



Remembering the Poor in Serbian and South-Slav Oral Poetry

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ABSTRACT

Memories of the poor and impoverished in Serbian and South Slavic oral poetry are linked to contradictory beliefs: poverty is explained by reasons of fate, some offence, sin, or misfortune, however, the poor (as well as orphans, widows, wretched, etc.) are considered to be intermediaries between this world and the next, therefore close to God and the ancestors, and who possess certain healing and miraculous powers. These beliefs are merged and intermixed with other ideas about the poor, which entered oral tradition through human experience and everyday life, and were influenced by historical, social and economic changes (the poor who do not work or do not wish to contribute to their community, become a social threat and their lifestyle and use of welfare are disapproved of). In Serbian and South Slavic folk songs and ballads, representations of the poor and impoverished are diverse regarding aspects, such as, the selection of motifs and genre, time, place, context of recording, etc. Representations of the poor and impoverished in Serbian and South Slavic oral poetry vary from tragic to comic, from idealistic to ironic, or the subject can be depicted from a moral or realist standpoint. Poverty is usually related to the person's private life, his or her feelings and moods, and may reflect their attitudes toward family, nature, community or society. Different portrayals of the poor and impoverished may reveal personal experiences, collective customary law and practices, way of life, ethical and religious norms, a system of values, as well as psychological motivation or background. Special attention will be paid to poverty as a fact of daily life, and to realistic details which make the songs and the characters particularly convincing and vivid.

KEYWORDS:

poverty, remembrance, epic poetry, Serbia, South Slavs

1. ON REMEMBRANCE AND POVERTY

Memory and remembering are inseparable from the folklore process and an inevitable subject in discussions on oral transmission, creation and variation. They also deal with the relationship between the individual and the collective in folklore. There has been much discussion about what and how folklore remembers the artistic handling of customs and beliefs, mythical motifs, historical events and figures, geographical toponyms, societal attitudes, cultural patterns, etc., and what the individual creator remembers. Various theories on memory through the examination of oral tradition have tended to be concerned with the creative process, modelled on Bartlett's (1932) analysis on the extent to which stories are transformed in the course of transmission, or in Rubin's (1995) research with cognitive models: the types of stability and variability in certain genres and the role of formulae in creation and transmission, including exploration of transitional forms between oral and written literature.

Folklore semioticians point out that the ability of oral tradition to remember comes from its characteristic ability to transfer information (Nekliudov 2002). To be



able to transmit information over an extended period — oral transmission features a lengthy process or *longue durée* — the traditional material must be subjected to a transference process which includes the selection, compression and generalization of the material. Due to this accretion of traditional elements, some information is suppressed and lost, while some is adapted and retained, so that the various forms of traditional knowledge, folklore themes and genres, customs, beliefs and ethnographic and cultural details, are preserved. The information preserved in oral tradition is usually unreliable in terms of historical accuracy. Mistakes are customary: anachronisms, transference of the names of historical figures to fictive characters, imaginative reconstructions of historical events, the addition or discarding of motifs, or the invention of a storyline and causal-consequential relationships created to produce a convincing plot. However, despite the poetic embellishments and additional story building, oral tradition abounds in data over a broad spectrum from the life of the traditional man, even daily life, and so holds up a mirror to the culture.

Poverty — part and parcel of daily life in the traditional culture of the Balkans — was transposed into oral poetry as a poetic element. Historically, poverty was a characteristic of most South-Slav rural populations. For the duration of the ruling independent medieval states, up to the fourteenth century, and under Ottoman rule (fifteenth to nineteenth centuries), Balkan South-Slavs were subjected to wars, devastation and natural catastrophes. Due to the uncertainty of everyday life, they were often forced to migrate. According to historical and ethnographic data, people disposed of humble means and lived in modest dwellings. Economically, they were crushed by the demands of taxation and the *corvée*. The main occupations of agriculture and cattle-breeding were underdeveloped, and peasants often did not own the land on which they worked. Folklore has only a piecemeal recall of the processes which contributed to the people's poverty, e.g., hungry years, the imposition of taxes and other levies, the imprisonment of debtors, or individual cases of their struggle for daily existence. Oral poetry recognises categories such as beggars, the homeless, penniless single mothers, widows, orphans, impoverished peasants, soldiers and outlaws, nomads such as herdsmen, hauliers with horses and carts, impoverished peasants and artisans forced to travel abroad to find temporary employment, etc.

The historical and social circumstances surrounding the origin and development of oral poetry among the South-Slav peoples were fairly similar, notwithstanding ethnic and confessional differences; the structure of folklore genres was also similar.¹ Most South Slav oral poetry was collected in the nineteenth century, during a time of national awakening and continued into the twentieth century. The bodies of the

1 With regard to terminology, the main types of oral poetry among the South-Slavs were epic song, lyrical song and lyrical-epic song. The term 'lyrical-epic songs' is more or less parallel with 'ballads and romances', 'narrative songs' and 'non-historical songs'. 'Non-historical songs' is a conditional term for epic songs in which mythological, legendary and novelistic motifs prevail. However, that does not mean that these songs are devoid of historical elements (Pešić, Milošević-Đorđević 1984: 175). Lyrical-epic songs or ballads are thematically divided into: mythological, legendary, historical, songs about personal and family relations and daily life songs, novelistic ballads or romances.



poetry are very diversified and reflect a lengthy period of development, which should be borne in mind while considering the theme of poverty.

The thematic register of Serbian and South-Slavic songs on poverty may generally be divided into serious or humorous-ironical modes. In the first group, we encounter social, ethical, religious and moralistic themes, in the second, parodies and mocking songs. The rules of the genre and specific style considerably affect the song's interpretation. In epic songs, the poor are presented from the broader perspective of heroism and its place in the divine order, so that characteristic motifs are the protection or oppression of the poor and the tears and curses of paupers. In lyrical songs and ballads, poverty is usually shown as the cause of personal and family misfortune — the indigence which encumbers the individual, frustrates him, banishes him to the margins of society and sometimes leads to his death. The motif of poverty is intertwined with love, family, or legendary motifs of time-honoured international themes.

2. POVERTY IN EPIC POETRY

The poverty motif in Serbian and South-Slav epic songs appear as part of the plot or in connection with the characters and are incorporated into various international themes. Since the epic world is a construction modelled on the real world and built on the laws of credibility, the artistic model of the world does not coincide with the real one but is in correlation to it (Putilov 1990), ordered according to the laws of epic stylisation, its motifs synchronised with the underlying idea of the specific work. Thus, the motif of poverty has been reworked multiple times compared to the model of reality. Epic songs preserve general recollections of established relations and the obligation of rulers and heroes to protect the poor, as shown in the motifs of paupers' tears and curses, which act as ethical regulators of behaviour. The motifs of poverty are also encountered in the depiction of characters, a part of artistic procedure which contributes to vivid storytelling and can sometimes be a source of humour.

2.1. THE MOTIF OF PAUPER CURSES AND TEARS

The motif of a pauper's curse is based on the belief that the poor must not be made to suffer, which parallels religious teachings. The curse is based on traditional faith in the magic of words; it is usually uttered as a threat and arouses fear. The pauper's tears, when accompanied by a curse, are less ritualised and more emotional in meaning. They serve to intensify feeling and may be interpreted as an expression of helplessness induced by exposure to injustice and humiliation.

In epic songs, curses and tears regulate the behaviour of the protagonists and may obviate the need for the curse to be uttered. The greatest hero of the South-Slav epic, Marko Kraljević, at the very thought that the poor might damn him, decides to act chivalrously. When Mina of Kostur plunders Marko's court and abducts his beloved, the Ottoman sultan offers to build him a new court by taxing the poor, but Marko firmly refuses:



„Ал’ говори Краљевићу Марко:
 – Фала тебе, царе почиме!
 Кад ти станеш мене дворе градит,
 Мене хоће сиротиња клети:
 Гле крвника Краљевића Марка!
 Они су му двори изгорели,
 А ови му пусти останули!
 Да м’ учиниш агом харачлинским,
 Ја харача покупит не могу
 Док не свежем ништа и убога,
 Па ће мене сиротиња клети:
 Гле крвника Краљевића Марка!
 Оно му је благо однесено,
 А ово му остануло пусто!’ (Караџић 1845/1988: бр. 62)

‘But Marko Kraljević answered:
 – Thanks be to thee, my father the Sultan!’²
 But, and if thou build me a manor,
 The poor will curse me, saying:
 See the whoreson Kraljević Marko!
 His old manor is burnt with fire,
 May his new one avail him naught! —
 And if thou makest me collector of poll-tax,
 I may not gather the taxes,
 If I bind not the poor and needy.
 And the poor will curse me —
 See the whoreson Kraljević Marko,
 The gold he had was ravished away,
 May this gold also do him naught of profit.’ (Karadžić 1845/1988: No 62; Low 1922: 97)

Using Marko as an example, the epic singer illustrates the importance of moral behaviour towards the poor and towards subordinates in general. As a kind of regulative, the curse from the poor is important for the creation of a humanistic universe conceived as an ideal of equality amongst people and of a righteous moral order.

Traditional beliefs that the poor enjoyed divine protection, led to them being accorded a privileged status in certain magical rites and rituals. It was held that en-

2 In Serbian oral epic, Marko has been depicted, among other things, as an Ottoman vassal, a reflection of the true relationship between Marko Mrnjavčević (c. 1335–1395), an historical figure who provides some of the character of the epic Marko, and Sultan Bayezid I (c. 1360–1403). Epic songs, however, show Marko as quite independent and superior in relation to the Sultan: even though he fulfills his feudal obligations and fights at the Sultan’s behest, he breaks Ottoman laws, drinks wine at Ramadan, dances next to Ottoman women in the *kolo*, wears a green overcoat and threatens the sultan, who fears him and then adopts him. This is why Marko addresses him as ‘father’.



dangering the poor brought with it punishment or malediction. In oral literature, such beliefs are frequently built into the plot and such plots usually have mandatory elements such as an offence (violence or sin against the poor) and punishment or malediction for the perpetrators. For instance, there is a widespread belief that goods seized from a poor man are cursed; there are songs that sing of a bridge or a religious endowment, built from the proceeds of exploiting the poor or using ill-gotten gains. Such edifices cannot endure and are considered accursed (Petranović 1870: No 52; Hörmann 1888: No 3). If the offence against the poor endangers the survival of the family, the consequences for the offender may mean death. Several songs tell of a lord or king who takes the only sons away from families for military campaigns, leaving husbandless mothers to fend for themselves without male help, or who takes several sons from one family. These rulers soon die, cursed by the poor for their misdeeds. The curses also catch up with outlaws who take into their band people whose absence will lead to the destitution of their families. In the songs, the ethic code is clearly formulated — if the outlaws do not want the poor to curse them and so call down an evil fate and die in battle, they can take into their ranks only the homeless, since they will not be missed by anyone (Gezeman 1925: No 136), or people without a family, who will not be mourned by anyone (Karadžić 1846/1988: No 73, Milutinović 1837/1990: No 82).

Although the motifs of punishment and damnation for oppressing the poor are given artistic form in oral epic songs as a reminder of certain religious teaching or ethical laws, there was also evidence from actual historical events, woven into oral tradition through collective memory. Historical, ethnographic and memoir documents of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries chronicle the reactions of ordinary people to the merciless recruitment by the Austrians, which devastated homes, created trauma and had huge economic consequences. There is a graphic testimony to this by Petar Runjanin, a parish priest from the Srem village of Kuzmin. He describes how in 1765, during the Seven Years' War with Prussia, more than 80 soldiers left Kuzmin, and their wives and children were handed over to neighbours who were unfit to serve, to till their lands. During the mass mobilization of 1778 and 1779 during the War of Bavarian Succession between Austria and Prussia, many families were targeted, including those with only sons, so such broken families without male heirs soon perished, and others had to return to their old homes in Serbia. In the war against the Ottomans, in 1788 and 1789, all those who could bear arms were recruited, and those who were left behind were employed in transporting ammunition and feeding the army. Only those incapable of serving in the army — the old, the crippled, women and children — could work — however little — on the land in order to survive (Runjanin 1936: 24–25).

2.2. PROTECTION OF THE POOR AND THE SALVATION OF THE SOUL

The motifs of tears and curses from the poor are closely connected to the universal theme of protecting the poor and other endangered categories. Protection is one of the most important roles of epic rulers and heroes and is a poetic procedure used to idealise and ennoble them as characters. Protection leans on the belief that rulers



and heroes are symbolic proponents of divine will and that by executing it, they protect the balance of cosmic order. Saints do this more directly: they protect the poor by miracles, thus establishing justice and a state of balance, and at the same time demonstrating the supremacy of the Christian faith compared with non-Christians or pagans.

The role of rulers to protect the poor is both universal and historical, so epics can be backed by historical sources. In Serbian epic songs, a prominent protector of the poor is Prince Lazar Hrebeljanović (c. 1329–1389), the historical and epic martyr of the Battle of Kosovo. Singers praise Lazar for choosing his soldiers with care (he did not take only sons), so as not to give the poor a reason to curse him. When he was building Ravanica — the church in which he was to be buried — he built it out of his own pocket, without oppressing the poor with taxes. Lazar's epic character is embellished by the virtues of a just ruler, defender of the land from the Ottomans and a fighter for 'the honourable cross and golden freedom'. Similar traits are ascribed to him in cult writings, where he is celebrated as the epigone of Christ, the leader and good shepherd whose prayers protect his flock from the wolves, a valiant champion of true piety and the heavenly kingdom, the builder and adorer of holy churches and the giver of abundant alms to the poor (see Mihaljčić 1989: 70). Verses of the folk song declaring that Lazar built Ravanica Monastery 'with his own bread and his own wealth, without the tears of beggared folk' (Karadžić 1845/1988: No 53, Devrnja Zimmerman 1986: 199), entirely coincide with the monastery's founding charter, which states that all of Lazar's generosity comes from his own land, that he did not take it by force or by appropriating someone else's property, but by purchase or exchange (Trifunović 1995: 26). This is not about the direct influence of cult writings or a founding charter on epic songs, but rather about cultural memory — the transmission of ideas associated with the character of Prince Lazar in oral tradition, the monastery at Ravanica and his other legacies as places of remembrance and periodic ritual practices, which lead to the celebration of Lazar as a great martyr in the ecclesiastical calendar, the church and folk cults dedicated to him.

The obligation of epic heroes to protect the poor was part of their chivalrous and ethical code. A hero's campaign might be motivated by his obligation to the poor, and so Marko Kraljević starts off as the Sultan's champion, pitting himself against the ruffian Musa Kesedžija, since the Sultan was tired of 'the sore complaints of the poor / against the accursed Musa' (Karadžić 1845/1988: No 67).

The attitude of epic protagonists towards the poor is significant when it comes to characterizing them. Representatives of 'our' camp, the perspective from which the narrator tells the story, are protective and compassionate. They honour the poor not only out of chivalrous duty and respect for custom, but also for the salvation of their souls. Jevrosima, the mother of Marko Kraljević, known in the songs as a model of righteousness and morality, takes in and feeds the 'poor and wretched on their patron saint's day'³ with the same cordiality she extends to noblemen and bishops (Karadžić 1845/1988: No 72). In contrast, 'other' ('alien') heroes, opponents or traitors of 'our' camp, harass the poor and receive their curses. This polarization is the basis

3 Patron saint's day — a Serbian folk and church custom of celebrating the patron saint.



for positioning the characters (hero vs. opponent, one's own (people) vs. the other, good vs. evil).

The saints also regularly protect the poor, usually by means of miracles, as for instance in songs about Ottoman raids on monasteries. The Abbot of Dečani⁴ dissuades the Turk Jaut-bey from pillaging the monastery since it contains the donations of poor folk: 'If you take away the poor's possessions / many of the poor will curse you' (Vuk IV, 16). Jaut-bey turns a deaf ear and soon the saints' retribution overtakes him at the hands of the outlaw Petar Mrkonjić, who pledges himself to the king and founder, St. Stefan Decanski⁵, saves the monastery and drives out the Ottomans.

Both past and recent epic heroes are depicted as protectors of the poor, the same being true for those who fought in the First Serbian uprising (1804–1813) and the Second (1815–1817). The songs point out that the rebel leaders care for the poor, following the examples of past legendary heroes (Karadžić 1862/1986: No 31). Therefore their role is not only commemorative but part of the systematic motivation for the uprising. The moment the Ottomans lay siege to Loznica, the *voivode* (military leader) Anta Bogičević knows that if the poor are abandoned to the Ottomans, no soul can be saved:

'Али што ће јадне наше душе?
 Душе неће виђет божјег лица,
 Сиротиња с нас муке допада.' (Karadžić 1862/1986: бр. 33)

'But what will happen to our poor souls?
 These souls will not see the face of God,
 The poor have fallen with us into misfortune.' (Karadžić 1862/1986: No 33)

Even the leader of the First Serbian uprising, Karađorđe Petrović, in the manner of a medieval ruler, felt responsibility for the poor, whom he compassionately called 'crvopisak' or 'worm squeak'. He is otherwise remembered in history as a stern man with a short temper who instilled awe in his contemporaries; in songs by the bard of the Uprising, Filip Višnjić, Karađorđe is portrayed in a somewhat idealized manner as a severe but just leader who works for the good of the people, protects the poor and cares about saving his soul:

4 One of the most beautiful Serbian medieval monuments and on the UNESCO world heritage list, the monastery of Visoki Dečani in Kosovo and Metohija was built by Prince Stefan Uroš Nemanjić (known as Stefan Dečanski) and his son Stefan Dušan between 1326–1335. Throughout history and to the present day, the monastery has been the target of attacks by the Ottomans and Bulgarians, followed by the Albanians. The event described in the song probably relates to one of the most famous miracles which ensued following the Ottoman attacks of 1690 and 1692.

5 According to tradition, the Holy King Stefan Dečanski protected the monastery, demonstrating his power in the occurrence of earthquakes, bright light, flame and thunderbolts. To this was added a miracle, when the stone sculpture of a lion by St. George's window fell on the Ottoman mufti, thus foiling an attempt at turning Dečani into a mosque (Ninković 1929).

‘Моја мајко! што ли ћу ти јако?
 Ја сам први кавгу заметнуо,
 Црвописак на душу узео:
 Куд ће моја душа и тијело?’ (Караџић 1862/1986: 39)

‘Oh, mother! What now lies before me?
 I was first to fan the flame of enmity,
 And take on the burden of the miserable:
 What fate awaits my soul and body?’ (Karadžić 1862/1986: No 39)

The intention behind Višnjić’s portrait of Karađorđe was to show him in the light of the medieval Nemanjić dynasty, since under their rule (1166–1371) Serbia was an independent state in political, economic and cultural florescence. The First Serbian Uprising of 1804 was a break from centuries of Ottoman bondage and was intended to establish continuity with the old kingdom.

3. POVERTY IN LYRICAL SONGS AND BALLADS

While in epic songs the poverty motif is linked to descriptions of heroic deeds, the state of society and ethical values and customs, lyrical songs and ballads are directed more at the internal world. This is combined with love, family and religious and moralistic themes in order to bring out universal and symbolic cases which may be based on real life experiences. Among characters of the poor, we encounter both generalized examples of people in financial straits and tangible characters such as beggars, the hungry, debtors, the homeless etc. Most frequently the poor overlap with those who have neither parents nor relatives — all the more so, in Serbian, since the words have the same etymological root. Both orphans and the poor are marginalized creatures with special ritual and magical roles ascribed to them. In songs whose theme is society, the poor are usually placed in opposition to the rich. The characters may be presented in different stylistic registers, from serious to playful and ironic.

Singers of folk songs rely on their individual memories when introducing real life experiences alongside certain cultural and ethnographic details into their works, they then blend them with imaginary motifs into a seamless whole. The mixture of the realistic and imaginary, as it has been noted, appears as ‘a descriptive report on something which is usually on the same plane but also in separate layers: an ethnographic description, historical facts, lovers’ meetings’ (Milošević-Đorđević 2008: 15). These layers can also include the model of a wished-for reality, which is ‘accepted as reality’ in the poetic world or, again, as a model of ritual reality, which encompasses the mythic time of the ritual, alluded to by the rite, (e.g. the symbolic association of the cosmic marriage in the actual wedding ritual) and the present tense in which the songs are performed (e.g., when participants in a wedding, sing songs at certain points of the ceremony). Whether presenting models of realistic, ritual, or desired reality, these songs contain fragments of real experiences — the echoes of memories of daily life, collective experience, or established relations and situations.



These echoes are determined by the cultural heritage of the entire community and have both a general and symbolic nature which enables the songs to be universally recognizable outside the ethnic or language community in which they were sung. The memories in the songs are passed on by means of traditional models, which are repeated and adapted to fit withing the model of the poetic world.

3.1. THE POOR IN LOVE AND WEDDING SONGS

Poverty disrupts the life of the individual and is most frequently encountered as an existential obstruction to starting and sustaining a family; therefore, the songs deal in intimate themes, family disagreements, social status and the rejection of the poor.

A common poetic theme is the marriage of a youth to a poor or orphaned girl. The framework of the story is comprised of moral qualities which are respected by the patriarchal community. They are usually portrayed as a negative parallel between a poor girl and a rich one, presented as a discussion between sister and brother on the kind of girl who would be acceptable into the family. The nuances of the variants differ, allowing us to perceive the cultural environment, the value system of the community in which the songs originate and the personal affinities of the singer.

‘Да узмемо много богаташку,
Она ће се с богатство големи;
Да узмемо много даровиту,
Она ће се с дари подголеми;
Да узмемо много сиромашку,
Она нема су чим да с’ големи!’ (Манојловић 1953: бр. 241)

Or:

‘Она че нам стару мајћу да послуша.’ (Јоцић et al. 1979: бр. 146)

‘Ће узнем, Марче, ће узнем,
Ће узнем таја сирота, —
Сирота ти је лепота,
Лепота, Марче, до века!’ (Васиљевић 1950: бр. 250)

‘If we take a very rich girl,
She will flaunt her riches
If we take a very gifted one,
She will be proud of her gifts;
If we take a poor girl,
She will have nothing to show off with!’ (Manojlović 1953: No 241)

Or:

‘She will obey our old mother.’ (Jocić et al. 1979: No 146)

'I will take, Marče, I will take,
I will take this poor one, —
The poor girl is a beauty,
A beauty, Marče, forever!' (Vasiljević 1950: No 250)

The advantages ascribed to a poor or orphaned girl are her virtues: modesty, loyalty to the family and indeed beauty, which in oral poetry is not just a physical but a moral component on par with goodness. In the first two examples, the selection of a bride points to the requirements of the traditional patriarchal community in which the songs are sung — the youth's family wants the bride to adjust, as best she can, to the new environment, and the girl's moral values are necessary to safeguard the reputation of 'her own' i.e., the bridegroom's kin. In the third example, the youth's decision is motivated by his infatuation and the idealized beauty of the girl is projected as the fulfilment of his wishes.

The motif of the poor/orphaned girl and her beauty is frequently described as fatal in ballads. In one account from southern Serbia, fatal beauty causes disruption in the family. The mother has married eight sons to girls from a landowner's household and the ninth to the most beautiful girl, who is unfortunately very poor. In a fit of jealousy, the eldest brother kills the younger during a hunt. The news of his death is given through the metaphor of a horse screaming for his master, and the powerlessness of the beautiful girl who is unable to welcome him back is expressed by a bitter curse:

'Проклет да си ти мили девере,
Што си мога мужа изгубија.' (Димитријевић 1988: бр. 25, стр. 38)

'Be you cursed, dear brother-in-law,
For killing my husband.' (Dimitrijević 1988: 25, p. 38)

In some songs, the selection of a bride is placed within the broader cosmic framework, where forms of personified nature judge the youth's choice, the value and character of the rich girl, and of the poor one. In a version from southeast Serbia (Zlatanović 1994: No 273) when the youth first seeks the hand of the rich girl, both the mountain and the army recoil when they see what ordinary men cannot: that he is leading home an *ala*, not a bride. The *ala*, a dangerous creature of Balkan mythology, similar to a dragon, appears elsewhere in folklore as the demonic transformation of some female characters. When the youth then chooses the poor girl, happiness prevails, since the girl's goodness has been recognised. The mountain, a metaphor for primeval nature and wisdom, foretells the future of the young couple, while the army points to public opinions and views as social regulators. As a sign confirming the boy's choice, the young couple receives blessings from the mountain and the army, just as in the wedding ritual, the bride and bridegroom are blessed by the wedding guests. In this way, ritual and empiric reality merge, and the wedding at which the song is sung now has its symbolic mythical correlation. In a variant from north-eastern Macedonia (Mikhailov' 1924: No 254), the rich girl is simply marked as evil and the poor one as good. The personified upholders of the cosmic plan — mountain, field



and water — do not approve of the boy's choice of the rich girl. Ritually speaking, mountain, field and water are typically dangerous places along the route of the traditional wedding procession, since on her way to the bridegroom's house, the bride is in a sensitive, liminal phase of the transition ritual. The last instance along the way is the village, which can be interpreted as the exponent of collective judgement and morals, which finally confirms the youth's choice of the poor girl.

The characters of poor youths, though rarer, are idealised in the same way as the girls'. In love songs, the poor youth is the object of the girl's longing. Because of his eyebrows, she favours him above the rich man, and no material riches can dissuade her:

'Preko njive prema brazde,
Prose mene siroma i gazde!
U gazde su tri kuće šarene,
U siroma veđe izvijene!
Gazda daje trista hiljadarke,
A siroma prljesne opanke!
Oj siroma, da ti nije veđa,
Davno bi ti okrenula leđa!' (Vukanović 1986: 151)

'Across the field towards the furrows,
I am courted by a poor lad and a man of property!
The landowner has three painted houses,
And the poor one has arched eyebrows!
The landowner is giving three hundred thousand,
The poor lad fire-scorched shoes!
Oh, poor lad, if it were not for your eyebrows,
I would long have turned my back on you!' (Vukanović 1986: 151)

In love songs, a frequent motif is the projection of the girls' wishes, and in the sub-text, we notice the model of a desirable and socially acceptable groom, in accordance with the ideals of the traditional community in which the song was sung. The girl endeavours to present her poor youth to her mother as a groom with prospects, full of confidence in his abilities to become a respected shepherd:

'Додај ми, мале, Стојана,
Ако је Стојан сирома.
Је га му Господ помогне,
И он трговац да стане,
И он че овце да купи,
И он пред овце да појде,
Овчарску свирку да свирне.' (Николић 1910: 281)

'Mother give me Stojan,
Even if Stojan is poor.



The Lord will help him,
 Even to become a trader,
 And he will buy sheep,
 And look after the sheep,
 Playing a shepherd's tune.' (Nikolić 1910: 281)

In playful songs of love and weddings, a joyous atmosphere prevails, and the cult of youth, beauty and love is glorified. The wish to marry implies the wish for life, a family and the continuance of a lineage. In this imaginary poetic world, poverty is not admitted as an obstacle to marriage:

'Зелен ора', дебб лад,
 Жен' се, лоло, док си млад!
 Жен' се, лоло, док си мио,
 Ма сирома' био!' (Шкарић 1939: 196, бр. 132)

'Green walnut tree, deep shade,
 Marry, lad, while you are young!
 Marry, lad, while you are sweet,
 Even if you are poor!' (Škarić 1939: 196, No 132)

A song about a lad whose poverty makes him hesitant to propose to his beloved is sung in a merry, teasing tone: 'To kiss you, Jovke, you will not let me, / to take you for a wife, Jovke, I have no money' („Да те љубим, Јовке, не се даваш, / да те земам, Јовке, пара немам“) (Manojlović 1929: 324). The youth thinks of a plan to get the girl by purchasing her: he will go around the villages collecting taxes and charge the most to Jovke's brother. If the brother is unable to pay, he will have to give the lad his sister as a wife. The motif of the bride price, though envisaged as a play on words in the song, has been taken from the traditional wedding ritual, where the groom symbolically buys the bride from her parents, and in some areas, showers her with ducats.

As opposed to the celebration of love and the idealization of poor characters, we encounter young men unsuitable for marriage, whose flaws may be cited in a serious or joking tone. From the viewpoint of the mothers of prospective brides and the patriarchal community in traditional society, the type of poor bachelor who likes to make merry, or serves as a mercenary in the army, is unsuitable as a bridegroom:

'Дено Магдалено,
 Не узми бећара!
 Бећар је го,
 Нигде ништа нема!
 Има једну кућу
 И она је туђа!
 Има једну гуњу
 И она није његова!
 Бег му гу даја



И па му гу узеја!
 Има стару мајку
 И она не види
 И она је гола!
 Нигде ништа нема,
 Не га узимај!' (Вукановић 1975: 41, бр. 10)

'Dena, Magdalena,
 Do not take the reveller!
 The reveller is skint,
 He has nothing at all!
 He has one house
 And that too is someone else's!
 He has one *gunj*⁶
 And it too is not his!
 God gave it to him
 And then took it away!
 He has an old mother
 And she cannot see
 She too is skint!
 Do not take him!' (Vukanović 1975: 41, No 10)

The type of undesirable poor bridegroom is also found in songs in which young men are ranked according to profession and the ability to make money, so that the girl's choice, is in fact conditioned by the environment in which it is sung. For example, in a song from the level plains of Srem, tailors are thought to be poor:

'У снајдера танка игла,
 Још тања вечера.' (Шкарић 1939: 166–167, бр. 33)

'The tailor has a slim needle,
 And an even slimmer supper.' (Škarić 1939: 166–167, No 33)

However, in mountainous areas the opposite is true. In a song from Bosnia, a tailor is a desirable husband for an orphaned girl (Petranović 1867: No 260), and in another from Montenegro, the girl refuses suitors who work hard the whole day and are absent from the house (shepherds and farmers) or whose work involves dishonesty (traders), only to choose a tailor since 'the little needle is easy food' (Pavićević 1938: No 79). In other words, this craft is not physically demanding and brings in enough for a decent life.

Some playful songs about the undesirable poor boy can be characterised as mocking songs. In one such from eastern Serbia, the girl's only suitor is ridiculed on the model of comic fools, who do absurd things in humorous stories, evoking peals of laughter:

6 Part of male folk costume, a cloth cloak with sleeves, worn instead of the upper coat.



‘Село Јело, што се не удаваш?
 Брале Жико, мене нече никој,
 сал Никола из Мечјега Дола,
 што си нема ни краву ни вола,
 кучку музе, а магаре стриже;
 кућа му је пуна сас немање.’ (Рајковић Кожељац 1978: бр. 199)

‘Sister Jela, why do you not marry?
 Brother Žika, no one will have me,
 Save for Nikola from Mečji Dol,
 Who has neither cow nor ox,
 He milks the bitch, and shears the donkey;
 His house is full of nothing.’ (Rajković Koželjac 1978: No 199)

The wedding as a ritual of transition, the merging of two families or as a social act, provides a wealth of material on relationships and situations in which the participants find themselves, depending on whether the transition is successfully or unsuccessfully concluded. Within the thematic complex of the wedding, the motif of poverty can acquire realistic and even social features. The overlapping of social and love motifs is encountered in songs which tell of the penury and deprivation of the poor. They cannot marry because of poverty, and a wedding implies a major expense. The youth begs his mother to marry him off, but the hungry years are an obstacle to the wedding:

‘Жени ме мајко жени ме,
 Докле сам ти ја млад и зелен,
 Докле ме моме сакају,
 Докле ми главу обрђају,
 Докле ми бакшиш прађају.
 — Не могу, синко, не могу,
 Дођоше те гладне године.’ (Дебељковић 1897: АСАНУ ЕЗ 10-2-123, бр. 349)

‘Marry me, mother, marry me,
 While I am young and green,
 While the girls like me
 While they look at me
 While they give me baksheesh.
 — I cannot, son, I cannot,
 These hungry years have come.’ (Debeljković 1897: ASANU EZ 10-2-123, No 349)

Wedding expenses include gifts, which are an integral part of the ritual. The absence of gifts can disrupt family relations:

‘Мене моја свекрвица кара,
 Што јој нисам донијела дара:



Свекрвице, била ратна доба,
Ратна доба, поскупила роба.' (Филиповић 1949: 244)

'My mother-in-law scolds me,
For not bringing her a gift:
Mother-in-law, it was wartime,
In wartime goods became expensive.' (Filipović 1949: 244)

Social differences between a girl and a boy are conspicuous in songs if they violate written or unwritten social norms and customs, do not behave in accordance with the expectations of their community or have recourse to deceit. Class differences are described as an insurmountable obstacle in one variant from Montenegro, where the emperor's son is so infatuated with the beauty of a poor girl, that he is prepared to renounce his riches in order to marry his beloved (Pavićević 1938: No 77). Social motifs are also found within the criticisms of proud girls, who hope they will marry better if they follow the fashion, even though their families are shabbily dressed and suffer from want (Karadžić 1841/1975: No 766), or criticism of poor girls of lowly origin who put on airs and graces (Rajković Koželjac 1978: No 200). Demanding girls can cause the ruin of the love-struck boy who spends all his money and sells his horse to win his beloved:

'Јелено, момо Јелено,
Јелено, филдан бојлијо,
Имадо, Ленче, продадо,
Продадо душо за тебе,
Док сам те видо крај себе.' (Димитријевић 1987: бр. 18, стр. 47-48)

'Jelena, lass, Jelena,
Jelena, slim and tall,
I had means, Lenče, and sold them,
Sold my soul for you,
Until I saw you by my side.' (Dimitrijević 1987: No 18, pp. 47-48)

Songs with this motif also have comical variants in which the wife of a poor man goes too far in her demands. Instead of selling the oxen and buying her clothes, the poor man, on his friend's advice, beats his wife and she stops pestering him (Dimitrijević 1989: No 20, pp. 8-9).

3.2. THE POOR IN RELIGIOUS AND LEGENDARY BALLADS

Religious and legendary ballads show a mixture of motifs from biblical legends and the apocrypha, with an older layer of mythological beliefs, in order to tell a moral story where virtue is rewarded and sin punished. The poor are actors in plots involving mercy, various offences and hellish tortures, divine protection and other correlated themes. The characters of the poor are idealized, highly moral and may be the



proponents of ethical and customary norms. They may also be presented as the victims of evil people, when they defend themselves with curses, as in the epic songs.

An example highlighting the ethical character of the poor man is illustrated by a song from around Vranje in southern Serbia, sung at the *slava* (a Serbian feast celebrating the family's patron saint), with a rare motif of the compassionate wedding of a girl with a physical affliction. While celebrating St. Petka, who is, according to Slavic beliefs the protector of women who honour her⁷, the Strumali Queen toasts the guests and invites one of them to marry her daughter who has a crippled arm. Of all the queen's guests, only Pavle, a poor man, accepts and raises his wine glass in a toast:

‘Сви су гости ником поникнали,
И у црну земљу погледали.
Не поникна сиромашче Павле,
не поникна, но јунак повикна:
— Чуј овамо, Струмали краљице,
ја ће пијем твоју чашу вино,
прву чашу с вино трогодишњо,
ја ће узнем твоју милу ћеру,
твоју ћеру сас руку сакату!’ (Златановић 1994: бр. 190)

‘All the guests looked away,
And looked at the black ground,
But poor man Pavle did not look away,
He did not look away, but called out like a hero:
— Listen here, Strumali Queen,
I will drink your glass of wine,
The first glass of three-year-old wine,
I will take your dear daughter,
Your daughter with the crippled arm!’ (Zlatanović 1994: No 190)

The previously given examples of epic songs have already shown that saints protect poor men from their enemies in miraculous ways, and the same motif can be seen in Christian ballads and has been placed in an eschatological frame. St. Nicholas, according to Slavic belief, is one of the most revered saints. He holds the keys to Heaven to which he admits people, transports souls from this world to the next, is the patron of cattle, wild animals, agriculture, water, warriors, sailors and fishermen. In a patron saint's day song from south Serbia, St. Nicholas saves shipwrecks and transports ships across the water — travellers, pupils, monks... He especially protects the poor:

‘Сви се свеци сабираше
Свет Никола дом га нема,

7 In folklore St. Petka is associated with the Christian Saint Paraskeva and with the Virgin Mary, but her image also shows remnants of the pre-Christian cult of the Mokosh goddess, as well as the personified figure of Fortune (see Detelić 2010).



Отишеја на бел Дунав,
 Да превезе млади ђаци,
 Свет Николу помолише,
 Превезе ги, избави ги.
 Друга лађа калуђери,
 Свет Николу помолише,
 Превезе ги, избави ги.
 Трећа лађа сиротиња,
 Сиротиња, гола, боса,
 Свет Николу помолише,
 Превезе ги, избави ги.' (Ђорђевић 1958: 643)

'All the saints came together
 St. Nicholas is not at home,
 He has gone to the white Danube,
 To transport little schoolchildren,
 They prayed to St. Nicholas,
 He carried them over and saved them.
 The second ship was of monks,
 They prayed to St. Nicholas,
 He carried them over and saved them.
 The third ship was of the poor,
 The poor, the naked and the barefoot,
 They prayed to St. Nicholas,
 He carried them over and saved them.' (Ђорђевић 1958: 643)

Representations of the poor, who are under special divine protection, predominate in Christian ballads. The theme of punishment for sin and visions the damned being tortured, were influenced by the Virgin Mary's apocryphal Walk Through the Torments. Such songs, which appeared under the sway of the church, had a normative and didactic character and acted as an exemplum. Catalogues of sins and terrifying images of the torments of hell were meant to ensure good religious behaviour and encourage Christian mercy and virtue. Motifs of charity towards the poor are an integral part of the saints teachings. The mother of St. Peter cannot enter heaven because she endowed no religious institutions and 'she sent away a poor man from her door' (Karadžić 1898: No 223). Sinners implore St. Peter to raise them out of hell, and he lists their sins:

'Ви нијесте кључева достојни:
 Ви гладнога нијесте најели,
 А жеднога нијесте напили;
 Гола, боса нијесте обукли,
 Од гр'јеха се нисте кајали,
 Те у паклу муку заслужили.' (Караџић 1898: бр. 224)



'You are not worthy of the keys:
 You did not feed the poor,
 And did not give the thirsty to drink;
 You did not clothe the naked,
 You did not repent of your sins,
 And have deserved torture in hell.' (Karadžić 1898: No 224)

The depiction of the torments serves as a warning that alms must be given to the poor sincerely, from the heart. Down in hell, an uncharitable woman swims in a lake, trying in vain to reach a crust of bread. To the Virgin Mary's question of why she has come to this, Elijah the Thunderer explains:

'Јесте баба Богу сагрешила:
 Кад је била на ономе свету,
 Та је баба већимашна била,
 Од свог срца немала порода,
 Имала је вуне и кудеље,
 Сиротиња њојзи долазила,
 Трудила се, за Бога искала,
 Она није тела поделити,
 Већ изнела једну кору леба,
 Кору леба од петнаест дана,
 Те је њима била поделила,
 Па не дели својом десном руком,
 Веће дели својом левом руком:
 Што је фајда, што је поделила,
 Кад је била срцем зажалила?' (Караџић 1899: бр. 1)

'Yes the old woman has sinned against God:
 When she was in the earthly world,
 This old woman was rich,
 She had no children born of her heart,
 She had wool and hemp,
 The poor would come to her,
 Begging her in the name of God,
 She would not share,
 But brought them out a crust of bread,
 A crust of bread fifteen days' old,
 This she gave to them,
 And she did not give with her right hand,
 But with her left:
 What is the good of what she shared,
 When in her heart she regretted it?' (Karadžić 1899: No 1)



The motifs of God's protection of the poor and the punishment of sinners who did them harm become especially dramatic in conjunction with motifs surrounding violations of the customary code. In a ballad from southern Serbia about a great sinner, he is condemned for transgressions of perjury and failing to respect the duties of a godparent, both of which are strictly sanctioned in traditional culture. Đurđe Daničić is asked to be the godfather to 'an extremely poor woman' and a 'rich Vlach woman', and to christen the son of the former and the daughter of the latter. The rich woman bribes Đurđe to switch the children at the christening and give her the male child. When the poor woman realises what has happened, she curses Đurđe:

‘Цвили, пишти, љута сиротинка,
Цвили, пишти, и љуто ме куне:
Еј да бог да мој крстени куме,
Из руку ти семе не никнуло,
У трле ти стадо не блејало,
Уз колено чедо не плакало,
Што промени дете на крштењу?’ (Димитријевић 1988: бр. 31, стр. 42)

‘This woman, exceeding poor, whines and whimpers,
Whines, whimpers and curses me sorely:
God grant, godfather mine,
That seed never sprout from your hands,
May there be no cattle bleating in your pen,
May there be no crying babe upon your knee,
Why did you exchange the child at the christening?’ (Dimitrijević 1988: No 31, p. 42)

Đurđe, however, not only does not repent of his sin, but commits an even greater one. He perjures himself, swearing that his only son may turn into a lamb and he himself eat it, if he is not telling the truth, thus invoking upon himself the wrath of God. His false oath comes true in the most horrible way and the poor woman's curse, that he be left without offspring, comes true.

3.3. POVERTY AS A PART OF DAILY LIFE

Folk singers include many details from daily life into their poetic world, so that the various forms of poverty such as deprivation, misfortune, the consequence of wicked or deviant behaviour, debts etc., are sung about in a realistic way. They may be from personal experience, or perceived or deducted from observing social circumstances. Realistic details make the songs colourful and convincing, and the characters familiar and real. Songs with first-hand descriptions of poverty feature strong emotions and have a tone of lamentation:

‘Је л’ још коме ко што срцу моме?
У мене је земља иловача,

У мене су дрва јасикова,
У мене је љута сиротиња!' (Филиповић 1949: 244)

'Is there another with a heart like mine?
My land is loam,
My firewood aspen,
I am desolately poor!' (Filipović 1949: 244)

Reactions to poverty, transfused into oral poetry, describe a broad arch from helplessness to anger. We encounter a quiet tragedy, due to an inability to change the situation, in a ballad from eastern Serbia. Two girlfriends, married on opposite sides of the world, each experience a different fate. While the first girl informs her mother that she is living a carefree life: 'I eat flatbread, I spin silk / I embroider silver, I wear gold' („сомун једем, свилу предем / срму везем, злато носим“), the second one says: 'Come to me, dear mother, / to see how I live: / I carry a bag, I beg for bread!' („Дојди мене, мила нано, / ти да видиш како живим: / торбу носим, леба просим!“) (Rajković 1998: 27). By opposing the letters of the two girlfriends, the singer instils pity not only for the miserable fate of the second girl, but also for the fate of her mother, who has to confront the unhappiness of her child.

The collision between youthful vitality and the prudence of maturity is encountered in a song from Vranje, in which a fragile girl, slim as a switch of brushwood, dances defiantly to express her contempt for her own impoverishment. Angry at being warned not to dance the *kolo* too energetically so that she may save her shoes, since there is no money for new ones, she does the opposite and dances violently:

'Илинче, шибљинче,
не си шибаж оро,
спрема мене оро,
љуто, ем срдито,
што ву синоћ реко:
— Поспарај кондурке,
ми смо сиромаси,
ми паре немамо,
друге да купимо.' (Златановић 1994: бр. 452)

'Ilinče, little brushwood wand,
Do not dance the kolo too fast,
Towards me the kolo,
Angrily, and forcefully,
As I told you last night:
Save your shoes,
We are poor people,
We have no money,
To buy others.' (Zlatanović 1994: No 452)



Irony and ridicule, in reaction to poverty, are thought to come from personal experience, as a form of psychological defence. Family misfortunes are accepted as part of daily life and looked on ironically when vice is exposed to the taunts of society. Derisive songs of local character name the culprits (spendthrifts, gamblers, debtors) whose irresponsible behaviour has led to victims in their own family:

‘Чије је оно луче
Што кроз прозор гуче?
Оно је нашег чича-Паје
Што земљу и кућу продаје.
Чији су оно малишани
Што иду боси подерани?
Оно су нашег чича-Неце
Што воли на картама кеце.’ (Шкарић 1939: 201, бр. 7)

‘Што ћу тужан, кад сам много дужан:
По сто-двеста на стотину места.’ (Шкарић 1939: 172, бр. 26)

‘Whose is that beauty
Cooing through the window?
She belongs to our uncle Paja,
Who is selling his land and house.
Whose are those little ones,
Going around barefoot and in rags?
They belong to our uncle Neca
Who likes aces in his hand of cards.’ (Škarić 1939: 201, No 7)

‘I am sad, because I owe so much:
A hundred-two hundred in a hundred places.’ (Škarić 1939: 172, No 26)

Ballads on family misfortunes, caused by debts and penury, are melancholic and arouse pity because they evoke emotions toward life’s simplicity, as for instance in the song about a young bride who is forced to borrow bread and salt in order to be able to send her brother off in a fitting manner (Yastrebov 1889: 46).

The comparison of the rich and poor is based on observations of the immediate environment. The poor are recognisable everywhere and there is an ironic edge even when the main motif is love. Social inequality, however, is taken for granted as the usual state of affairs:

‘Чија врула у слатине свира?
То је врула сиромашка сина;
А газдинска засвирити неће:
Газда плати, па га свирац прати.’ (Телечки 1863: бр. 178)

'Whose flute is playing by the salt spring?
That is the flute of a poor son;
But the landowner's flute will not play:
The landowner pays, and the player follows him.' (Telečki 1863: No 178)



The various motifs associated with the poor in Serbian and South-Slav oral poetry are permeated to a greater or lesser extent by the experiences of real-life memories, social circumstances and the historical past. The poetic material shows a broad pallet of memories, from the local and autobiographical, to the cultural. Fragments of memory are atomized and fragmentary, transposed or sifted through different formulae and thematic patterns and adapted to the ideas and stylistic registers of the corresponding genres. Thus, compressed and modified, memories of the poor are important not so much for their closeness to real historical and social circumstances, but above all for their emotional and experiential strength, lively imagery, links to ritual reality, ethical messages and their ability to relate an authentic experience which is felt to be real, notwithstanding the distance in time and space from the event and the unreliability of memory. The diverse examples of songs about poverty presented in this paper bear testimony to 'pluralism of memory through the different memories of different social groups' (Sládeček, Vasiljević 2015: 17). The songs may be seen as signposts, pointing the way to an insight on the multiple layers of traditional culture, or as a kaleidoscope, where different memories of human experience are reconstructed, intertwined and crafted into a story of identity.

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