

Duel of Unequal Adversaries in South Slavic Epic Poems¹

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The biblical story about the duel between Goliath, the Philistine champion from Gath, and David, the Israeli shepherd, is the most widely known story about a contest between a man and a giant. A young man, unskilled at combat, defeats a superior warrior, six and a half cubits tall, not with the strength of his muscles, but with dexterity of his mind – and a simple stone shot from a sling. Although it has long been paradigmatic, this well-known story about the triumph of a weaker, younger hero over an older and more experienced one, is neither unique nor the most ancient.

The roots of this duel should first be sought in cosmogonic myths about the succession of generations among deities from all over the planet, from Europe and Asia Minor to the Far East and the Pacific. An older deity, a god creator of a cosmos, a planet, an embodiment of immobility and resistance, is dethroned by a younger, more dynamic deity. He can also be replaced by a more capable descendant, and the theomachy may end with a god (most often the thunder god), who establishes the rules and order in the universe. In the Acadian tradition, Ea (Nudimmud) kills Apsu, who together with Tiamat represents the first, still unseparated divine pair – the water-totality. Marduk, the son of Ea, defeats Tiamat and becomes the supreme god (*Enuma eliš* 2008: Table I, 61–69; Table IV, 93–103). Hurrian/Hittite theogony establishes the line of Alalu – Anu – Kumarbi – Teshub, the god of storm (HOFFNER 1998: 40–45; ELIJADE 2003a: 122–128). According to the Canaan myths, the original El is supplanted by the god Baal who takes both of El's wives (ELIJADE 2003a: 130–134). Greek mythology records the origin of Uranus and Gaea from Chaos, the rule of Chronos, and finally Zeus's enthronement (HESIOD 2008: 116, 126–127, 881–885). The Indo-European tradition also preserves the memory of the conflict between the older and the younger generation of gods. In the East, this takes the form of the victory of Indra, who supplanted Varuna (the fight between Asuras and Devas), and in the West, among German tribes, there are myths about wars and peace-making between two groups of gods – Aesir and Vanir (*Atharva-Veda* IX, 2: 17–18; ELIJADE 2003a: 171–178; ELIJADE 2003b: 130; ROBINSON & WILSON 1976: 268).

The gods that win usually do not fight only with their own ancestors, but also with a series of monsters, dragons, or giants who defend the old order and chaos, prevent the new order from installing their rules over chaos by making droughts, blocking water and similar (cf. OGDEN 2013: 11–184, WEST 2007: 255–263; WATKINS 1995). They are created by the older generation of gods to fight the usurpers of the divine throne, but the creatures of chaos can rise up against their own makers. During his fight against Tiamat, Marduk has to overcome a hydra, dragon, lion, wolf, and men-beasts; in total, eleven monsters of her creation (*Enuma eliš* 2008:

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Table I, 132–145; Table IV, 115–119). In beating the dragon Illujanka, Teshub has help of a mortal man (BECKMAN 1989: 104–105; HOFFNER 1998: 10–12; ELIJADE 2003a:125–126). Baal kills the seven-headed water dragon Yam (GORDON 1961: 193–194; ELIJADE 2003a: 134). Yahweh is the only one who can defeat the sea monster Leviathan (*Book of Job*, 41:1–34; *Psalms* 13:1–6; *Isaiah* 27: 1); Zeus fights the monstrous Typhon who has one hundred snake heads on his shoulders (HESIOD 2008: 820–868); Apollo fights the snake Python and the giant Tityos (GRAVES 2004: 73); Indra kills the dragon Vritra (*Rigveda* I, 32; *Rigveda* X, 113, 5; ELIJADE 2003a: 176); Thor uses a hammer to fight against giants and the snake Jormungandr (PUHVEL 1989: 202); and the battle between Perun/Perkunas and the Dragon/Volos/Veles is well known in the Balto-Slavic tradition (IVANOV & TOPOROV 1974: 75–103).

In both the ancient cosmogonic myths and the Bible story about the battle between a man and a giant, the winner is usually neither stronger nor inviolable. The battle normally begins with a defeat, which is then followed by an alliance or some help from the older generation of gods or men and a miraculous device, or even perhaps deceit. Ea has to put Apsu to sleep, shackle him, and then take away his power and glory, and Tiamat silently agrees to all this (*Enuma eliš* 2008: Table I, 64, 69). Illujanka first has to beat Teshub, and then a mortal, Hupashiya, intoxicating and tying up the dragon, so as to make it easy for the god of thunder to slay him (BECKMAN 1989: 104–105; HOFFNER 1998: 10–12; ELIJADE 2003a: 125–126). Chronos sits on the throne only after he has castrated Uranus (HESIOD 2008: 179–181), and Zeus finally defeats Chronos and the Titans when he is helped by the Hundred-Handed Giants (HESIOD 2008: 713–721).

In the domain of myths, earthly battles are fought in parallel to those in heaven. Heroes in many traditions – demigods, divine descendants, are the only ones who can manage to free the earth, its rulers, and even its gods from fearful gigantic fiends. Gilgamesh and Enkidu defeat the horrible Humbaba, the guardian monster of the Cedar Forest (*The Epic of Gilgamesh*: Tablet V), the Persian hero Fereydun nails the snake-headed demonic king Zahhak against a rock (in the Avesta, Thraetaona kills Zahhak/Aži Dahak) (FERDOWSI 2000: 20–21). The most famous Greek hero, Hercules, becomes immortal through a number of feats: he kills two snakes, the Nemean Lion, the nine-headed Hydra, the three-headed and three-bodied giant Geryon and other adversaries (ROBINSON & WILSON 1976: 167–176), and Odysseus outsmarts the Cyclops. The story about the giant Goliath and the Biblical shepherd and later king, David, can also be positioned at the time when the ancestors were still introducing order into a world which was at that time inhabited by monsters and giants.² The activities of cultural heroes and ancient ancestors are in fact a continuation of the same cosmogonic story about creating order and the universe out of the original chaos in the mythical time of the childhood of humanity. Obtaining victory over the monsters that keep emerging and threaten to endanger the world that has just been established, is at the same time a way of preserving the newly established cosmic law,

2 The *Bible* and the Apocryphal books speak of the Nephilim, who were giants. *Genesis* and *The Book of Enoch* mention the giants who were born to the sons of gods and daughters of men (*Genesis* 6:4; *The Book of Enoch* 1917: Ch. 7).

and a cyclical struggle against the forces of chaos that cannot be destroyed because they are also of divine origin. They can only be suppressed and banished into the inaccessible regions at the end of the world, from which they periodically return. The rites and rituals related to the New Year symbolically repeat the cosmogonic struggle against monsters, maintaining an understanding of cyclical mythical time. The main work of cultural heroes is to suppress these forces of the dark and to educate humans, and sometimes also to create them (MELETINSKI 1983: 201). The cultural heroes are the first humans, teachers, and demiurges, they bring with them elements of culture and often conquer their enemy by using fraud (tricksters³). Once they have established order on earth, their mission is complete and they disappear or retire to heaven, into the earth, or the ocean, to some faraway islands or into the stars (MELETINSKI 1958: 114–132).

Epics adopted certain mythological patterns, and therefore they have also preserved the notion of a cultural hero. Cultural heroes become the first folklore heroes,⁴ characterized by hyperbolic strength, gigantic growth, enormous weight, and sometimes magical abilities, and totemic and zoomorphic traits (KRINIČNAJA 1988: 187). Their adversaries also have some visible fantastic features. Some epic plots about their combats are also known as plots of dragon-slaying⁵. At the later stages of the development of the epic such heroes are gradually replaced with more realistic heroes, and cosmogonic combats become national and tribal.⁶ The succession of generations of heroes lies at the heart of all of the epic plots which depict one hero killing another, gigantic, strong and previously invincible hero.

Pairs of mythological and epic fighters (victors and losers) form a paradigmatic line, which need not be evolutionary, i.e., developed according to a chronological principle. Mythical logic entails the cyclical repetition of the same archetypal pattern:

- 3 The trickster/cheating hero type is widely present in the mythologies and epic traditions of many peoples. He is believed to have a wide array of ambivalent traits: he is a divine cheater, a cultural hero who possesses striking sexual or demonic, animalistic features; he can also be an enchanter, a blacksmith, a masked hero, a coward, a “reverse hero”, a villain, a jester, and a comic figure (MILLER 2000: 242–295; ESTHER 2005: 472–480; RADIN: 1956: 132–169; KERÉNYI 1956: 186–188).
- 4 Meletinski believes that the mythological cultural hero evolved in two directions: into a deity and into an epic hero (MELETINSKI 1963: 25–31), and that this is a type of transition from an archaic form toward more developed forms (MELETINSKI 1983: 196).
- 5 The cosmogonic mytheme about fighting a monster, or a dragon was first translated into the famous Biblical legend about St. George and the dragon, and then appeared in numerous epic plots. South Slavic folklore tradition differentiates between an old Slavic word for a dragon-like monster, *zmaj* (dragon) which protects a nation, a region, a village or crops (a positive principle) from *ala* and *aždaja* (words of Persian origin, negative principle). The fight between a *zmaj* and *ala* is a fight between creatures that are similar, primordial, repetitive and tied to the annual cycle. In this sense, the hero who is a dragon-slayer, or monster-killer, must also possess a dragon-like nature and mediating abilities between the human and dragon worlds; he is a combination of the solar and the chthonic.
- 6 Propp and Meletinski note the three phases of the Russian epic (PROPP 1958; MELETINSKI 1963). Putilov follows the fantastic-historic, heroic-historic and real-historic evolution of the epic and its main character (PUTILOV 1971).

Defeated	Victorious
Older deity	Younger god
Monster, giant	Younger god
Monster, giant	Cultural hero, hero of the older generation
Cultural hero, hero of the older generation	Younger, more realistic hero

It is noticeable that the position of the cultural hero belonging to the older generation is variable. Loma has noticed that Kraljević Marko, the greatest South Slavic hero plays such an ambivalent role in the oral Serbian tradition.⁷ According to legends, long-living Marko, a man of hyperbolic strength, overpowers his fantastic, chthonic adversaries, but he is also endangered or overpowered by a hero of a younger generation. According to one legend, he even retreats to the new times of modern weapons (KARADŽIĆ 1972: 321). The former refers to dragon-slaying plots, and the latter to the succession of generations among heroes. The story of David and Goliath fits both patterns. The model of a cultural hero slaying a monster corresponds to the double characterization of David as a shepherd, which is indicative of his mediating abilities (*Slavic Mythology* 2001: 420; KULIŠIĆ, PETROVIĆ, PANTELIĆ 1970: 307; DETELIĆ 1992: 243–247), and later, of his abilities as a king and God’s emissary. The second model is more visible: it is the succession of generations among epic heroes, where a hero of average abilities overpowers a hero of fantastic abilities. What we have here is actually an isomorphic archetypal matrix. The South Slavic epic has not completely assimilated this ancient thematic pattern; what has been preserved are some references to it in the construction of the characters who are protagonists of a duel, as well as parallel motifs in the culmination points (use of fraud, tricks) and in the epilogue (victory over a superior adversary).

Giant

A giant in South Slavic fairy-tales and legends is not very different from a giant in the oral prose tradition of other nations – he is a typical enemy (or a cannibal in fairy-tales) who is easy to deceive (RADULOVIĆ 2009: 215–216). A leader of giants in verse fairy-tales *Jovan i divski starešina / Jovan and the leader of giants* (KARADŽIĆ 1988a: 8) and *Carević Jovan i nemila majka / Prince Jovan and cruel mother* (BOŽIĆ/BOŠANAC 1890: 45)⁸ fits within the same model. In other examples, South Slavic epic poems rarely mention a giant (*div* or *džin*) – they rather speak of a ‘huge hero’ (*golemi junak*). It can be concluded that the hero is enormous because of his incredible, in-

7 A giant from the Russian bylinas, Svyatogor, holds a similar position: “[...] Svyatogor and Marko represent, each in his own epic tradition, a chronological vertical axis that connects several generations of heroes” (LOMA 2008: 87).

8 The main hero, young prince Jovan, first defeats 30 or 70 giants and then also their leader, his mother’s lover.

human strength, polycephaly, two or three hearts, body parts made of stone, his thundery voice or because of the fear he inspires. It should be noted that the difference between a giant and a dragon-like hero is tiny and relative. The patterns overlap, and this conditions the ambivalent position of these colossi.

The positive pole is occupied by the greatest South Slavic hero, and parallels have long been drawn between this hero and the heroes in Indo-European mythology and epics based on it. Kraljević Marko is seen as the sun deity, a dragon-slayer, shaman, an heir to St. George, and a hero-horseman or a typical epic hero.⁹ His gigantic proportions may be inferred on the basis of the cultural and historical legends in which he figures, about the origin of some rocks or grooves made in stone. Karadžić, for example, in his *Rječnik (Dictionary)* mentions Kraljević Marko's gigantic wooden bowls, and the enormous distances between the rocks from which and to which Marko or Miloš Obilić jumped – *Kraljevića skakala, Miloševa skakala / Kraljević's stepping stones, Miloš's stepping stones* (КАРАЏИЋ 1986b: 1110, 521, 502). Macedonian and Bulgarian legends speak of Marko as belonging to a time when the ancestors were still introducing order to the universe – by creating the mountains, cutting through the gorges and making niches with their weight. One of the topics of legends and epic poems about Marko is his loss of strength. When Marko tries to lift a stone or a bag of a weak old man (a deity disguised as an old man), which are heavy as a planet, Marko loses his strength. It turns out that the old man is in fact God, who takes away his excessive strength and demands that he uses his wit in future (BURIN, 48; BOGIŠIĆ, 49; *Slavic Mythology* 2001: 293). The creation of the world is finished, there is no need for heroes of gigantic strength, and the new age demands heroic paradigms of a different kind.¹⁰ Delić interprets this loss of strength as a move from mythology to epics (DELIĆ 2006: 306–312), and Suvajdžić as the fictional death of the hero (SUVAJDŽIĆ 2005: 178–182). In addition to his enormous strength and weight, which only Šarac, Marko's miraculous horse, can bear, the elements of Marko's portrait that classify him as being a giant are his forceful blow, the weapons that only he can lift (such as the mace of 6 oka¹¹), his moustache which is as big as a six-month-old lamb, the enormous amount of wine that he drinks from large washbowls (sometimes also his insatiable appetite) and the way in which his dancing makes towers shake.

Kraljević Marko inherited his strength from his uncle, Duke Momčilo, a “great hero”, who was unheroically tricked and defeated by King Vukašin/Petrušin/Kostadin with the help of Duke Momčilo's unfaithful wife. The King is a small, unsightly victor, the polar opposite of the colossus he has slain; he can hardly lift Momčilo's equipment and weapons (KARADŽIĆ 1988a: 25). Momčilo's calpac (a type of cap) is so

9 For an exhaustive list and a commentary of papers published on this topic by Ruvarac (Руvaraц), Khalansky (Халански), Nodilo (Нодило), Čajkanović (Чајкановић), Schmaus (Шмаус), Tomić (Томић), Novaković (Новаковић), Vanašević (Ванашевић), Milošević-Đorđević (Милошевић-Ђорђевић), Merighi (Мериђи), Stojković (Стојковић), Ljubinković (Љубинковић), Loma (Лома), Ivanova (Иванова), Srejović (Срејовић), Filipović (Филиповић) see SUVAJDŽIĆ (2007: 125–150).

10 Similarly, in Russian bylinas, Svyatogor leaves the epic scene because mother earth cannot bear his weight any more.

11 Oka – medieval unit of weight, equal to about 2.75 pounds.

huge that it falls on to the King's shoulders (KARADŽIĆ 1988a: 25; BURIN, 2; BURIN, 3), Momčilo's coat drags behind him in the dirt (BURIN, 2), both of the King's feet can go into one of Momčilo's boots (KARADŽIĆ 1988a: 25; BURIN, 2; BURIN, 3; MILADINOVCI, 105), and he disappears into the enormous hero's boot up to his waist (MILUTINOVIĆ 1990: 147). Duke Momčilo's gigantic height is also shown through the immense distance between the hunting ground and his castle, which he nevertheless manages to cross in three strides (KARADŽIĆ 1988a: 25). According to the old manuscripts, the Duke has two hearts (BOGIŠIĆ, 97). The attributes which are fitting for such a hero are a winged horse, a sabre with eyes and plants that grow in his pigtail. These plants are supposed to be magical, like an amulet; a source of external strength located in his hair. According to Karadžić, King Vukašin tearfully admits that there are no longer any such heroes in the whole world, thus indirectly testifying that Momčilo was last representative of gigantic heroes and when he disappeared it was consequently the end of the mythical era (SCHMAUS 1969: 21). By dying, Duke Momčilo, a hero of the older generation, transfers his strength to the hero who starts the historical epoch (DELIĆ 2006: 298–299).¹²

The rare giants with extremely negative characteristics that are found within the tradition are the enemies of heroes. Black Arabian, a tyrant, has a head like a cauldron, ears like bowls, and eyes like pans, and can eat all the bread baked in a fireplace along with three cows, and then drink two barrels of wine and one of brandy (MILADINOVCI, 154). In a Macedonian variant, a portrait of the Arabian who attacks wedding parties also emphasizes his gigantic proportions:

„Доња усна на груди му бије,	His lower lip reaches down to his chest,
Горња усна у чело удара.	His upper lip, up to his forehead,
Главу има колико два бубња,	His head is like two drums,
Очи има као две чиније,	His eyes like two bowls,
Уста има кол'ко мала врата,	His mouth is like a small door,
Зубе има четири мотике,	Teeth like four hoes,
Ноге има солунске диреке.“	Legs like posts from Thessaloniki.

(MILADINOVCI, 173)

The adversary of Stojan Popović (KARADŽIĆ 1988a: 87), a highwayman in a strange golden-silver suit who intercepts Stojan's wedding party, is the giant Latinin. The chronotope of the crossroad which the wedding party reaches on its way back to the bridegroom's home, the *vila* who serves the fearsome brigand, who languidly sits with his legs crossed, and the portrait dominated by Latinin's theriomorphic features, his golden and silver colours, his moustache, which is as big as a six-month-old lamb, and his heavy equipment, position this giant unambiguously among the demonic and chthonic heroes. The giant is subdued by Marko, the groom's brother, who tricks him by making him look elsewhere for a moment. The topos of the rite of passage and the wedding theme to which it is dominantly related, make these heroes more closely resemble dragon-like heroes (PETKOVIĆ 2008: 141–144).

12 Loma notes that Svyatogor, in his breath, sweat or foam also transferred a part of his strength to Ilya, the first representative of the next generation (LOMA 2008: 74).

In a poem about the combat with a girl called Džidovka, the ill-fated bride of Marko, the girl is described as being so strong that the blows delivered by Relja and Miloš, Marko's blood-brothers, manage only to wake her and irritate her. She falls dead, however, when accidentally struck by Marko's mace, thrown blindly while they were running away (BOSANAC 1897: 49). In a Bulgarian variant, Marko's mighty adversary, Arvatska, does not give up when Marko cheatingly stabs her and dies only when the hero decapitates her. Her gigantic features, supernatural strength and her sable fir cap which the heroes cannot lift emphasize her chthonic nature (BURIN, 50).

That Marko's adversaries are giants can also be understood from their names – Deda Džidovina (from Arabian word *džin*, meaning giant) and Mina Džidovina (MLADENOVIĆ & NEDIĆ 1974a: 49; MILUTINOVIĆ 1990: 37). In all these examples, Marko represents a realistic hero of humanly proportions.

All the heroes mentioned so far can be classified as giants. Their portrait features, attributes and nomenclature explicitly indicate this. There is, however, a greater number of giants who possess only the remnants of gigantic features. A thundery voice which makes the leaves fall off trees can indicate a dragon-slayer, an adversary of the Thunder God, but also an enormous hero.¹³ In Serbian epics, the heroes with such a voice are Starina Novak (KARADŽIĆ 1988b: 6), Komnen the standard bearer (КАРАЏИЋ 1988b: 26) and the stubborn Arabian (KARADŽIĆ 1988b: 36). Radosav Kavga makes the earth tremble under his foot (MLADENOVIĆ & NEDIĆ 1974a: 80), and when Kraljević Marko dances taking small steps, "like a monk", balconies tremble.

The greatest number of heroes whose portraits have conserved some of the characteristics of giants can be found among the adversaries. One striking character is Mihna who is stone up to his waist and who stole Kraljević Marko's beloved. His stone features, a toponym related to him (city Kostur/Skeleton) and the theft of a woman signal his relationship with the world of the dead, a chthonic world (DELIĆ 2009: 534–535). Eliade shows that myths about stone people who originally inhabited the earth are widely present. They descended from the original deities and rocks (petra genatrix). The myth about Ullikummi, a giant stone monster, who is toppled and subdued by Teshub only after Ea cuts his legs (ELIJADE 2003a: 127–128), is typologically close to the resolution offered in the already mentioned, older manuscript about Kraljević Marko and Mihna, and indirectly reveals Mihna's gigantic nature. Loma indicates that Musa Kesedžija is also of similar origin: he was born on a cold plate and he intercepted Kraljević Marko in a gorge (LOMA 2008: 73).

Musa, who bears another mark of the giant world – three hearts – is sometimes depicted as having a snake in his third heart (KARADŽIĆ 1988a: 67; BURIN, 20; BOSANAC 1897: 42, 43; BURIN, 21, 22). If he can be considered a dragon-like hero, the three hearts indicate that his ancestors are giants, although the delineation of these two types of heroes, as already noted, is not impermeable. In addition to hypertrophic features, his giant nature is also indicated by his multiple, double and triple organs (he has three sets of ribs, one on top the other). The superior adversary with three (or two) hearts is overcome with much difficulty. Most likely, he is defeated

13 On the motif of voice in Russian bylinas and South Slavic epics, see: RADENKOVIĆ 2011: 76–84.

through trickery, made to look away or toward the sky at a key moment. A hero is often helped by a *vila*, who dazzles the opponent, casts a spell on him or reminds the hero of a hidden weapon. As well as Musa, Relja of Budim also has three hearts (BOSANAC 1897: 62), and so do the adversaries of Rade Oblačić (Rade of Avala)¹⁴, Stojan Popović and Kraljević Marko¹⁵. Prominent adversaries of Rade are the Arabian and Alija Đerzelez. In addition to having three hearts, the Arabian also has three rows of teeth, and Alija has triple bones. Poem number 26 from Milutinović's *Pjevanija* (*Пјеванија*) belongs to the same thematic cycle – duels feature in it as competitions between heroes. The Arabian, Banović Sekula's adversary, does not possess three hearts or, formulaically, three heads. However, when he rides, he carries a fir tree as a parasol. This indicates the strength needed to tear a fir tree out of the ground and lift it up, and, importantly, also implicitly states the size of the hero, who needs a whole tree to shade him from the sun.

The representations of polycephalous chthonic deities and mythical monsters in South Slavic epic poetry are best preserved in the character of the three-headed Arabian, who is the adversary in the plots about the wedding of a hero.

A weaker hero

Just as the biblical giant has no direct double in South Slavic epic poetry, the character of David is also not directly borrowed. A typological similarity is however indicated by some biographical elements in South Slavic epic poetry – the hero is a shepherd, unskilled at duels, the son of an elderly parent, who despite advice to the contrary engages in a duel against a stronger opponent and overcomes him with trickery and deceit. In the widest sense, David becomes a paradigm for all of the weaker heroes who still manage to win in combat.

The most famous champion of the tsar is without a doubt Miloš Voinović, a shepherd and the youngest son of Voin (KARADŽIĆ 1988a: 29). Clothed in Bulgarian rainwear, he simulates unfamiliarity with basic martial arts and makes other people laugh by carrying his spear upside down. He manages to confuse both the tsar, who asks him not to fight, and his adversary. All this is a cleverly concocted plan, an initial ruse which secures him a more promising position in the ensuing fight. Miloš employs tactical know-how in his final fight with the three-headed duke Balačko as well. The hero first uses a bear-fur coat to shield himself from the adversary's flame, to be then thrown around three times by the forceful freezing wind coming from the Balačko's second head. The situation finally turns in his favour when, from afar, he topples his opponent with his mace (just as David did with a rock) and then severs all his heads. In the final section of the Bulgarian variant (BURIN, 79), the shepherd Miloš tricks the three-headed ala Balačko by making him look to the sky, where he had

14 This is the plot of a youngest hero fighting a famous and mighty adversary (KARADŽIĆ 1935a: 33; MLADENIĆ & NEDIĆ 1974a: 55, 85; MILUTINOVIĆ 1990: 145).

15 In the plot about an unfaithful woman who betrays the hero while they are going through a mountain and helps the attacker (KARADŽIĆ 1935b: 28; MLADENIĆ & NEDIĆ 1974a; BOSANAC 1897: 26).

supposedly blown away the whole wedding party. Using Balačko's distraction, Miloš eventually kills him.¹⁶

And whereas Miloš is only seemingly a bad duellist, Kraljević Marko is on several occasions said to be a coward and a weaker duellist. Still, the epic logic which does not allow the greatest hero to be defeated easily nor to be killed by a slighter, mortal hero, makes Marko victorious even when he is the weaker. Sometimes he even abandons the heroic code of fighting. He has the role of the protector of the bride and the wedding party many times, but he does not always win easily. He first has to deceive the fearsome Belil-aga by asking about the location of a spring and then killing him from behind, with his eyes closed (KARADŽIĆ 1935a: 38). He employs a similar method to handle his nephew, a young Turk, who he is not able to subdue (MLADENOVIĆ & NEDIĆ 1974a: 39). After much wine and having seemed to have established a truce, Marko invites his nephew to look at the apparently blurred sun and then kills him with his sabre because he had pledged to quench its thirst with the blood of the first hero he met. Because of the taboo contained in a spoken vow and the role of the national fighter against the Turks, Marko's inhuman act does not tarnish his epic glory.¹⁷ If anyone could kill Marko, it was only his nephew. Zlatković notes the matrilineal epical vertical line between Momčilo, Marko and Marko's nephew (ZLATKOVIĆ 2006: 83). Such a genealogical tree symbolically represents the succession of heroic generations. A mighty young hero who dies is still at the opposite pole from an inexperienced young man, who is weaker at the beginning of a duel, but victorious at its end.

Another example is when a young hero, almost a child, fights a duel for the first time in his life because he needs to replace an elderly father, and thus takes his initiation test. He belongs to the pole of weaker fighters because he is inexperienced and still a child. Overcoming an experienced, famous enemy should secure him heroic status, confirm his maturity and ability as a warrior. Ivo Senković, a champion of old Đurđe, gains the upper hand in a duel against the blackmailer and a tyrant Aga of Ribnik only after his father's experienced horse helps him dodge his opponent's deadly weapon (KARADŽIĆ 1988b: 56). The fight, full of turns in the plot, testifies to Ivo's frailty, inexperience but also his cleverness. When he sees a second chance to attack, Ivo cuts off the head of Aga's horse, which falls over Aga, so the only thing left for Ivo to do is to deliver the final blow. This is an echo of David's tactics, who also first toppled his adversary. Ivo then flees from the pursuers by cleverly hiding his trail in the forest. In another example, just like Ivo, weak Matija wins a duel, a kind of a bet where his sister is the pledge (KARADŽIĆ 1988b: 55). In yet another, "Hrdak" Jovan Stanković¹⁸, also known as a bad duellist, is the only champion of the

16 Ruvarac identifies Miloš as a dragon-slayer and an heir to deities such as Indra, and Balačko with Valas, i.e. Vritra (SUVAJDŽIĆ 2007: 86–87).

17 In a similar example, a folk singer also justifies an act of Dimitrije Jakšić, who kills his nephew, still a child, a black Arabian (KARADŽIĆ 1988a: 97). The Arabian and the Turk in these examples are not just national enemies, they are heirs to the mythological snatchers of girls (sisters), who belong to another, chthonic world. To kill their offspring is a way to continue the eternal fight against a demonic force.

18 "Hrdak" means "a bad".

old Duke Radonja. He cannot fight and is scolded for it by more experienced on-lookers, but he still wins the duel and the status of a hero (MILUTINOVIĆ 1990: 28).

We have already mentioned the type of plot about a fight in which three heroes await a famous adversary but only one of them (Rade/Mirosav or Oblačić/Oblak) dares to confront him. We noted the gigantic features of the adversary's portrait, as well as the motif of the deceit at the height of the duel, but there is also a third analogy with the mythological pattern – the winner is the least famous in the company of hardened and already famed fighters; he has no fighting experience and is extremely young. In one variant, for example, Rade is only 15 years old (MLADENOVIĆ & NEDIĆ 1974a: 85; SAMARDŽIJA 2010: 230).

Another type of epic plot, which bears many points of resemblance with family plots with numerous turns, places a weak, young hero in the centre. Jovan, still a boy, prevents his mother from marrying the man who had killed his father by ambushing and killing him (KARADŽIĆ 1935b: 30; MLADENOVIĆ & NEDIĆ 1974b: 23). In the first variant, the boy can hardly lift his father's weapon, the sabre is dragging behind him on the ground, and he can hardly pull the trigger of his gun, whereas the ill-fated groom has an unmistakable gigantic feature – his head is heavy: 17 *oka*.

Plots about the last feat of an ill hero can be viewed in a similar context. The best-known variants speak of Bolan Dojčin (or Ivan Karlović; GESEMANN, 110; KARADŽIĆ 1988a: 78; MLADENOVIĆ & NEDIĆ 1974a: 63; BOŽIĆ & BOSANAC 1890: 64; MILADINOVIĆ, 88, 154). A dying hero, tightly wrapped in a cloth and placed on a horse uses his final reserves of strength to defend the honour of his sister and/or his beloved and to repent for the sin that made him ill (MLADENOVIĆ & NEDIĆ 1974a: 63), so that he can rest in peace¹⁹. In another story, a tyrant who attacks at a moment when he thinks that the weakened hero cannot respond is challenged by Marko Martesin who rises from his sickbed to confront him (BOGIŠIĆ, 67, 68). Peter Bošković, who is also ill, similarly prevents the devastation of his sheep (KARADŽIĆ 1986a: 47). Đuro Daničić, a husband present at his unfaithful wife's wedding, preserves his face (KARADŽIĆ 1935b: 31, 32), when, already half-dead after years of sickness, he rises to perform his last heroic act. Similarly to Odysseus, who is the only one among his wife's suitors who can string the bow and shoot an arrow, Đuro Daničić is the only one who can take a sword out of its case. With this sword, a supposed gift to the new bridegroom, Đuro punishes his adversary and the adulterous wife. All these plots about the feat of an ill hero depart from the basic pattern because the winner dies and the adversaries are of human proportions.

19 Delić classifies the cycle of poems about Bolan Dojčin as poems of dragon-slaying. She also notices that a widely present mythical pattern, in which the person performing a cosmogonic act by default remains alive, was modified under the influence of St Demetrius, the defender of Thessaloniki (DELIĆ 2011: 112).

Widening and deformation of the model

The model of a man fighting against a giant is not repeated in the poems of the middle and more recent periods.²⁰ Archaic epic heroes gave way to more realistic characters, and duels and fights lost their cosmogonic character and became battles of earthly dimensions. The only plot pattern that persists is that of a conflict between a weak hero and a strong adversary, where the victory of the former is ethically highly valued and is equivalent to the way true heroism is understood. A brave individual is gradually suppressed by a group or a troop, an enemy who acquires a human form, but is also multiplied.

Duplication of the adversary forms a minimal widening of the pattern. So when a challenger comes to the pre-arranged duel with his companion and helper, the hero has to fight against both of them simultaneously (MILUTINOVIĆ 1990: 54; in the variant presented in MILUTINOVIĆ 1990: 143, the hero is a brave girl). In one example, an ambush of as many as three heroes awaits Vid Maričić at a spring (KARADŽIĆ 1935b: 54). In numerous plots a single hero confronts a troop or a whole army, and these patterns are generally dominant in the poems of the old period. The Kosovo heroes Banović Strahinja, Srđa Zlopogleđa and Boško Jugović individually overcome whole troops of Turks (KARADŽIĆ 1988a: 50). Kraljević Marko confronts hundreds and thousands of attackers at weddings or in the tsar's army. When a captured hero is brought to a foreign ruler, he is allowed to choose how to die, and he chooses a duel with hundreds of enemy soldiers, from which he, as expected, surfaces victorious (BOGIŠIĆ, 101; KARADŽIĆ 1988a: 52; MILUTINOVIĆ 1990: 158; BOŽIĆ & BOSANAC 1890: 60; ANDRIĆ 1939: 14). In another example, Todor Salakin alone defends his home and his beloved wife from a troop of janissaries (MILADINOVCI, 191). In the poems of the middle period, the number of adversaries is more moderate, and there is often the motif of fraud. Komnen the standard-bearer drives away Hrnja Mustaf-aga's troop, pretending that he is followed by a much larger troop (KARADŽIĆ 1988b: 26). A similar heroism characterizes a three-member group that disarms sleeping Turks (KARADŽIĆ 1988b: 39), or the feat of four *uskoks* (KARADŽIĆ 1988b: 47; MLADENOVIĆ & NEDIĆ 1974b: 63). These last two examples create a transition to the plots of collective conflicts. The victories of small troops of *hajduks*, *uskoks*²¹, Serbian insurgents or Montenegrins fighting for their freedom against enemy armies, are, however, already

20 The 'poems of the middle period' are the poems from the 16th and 17th centuries about *uskoks* and *hajduks*, and those of the 'more recent period' are those which recount fighting between troops in Montenegro and the fight for liberation from the Ottomans in Serbia and Montenegro (17th and 19th centuries).

21 The *uskoks* (*uskočiti* – literally, to jump into something, i.e. enter a foreign territory or defect to another country) were Christian refugees who, from the 16th century onwards fled from the territory occupied by the Turks into the territory of the so-called *Vojna krajina* (Military Frontier). One of their centres was the town of Senj. The *uskoks* were organized into small troops which defended the southern borders of the Austro-Hungarian Empire from Turkish attacks. *Hajduks* (Hungarian *baydu* – soldier, Turkish *baydud* – bandit) were outlaws from Turkish rule, who, led by a *harambaša*, were organized into small troops and groups and who intercepted and attacked the Turks in the wider area of the Balkans.

common. Realistic historical facts translated into poems completely block the mythological underpinning of the conflict between heroes of unequal strength.

The model is undermined in the variants of conflicts between equal adversaries or troops. The only thing that remains here from the paradigmatic pattern is the motif of fraud, for example when thirty heroes from Maksim the standard-bearer's troop tie up thirty sleeping Turks from Udbina (KARADŽIĆ 1935a: 50), and thirty *hajduks* disguised as girls overcome thirty Turks lured into the tower (ANDRIĆ 1939: 21).

A complete change of pattern, a deformation and distortion of the model is easily recognizable in conflicts between unequal adversaries where the winner is the stronger character. This is not the usual outcome in contests between characters of unequal strength, so poems on this topic are rare. The heroic and ethical codex which has been undermined, then requires additional motivation and a justification for the victory. A more numerous Montenegrin troop ambushes a lone *harač*-collector²² or a great villain and tyrant travelling with a small party (KARADŽIĆ 1936: 21, 72). A faithful rendition of historical circumstances in weaker variants is not even accompanied with any heroic or ethical motivation. For example, in poem 155 from Milutinović's *Pjevanije*, Sima Harambaša and his thirty-four companions easily overpower Osman and his seven followers, and in poem 128 of the *Erlangen Manuscript* a troop of sixty *uskoks* from Senj defeat thirty Turks from Udbina.

The unresolved duel between Marko and his nephew, when the winner is decided by Marko's cleverness (MLADENOVIĆ & NEDIĆ 1974a: 39) has already been discussed. Although at first it might seem that the storyline about the fight between an uncle and his nephew can belong to the pattern of the succession of heroic generations, inherited from the old cosmogonic myth, what we have here is in fact a double distortion of this pattern – the younger hero is in most variants the stronger character, and the succession of generation does not yet happen. The greatest national hero is not allowed to end his epic biography and die at the hand of a mere mortal, not even if he is an excellent hero. Even his nephew, a relevant heir to Marko's strength, can be better only for a moment; the uncle does not yet hand over the sceptre.

If, in summing up mythological and epic plots, we establish a line starting with the conflict between an older and younger deity, followed with one between a deity or cultural hero and a monster or giant, one between heroes belonging to different generations, and finally with a collective conflict between formations of unequal strength, we can notice an increasingly obvious departure from the starting point. The transformation of the protagonists is so great that it cannot always be a genealogical trajectory. The line drawn is largely typological, since the only constant is victory of the weaker over the stronger. It is this archaic principle that then becomes a basic heroic and ethical kernel in epic poetry.

22 *Harač* was a type of land tax paid by non-Muslims in the Ottoman Empire.

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