers to fertility and to the time when maidens went early at dawn to pick herbs possessing magic powers to be used most often in love’s service.

This simple example proves that in songs of this type the dominant role is played by the second narrative series from the moment when the negated literal repetition is completed and a new detail, essential to the meaning of the entire song, is introduced and elaborated. Such are the basic characteristics of songs founded on this compositional scheme. This popular lyric form has preserved in its style and composition traces of performance by two groups or two singers.

The ancient origin of antiphonal parallelism as exemplified in the question-and-answer form is best seen in some cycles of the earliest ritual lyric. Thus, for example, the twenty-four earliest *kraljičke pesme* [queens’ songs] were already published with complete ethnographic descriptions in 1815 in Vuk’s second volume of folk songs, the *Narodna srbska pjesnarica* (Vienna). For the first time, a ritual, that of the *kraljice* [queens], was described in detail together with songs that formed an intimate part of it. It was outlined in broad terms by Vuk in the first edition of his dictionary in 1818 (Karadžić 1966:cols. 335-36). *Kraljičke pesme* are among the earliest seasonal-ritual songs of the spring-summer cycle. They were performed by choirs in the context of dynamic ritualistic dance by maidens

glorifying the fertility cult. The textual elements thus have their source directly in ritual practice: description of movements, scenes, outfits with “male” characteristics (sword, standard on a pole), and strictly defined roles (“king,” “queen,” “standard-bearer,” and so on). An entire merry ritual drama depending on the season (it was performed on Pentecost) was introduced into the songs. Group singing was preserved, as was the belief in the mythical role of the queens, who personified spirits of vegetation. Syncretism is also evident: the protagonists of the songs are at the same time both dancers and singers, that is, the performers of the ritual.

The same characteristics are inherent in other ritual songs. Most important are those from the cycle of family-wedding songs, published by Vuk in the 1815 collection referred to above, and also other ritual seasonal songs, *dodolske* and *koledarske pesme* [rain-making and New Year’s songs], which were published later. They have all preserved traces of archaic syncretism and also a feature of the utmost importance, the multiple voice, or collective monologue, so that *all* participants are *one* and the compositional form is founded on a joint monologue-address. Some of the songs of this type, with different subject matter, can be better understood only if the rules, the meaning, and the purpose of certain rituals are viewed in the context of prototypic drama. That is why many of the songs can be interpreted by analyzing various chronologically different layers of their rich poetic semantic system.

The narrative form with dialogue (or monologue) represents a combination of two techniques in the organization of lyric folk song. Especially typical of the Serbo-Croatian oral tradition, this compositional model makes possible a more complete outline of the circumstances and atmosphere of the lyrical event, thus providing a deeper insight into psychological motivation. The narrative portion is introductory—first level, in the first person—and the dialogue or monologue—second level, in the third person—emerges at the very moment when the elements of the previous narrative technique have been exhausted. At that point, the direction changes and moves inward, dwelling on one character’s destiny or situation. These songs are, therefore, as a rule divided into two parts, each one complete and independent. The introduction consists of a description of a scene, landscape, or the time of day or night, and that is the parallel not yet filled with human content, as Veselovskij put it (1940). That comes later, from the perspective of the second parallel, namely, from the personal attitude of the hero who, in revealing himself, also reveals the metaphorical meaning of the external image in the introduction. The narrative factor is replaced by monologue or dialogue, that is, by a new event that need not be a concrete action, and whose goal in the lyrical story is to define more sharply the decisive factor determining one moment in a character’s life. The internal form of these songs and of other

compositional types can be shaped in various ways.

The following lyric, analyzed along general lines, illustrates the compositional scheme of narration plus dialogue and the particular techniques by which it is realized (Karadžić 1891:No.612 [No. 24 of *Narodna. . . pjesnarica* (1815)]):

S večer' sjala sjajna mjesečina.
 Obasjala zelenu livadu,
 Po njoj pasu dva gospodska konja,
 Čuvala ih dva gospodičića:
 Ban Stijepo i kapetan Jovo.
 Ban Stijepo Jovu govorio:
 "Da moj brate, sjajne mjesečine!
 Blago, brate, onome junaku!
 Koga nije na daleku draga;
 A moja je draga na daleku,
 Istrunu mi jagluk i marama:
 U marami grožđe odnoseći,
 A jaglukom suze utirući,
 Sa mojom se dragom rastajući."
 Al' govori Jovo kapetane:
 "I moja je draga na daleku,
 Al' kad meni na um padne draga,
 Ja ne gledam tavnj noći doba,
 Nit' moj konjic mutnoj vodi broda:
 Putem idem, za njim praha nema,
 Vodu gazim, za njim brčka nema."

[In the evening a bright moon was shining.
 It cast its light upon the green meadow,
 Two lordly horses were grazing along it,
 Two young lords were minding them:
 Ban [Governor] Stijepo and Captain Jovo.
 Ban Stijepo spoke to Jovo:
 "My brother, look at the bright moonlight!
 Lucky is the hero, brother,
 Whose beloved is not far away!
 But my beloved is far away,
 The shawl and napkin she gave me fell apart:
 The napkin I took some grapes in,
 And the shawl I wiped my tears with,
 When I took leave of my beloved."
 But Jovo the captain spoke:
 "My beloved too is far away,
 But when my beloved comes to mind,
 I don't care what time of the dark night it is,
 Nor does my horse care how deep the muddy water is:
 I wend my way, there is no dust behind him,
 I tread water, there is no sound of splashing behind him."]

The bipartite structure of the song is immediately evident. It begins with the description of a nocturnal landscape formed by a chain sequence

of images, starting with the broadest and ending with the narrowest, which at the same time moves from the uppermost image to the lowermost. The gradual reduction of images in the first part, which is normal, proceeds in an epic manner to a more specific portrayal of the entire scene—bright moonlight, green meadow, lordly horses—and finally the sequence comes to a halt with the two heroes, who are designated by both name and title. This is the point at which the discourse is directed inward. The first part of the song, which is complete and independent in its relation to the second, does not contain any indicators announcing further action. The lyrical narrative technique of the emergence of images linked to one another and their gradual reduction has come to an end. Now it is a question of a stylistic shift in the form of a change in the *sujet* through expansion. The result is a new stylistic transformation: the narrative form is now carried over into a dialogue against the descriptive background. Everything takes on a dynamic quality when the dominant element of the *sujet* situation is stressed. It is the feeling of longing shared by both heroes. The synonym for love, the beloved (*draga*), now occupies the crucial point of the entire song.

How are the first and second parts united even though each remains an independent whole? Two images, the external description and the internal frame of mind, are connected by the repetition of only one motif appearing in the introduction: bright moonlight, which evokes a feeling of longing. That single thread, the brightness of a celestial body, directly imprints itself on the souls of the heroes and unites the uppermost and broadest cosmic image with earthly life and human destiny, thus giving the entire song its structural unity. The landscape described during a night of peace and silence is qualitatively changed in the dialogue and acquires a new meaning through the perspective of personal experience. That is the psychological meaning of parallelism: images introduced from nature become *ex post facto* metaphors of the troubled human soul. The static, external, “cold” motif of moonlight is transformed in direct speech into a dynamic erotic stimulus and the lyrical story begins to evolve from within. The initial exclamation and sigh momentarily mark the speech with a higher intonation, since from it there emerges the intimate and passionate confession of longing. Here is where the story in fact begins, not as *an* event, that is, a concrete flowing action, but rather as *the only* event, since the true content of the song is given form here. Two qualitatively different confessions flow in parallel fashion, two states of the soul that are different but emerge from the same starting point: the beloved who is far away is the object of both heroes. The entire first image is, as it were, extinguished and only the erotic magic of the moonlight is operative, evoking in the heroes the same association of the distant beloved. The first parallel lends poetic character to the entire song, while the second discloses its inner

content, and only in the mutual symbolism of the two planes is the complete lyrical experience attained.

The style of the two speech series is shaped differently because each is a different experience of the same excitement and feeling: in the first, bleak tones and the theme of separation prevail; the second contrasts with the sorrowful disclosure of the first by the unrestrained energy of love that is directed toward reunion in spite of all obstacles. The first part is the story of love and separation, while the second, with a certain epic vehemence, describes a rider who, on the wings of passion, hurries to the beloved who is far away. In the highly effective image of the latter series, a new moment is achieved—as well as another “exit” into the nocturnal landscape—by the introduction of the concepts of space and time: the tension between distance and proximity is resolved by the dynamics of movement: ““Ja ne gledam *tavnoj noći doba*, / Nit’ moj konjic *mutnoj vodi broda*” [“I don’t care what *time of the dark night* it is, / Nor does my horse care how *deep the muddy water* is”]. The abstract categories of space and time are not only inseparable but also “visible,” since they are mutually concretized in accordance with Mikhail Bakhtin’s notion of the body as a universal, condensed formula that overcomes the laws of space and time (1968:18-19). The body is thus a form of their concrete unity.²

The present short survey should be viewed as a rough outline of some aspects of the literary composition of lyric folk song. Attention was focused on monologue, dialogue, and narrative combined with dialogue (or monologue). Other compositional models were not discussed—monologue within monologue, dialogue within monologue, narrative-descriptive forms without dialogue or monologue—nor was there any detailed analysis of style (especially of metaphors, epithets, and symbols), nor a definition of the specific nature of the “lyrical hero” in folk song. I have confined my attention to the most important compositional forms and have singled out the internal laws that shape lyric content. Examples were taken from Vuk’s collections since they are readily accessible, but the present contribution is based on a general familiarity with the entire Serbo-Croatian folk tradition, in both manuscript and published form, beginning with the earliest sources from the fifteenth century. Already at that time, five centuries ago, a lyric folk song without dialogue or monologue but with a finished compositional pattern was recorded in Dubrovnik (Pantić 1971:5-6). In only a few lines the essence of folk lyric

² This particular lyric folk song was selected to illustrate a frequently occurring compositional scheme. Its principal characteristics have been outlined, but much more could be added by way of analysis, including the meaning of its microformulas. That, however, lies outside the scope of these brief remarks.

style, indirect expression, was achieved as a result of the use of various kinds of poetic parallelism.³

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