

# Problems of Poetic Reactualization of Medieval Heritage in Post-War Modernism

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**Abstract:** A significant portion of Serbian poetry of the latter half of the 20th century was marked by the creative reactualization and rediscovery of medieval heritage. This orientation is evident in some of the leading poets of post-war modernism, such as Vasko Popa, Miodrag Pavlović, Ivan V. Lalić, and Ljubomir Simović. At the same time, this creative direction raised a number of poetic and cultural studies questions, most notably those that pertain to the nature of the relationship with that distant era. Namely, is it possible to establish authentic contact between the Middle Ages and the 20th century, given the linguistic, spiritual, and even civilizational distance between them? In this essay we attempt to define the nature of this connection as it appeared to the most important poets of the latter half of the 20th century. We show how some of the most central characteristics of post-war modernism (ideas of the totality and history, the poem as prayer) were formed through interactions with medieval poetics and its worldview. We further examine whether this relationship is established and realized exclusively as an individual poetic act of modernist poetry, or as a result of older and more profound cultural and historical forces. In other words, whether medieval legacy is only a part of individual poetic memory, or part of a greater spiritual body of Serbian history and culture.

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When literary historians speak about the connection to Byzantium, that is, the presence and significance of Byzantium for the poetics of new Serbian literature, they often understand it in terms of a broad corpus of works extending from the Serbian Middle Ages directly to Byzantine heritage. Making such close connections between Byzantine and medieval Serbian cultural

heritage is in principle justified, as it is an indisputable fact that medieval Serbian literature was shaped by the aesthetic and poetic principles of Byzantine literature.<sup>1</sup>

Nevertheless, it is important to make one distinction. Although they are culturally and poetically related, Byzantine and Serbian medieval heritage should not be equated. Dimitrije Bogdanović also points that out when he states that old Serbian literature

finds itself integrated into the system of genres of medieval and Byzantine literature, but the work of its own authors, meaning authors of Serbian nationality, is a product of its own cultural environment. Even when the author is not Serb, a work that is concerned with national themes is in the service of the national cult.<sup>2</sup>

Hence, the synonymous use of Byzantine and Serbian medieval heritage should be taken with caution, cognizant of the similarities implied by these terms, but also of the inevitable differences between them. Serbian medieval literature belongs to the wider Byzantine cultural realm, but that does not mean that it should be taken as a synonym for the entirety of the Byzantine legacy in Serbian literature. While it is a variant of that heritage, it is separated by language as well as by a thematic corpus which reflects the historical and ecclesiastical experience of the Serbian people. Serbian literature was indeed connected with Byzantium throughout the medieval era; however, in the 20th century, the legacy of Byzantium is indirect and is manifested in the manner in which it was preserved in medieval Serbian literature.

While drawing attention to the way in which this literature naturally belongs to the Byzantine cultural sphere, we also emphasize its authenticity stemming from its connection to the Serbian historical experience. Therefore, we propose the term “Serbo-Byzantine (cultural) heritage” as synonymous to Serbian medieval heritage and, in that sense, what we discuss here is the reactualization of Serbo-Byzantine heritage in post-war modernist poetry.

## The Boundary Between New and Old Literature

Researching the status of Serbo-Byzantine heritage in modern culture, or observing the connections between medieval and modern literature, is challenging due to the fundamental poetic difference between both types of culture. Medieval Serbian literature was ecclesiastical in character. Its primary purpose and function was to use words to express a religious worldview through participation in the ritual life of the church. Being sacral, it was organized according to very clear rules that did not leave room for originality or the principle of authorship.<sup>3</sup> On the other hand, modern literature is free, secular, original, and expressly individualistic.<sup>4</sup> In addition to these differences, the transition

<sup>1</sup> Thus, the “return” to the medieval in Serbian literature in the 20th century was a result of efforts to uncover an important era in its literary history, but also, through it, to reach Byzantium, whose literary works retained many principles and forms of ancient poetics. This is further meant to show that Serbian literature has direct links to the deepest creative foundations of European culture and civilization.

<sup>2</sup> Димитрије Богдановић, *Историја старе српске књижевности* (Београд: СКЗ, 1991.), 30.

<sup>3</sup> “Medieval writers primarily appeared as representatives of basic institutions of society at the time, the Serbian church and Serbian state, the first being a sacred and the second a sacralized institution. In the face of the power of these institutions, medieval writers lose their individuality. They look at their works as a way of serving these institutions, that is, as a way of serving God” (Јован Деретић, *Поетика српске књижевности* [Београд: „Филип Вишњић], 52).

<sup>4</sup> “New literature is written and authored, in the full meaning of those words, with all of the consequences that arise from them; the basis of this literature is individual creativity and constant production of new works; the author is primarily a creator...”

to vernacular speech, changes in civilizational norms and breakthroughs in new aesthetic ideas, and different worldviews contributed to the formation of a boundary between medieval and modern literature.<sup>5</sup> However, that boundary was not impermeable, as Jovan Deretić writes:

As for the first boundary, in a constant state of strengthening over the last two centuries, modern literature has sought to weaken, relativize and remove temporal, linguistic and civilizational layers in order to truly, nor merely nominally, recognize old literature as part of its own tradition. The academic reconstruction of old literary traditions and the creative assimilation of its elements and values into living literature complement and reciprocate one another.<sup>6</sup>

It is a fact that medieval literary heritage was not as accessible in the modern age as folkloric literature. A lack of accessible texts, linguistic differences, and poetic and civilizational distance all problematize the legacy of this heritage. Hence, we can ask whether the renewal of the medieval heritage in the 20th century, especially in the latter half, was the product of the commitment of individual poets and some literary historians seeking out the deeper roots of Serbian literature, or does this heritage represent an integral, collective, and living part of Serbian literary history?

### To Whom Do the Middle Ages Belong?

Beginning with Skerlić, the question often posed, more or less directly, is whether Serbian medieval heritage is an active part of our modern culture and literature or if it exists only as a historical period in literature.<sup>7</sup> In other words, does it belong to our collective memory and heritage—as is the case with folk literature and other literary periods—or is it the product of individual interest in certain poets?

Dragan Bošković observes that Deretić, referring to the period “from Dositej until late modernism,” mentions Byzantine literature and poetics only once, in relation to the poetry of Ivan V. Lalić. From this he concludes that “Byzantium, thus, after Dositej no longer exists, just as historically it ceased to exist after the fall of Constantinople and the fall of the medieval Serbian state.”<sup>8</sup> In other words, it seems that Skerlić was in some ways correct, and that Byzantine poetics, culture, and

(*ibid.*, 53).

<sup>5</sup> “Radical change in ideological, cultural and poetic paradigms, not just a change in literary language, has led to a large part of old literature being left without a creative connection to the literature of the modern age. As a result of this radical and all encompassing cultural turnaround, when we think of the poetic continuity of Serbo-Byzantine heritage and modern literature, it is easier to talk about discontinuity than to discuss the real connections in a meaningful way” (Марко Радуловић, *Српско-византијско наслеђе у српском постслерајном модернизму: Васко Поја, Миодрај Павловић, Љубомир Симовић, Иван В. Лалић* [Београд: Институт за књижевност и уметност, 2017], 16).

<sup>6</sup> Деретић, *Поетика српске књижевности*, 90–91.

<sup>7</sup> In his renowned work *History of New Serbian Literature* (1912), Jovan Skerlić denied the existence of any kind of creative link between old and modern literature. In fact, he denied any literary qualities in the entirety of medieval literature, reducing it primarily to the question of literacy: “Old Serbian medieval literature was almost exclusively of religious character, in which church people with church ideas wrote primarily for the use of the church and church readers, none of which could ever be of use to a literature of a new, secular age. All of the literature of liturgical breviaries, Typica, canons, chronographs, codes, hagiographies, ‘praiseworthy lives’ of Christ-loving and pious rulers and church figures, or at best apocryphal works and sick church romances, all of this was more literacy than literature, in the true sense of the word. If today this is counted as literature this is because of an absence of anything else and because it has already been accepted as such” (J. Skerlić, *Историја нове српске књижевности* [Београд: Завод за уџбенике и наставна средства, 1997], 19).

<sup>8</sup> Д. Бошковић, „Византија: идентитет или утопија историје српске књижевности?“, 75.

civilization did not play an important role in Serbian literature until the 20th century, when a renewed interest emerged among poets, writers, and scholars. Therefore, the question of the extent to which Byzantium constitutes an organic part of the identity of Serbian literature must be examined as well, even if “only” at the initiative of individual authors.

However, perhaps unexpectedly, the Byzantine-Christian spirit is mentioned by literary historian of Romanticism Miodrag Popović, who identifies and determines it as crucial for some of the best poems of Laza Kostić (“The Hymn of John of Damascus”). Unlike the established view of Kostić’s “crossing of opposites” present in this poem, the roots of which the majority of scholars attribute to ancient philosophy, Popović sees Kostić’s famous hymn as a product of Orthodox spirituality and corresponding poetic methods used to express it.<sup>9</sup> Popović’s insights into Kostić’s link to Serbian medieval literature are otherwise confirmed and supported by the work of Jasmina Grković Major, who shows that Kostić relied heavily on medieval language when constructing his famous poetic neologisms, concluding that he “must have been inspired by the creative richness of the Church Slavonic language.”<sup>10</sup> Thus, we cannot claim for certain that Byzantine influence did not exist between Dositej’s time and the 20th century. We can see that it is present in the works of one of our greatest Romantic poets.

To our question on whether medieval spirituality and creativity are an integral and active part of Serbian culture and literature, and not merely an exotic museum piece—these kinds of hidden traces are of great importance. So, while Kostić did not leave many written testimonies about his attitude towards old literature, the fact remains that its values were naturally incorporated into his poetry—so naturally that they remained unnoticed for quite some time. This could confirm the proverbial truth that a true and complete break with tradition is impossible. Our claim is that medieval heritage, even when suppressed, is still present and “within reach” of poets, as Vasko Popa noted.

## Symbol or Substance

What does the presence of this heritage actually mean in the 20th century? Can it be understood exclusively in terms of the poet’s individual (self-) identification, or does it represent the deeper creative potential of a culture? In other words, is this heritage only a symbolic ornament, or is it a constant possibility in Serbian literature? When speaking about the presence of Byzantine elements in modern Serbian literature, Bošković primarily makes connections to the 20th century and sees within it the symbolic self-identification of the poet:

Insofar as Serbian literature was Byzantine, that is European, after the Enlightenment it became once more exclusively European. In the 20th century, with the renewed interest in the symbolic articulation of Byzantine heritage (from Bojić to Vinaver, Rastko to Ivan V. Lalić or Pavić), it has become nowadays less of a symbolic ornament and more of a literary fashion.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Миодраг Поповић, *Историја српске књижевности – Романтизам* (Београд: Завод за уџбенике и наставна средства, 1972), 319.

<sup>10</sup> Ј. Грковић Мејдор, “Отисци језичке прошлости у делима Лазе Костића”, in *Лаза Костић 1841–1910–2010* (Београд: САНУ, 2011), 63.

<sup>11</sup> Д. Бошковић, „Византија: идентитет или утопија историје српске књижевности?“, 76.

Thus, it appears that for Bošković, Byzantine heritage in modern literature can be reduced to a symbolic ornament that serves for individuals to create their own poetic (self-) identity. Without a doubt, some poets sought a path to Byzantium through Serbian medieval literature, each with their own different poetic reasons. Therefore, when Pavić labels himself as Byzantine or when Lalić's poetic subject refers to themselves as "the lowly bearer of her [Byzantine] slighted shadow," we can see the "symbolic articulation" of that heritage, a kind of poetic and cultural definition of one's own position. However, there are numerous examples for which it cannot be said that this heritage is purely symbol articulation or exclusively individual reactualization, but rather show a permanent and natural inner potential in Serbian culture. For example, when Vinaver searched through medieval Serbian texts for a language that could be the basis of a new poetry, different from the decasyllabic of epic poems; or when Bojić dramatized the idea of history, inspired by life in the Middle Ages; or Popa's direct inspiration from medieval monasteries and art and "golden-winged hymnographers"; and finally, Lalić's pursuit of canonical form found in Serbian medieval church services. The fact that medieval heritage became widely accessible in the 20th century was the result of the publishing of new manuscripts and translation into modern language, as well as the spiritual preoccupation of contemporary poets. Thus, it was particularly in the latter half of the 20th century that the conditions for a wider creative reactualization of Serbo-Byzantine heritage were met. However, it would be incorrect to link this heritage exclusively to the 20th century as the connection had never been completely severed; it represents a constant force in Serbian culture and literature.

Insisting upon Skerlić's judgement on the Middle Ages may at times create the impression that the possibility of continuity with this era is exclusively a problem of the history of Serbian literature. However, after the Second World War, the famous book by Ernst Robert Curtius *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages* was published, in which he puts forward the thesis that in order to understand European literature as a whole, one must have a thorough knowledge of medieval literature, as it was exactly this era which was not adequately studied at the time:

As mentioned before, no period in European literary history is as little known and studied as the Latin literature of the early and high Middle Ages. And from the historical understanding of Europe it follows that these very people, who are the link between decaying antiquity and the emerging Western world, were starting to occupy a key position.<sup>12</sup>

Similar problems arise during the study and examination of medieval heritage:

But according to conventional literary history, modern Europe does not begin until around the year 1500. This makes about as much sense as writing a description of the river Rhine, but only including the portion from Mainz to Cologne. There is, however, also a "medieval" literary history. It begins in the year 1000, thus, to stick to the same analogy, we are now already by Strasbourg. But where is the period between the years 400 and 1000? For this we would already need to begin near Basel. [...] This part of the

<sup>12</sup> Ернст Роберт Курцијус, *Евројска књижевност и латински средњи век* (Београд: СКЗ, 1996), 28.

journey remains silenced—for a very simple reason: the literature of this period, with some negligible exceptions, is written in Latin.<sup>13</sup>

We can see that in the West, too, one of the crucial obstacles in understanding medieval literature was precisely language. The medievalist impulse that emerged in Serbian literary scholarship after World War II was, therefore, complementary to similar currents in Western European literary scholarship. What the Latin Middle Ages represented for Western European literatures, the Byzantine tradition was for Slavic literatures: a direct connection to antiquity. The relationship of literary scholars towards the Middle Ages in European literary history arose with similar motives, faced similar problems and shared a common goal: better understanding of the origins and genesis of their own literature.

Hence, in the 20th century, more thorough study of the medieval period and its inclusion into tradition was imperative, not because of the era itself, but because of tradition as a whole. That is, the Middle Ages appear as a point without which it is impossible to have a true understanding of one's own literature. Such insights show us that Serbo-Byzantine heritage in the works of modern poets could take on different symbolic forms, but also represent an unquestionable fact of their literary history, and thus can serve as a possible cornerstone of their poetic identity. Curtius described such an authentic link with literary tradition as “participation in the essence,” with which this literary historian and thinker indicated that George and Goethe felt an authentic, not sentimental connection to Rome:

I cite these testimonies because they speak to connection that Germany, as a former part of the Empire, has to Rome, a connection that is not sentimental reflection, but rather a participation in the essence. It is in this consciousness that history became present. It is here that we see Europe.<sup>14</sup>

Although much later, only in the 20th century and marked with different poetics, the historical consciousness of Serbian post-war modernists, which was unfolding in the creative relationship towards the Middle Ages, also recognized the European roots of Serbian literature. Just as Germany “belonged to the Empire,” Serbia was part of the Byzantine cultural realm, oriented towards Constantinople. This connection, in the manner in which it appears in post-war Serbian modernism, carried rich symbolic potential. It also presented a true “participation in the essence,” which allowed for the poetic articulation of historical consciousness and the European roots of Serbian literature.

## A Brief Overview of Medieval Heritage in the First Half of the 20th Century

During the first half of the 20th century, there was a limited availability of medieval texts translated to modern language. However, this did not deter poets of various schools and orientations from being attracted to this heritage. From the perspective of their poetics, each of them found impetus in medieval tradition. Thus, Milutin Bojić found a way to articulate his poetic vision of historic

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 23.

<sup>14</sup> E. P. Курцијус, *Евројска књижевност и латински средњи век*, 25.

processes in his poems and plays with themes from Serbian medieval history. Vinaver searched medieval language for mystical expressions and for an alternative rhythm for Serbian literature, different from the decasyllabic of epic poetry. Milan Rakić, inspired by that heritage, articulated poetic meditations about culture and the passage of time, while Jovan Dučić wrote about the greatness of our past state. Nastasijević found inspiration for his unique poetic expression in medieval language, while Rastko Petrović made connections to Old Slavic layers in Serbian culture. This is to say, in spite of inadequate access to written sources, Serbo-Byzantine heritage was well served by its breadth and complexity; it was not reduced, and even less so dead, and thus was not merely an emblem, but a living tradition in respect to which each poet could relate in their own way. The fact that authors as different from one another as Bojić and Vinaver found inspiration in the Serbo-Byzantine tradition to realize their own unique poetic works, speaks to the fact that this heritage, although only partially accessible, played an important role in the cultural and literary history of the 20th century.<sup>15</sup>

One thing has proven to be especially important in understanding the 20th-century attitude towards Serbo-Byzantine heritage. Although texts of the era were only partially accessible, medieval heritage was visually accessible to people in the early 20th century—in monasteries and churches—in the form of frescos and architecture. As a result, a significant current in 20th-century modernist poetry was inspired by the artistic and visual achievements of the Middle Ages.<sup>16</sup> The poetry about monasteries and frescos represent a constant in the poetic reactivation of medieval heritage in the 20th century. Although the reasons behind this are primarily poetic, they are also practical: on the visual level, medieval Serbia produced some of the finest classic achievements in art and architecture that were much easier to interact with than less accessible medieval texts. Medieval themes, however, did not represent a dominant current in the poetry of the early 20th century, although the attitude towards it was heterogenous and diverse, and present in some of the leading poets of that era. That time period was marked by sporadic and individual evocations of themes and motifs from medieval art. However, the second half of the 20th century brought about a more comprehensive and widespread reactualization of Serbo-Byzantine heritage and poetry. This current developed in parallel to medievalist research, to which the poets themselves often contributed, while some scholars, for their part, also had a poetic outlook towards this heritage.

## The New Middle Ages<sup>17</sup> in the Second Half of the 20th Century

Following World War II, Serbo-Byzantine heritage became increasingly accessible: hagiographies and liturgical texts were printed in modern language, anthologies were published, scholarly essays and papers were written. When it came to poetry, authors sought out old poetry with which they could establish a lively, fruitful interaction. In the prose of hagiographies they found poetic passages,

<sup>15</sup> Compare Radulović's observation that "the older layers of tradition—primarily medieval religious spirituality, Byzantine civilization and ancient Slavic mythology and culture—experienced their renaissance in modern art" (Милан Радуловић, *Раскрића српској модернизма: идеолошки и културни контексти српске књижевности XX века* [Београд-Фоча: Институт за књижевност и уметност, Православни богословски факултет Св. Василија Острошког, 2007], 113).

<sup>16</sup> In this context, the testimonies of architect Aleksandar Deroko and his travels with Rastko Petrović around Serbian medieval monasteries to study their architecture and art are quite eloquent.

<sup>17</sup> Unlike many of the meanings which "New Middle Ages" may have in different contexts, we primarily understand it as a process imminent to Serbian culture in which, after a period of exile and oblivion, and an existence in the realm of unconscious, medieval religious and aesthetic insights are being rediscovered and included in modern poetry in a creative way.

and in the Orthodox confessions of faith, they attempted to understand the outlook of the authors and relate them to those of modern man. Accordingly, poets such as Pavlović and Popa included sections of prose from medieval texts in their poetic anthologies,<sup>18</sup> graphically presented as verses. Medievalists Đorđe Trifunović and Đorđe S. Radojičić did similar things.<sup>19</sup> Such acts were an expression of the endeavor to make medieval literature more familiar to the modern reader, while also opening it to the modern poetic experience. Regardless of how sound the scientific basis of this attitude towards medieval literature was from a philological point of view, the undisputed fact remains that that the “dark” Serbo-Byzantine age became an integral part of poetic self-identity and collective memory as a result of these efforts. Thus, Pavlović’s statement on the matter was no exaggeration: “The possibility that the poetic legacy of the Middle Ages will become a real source of inspiration for new poets is only now being truly revealed.”<sup>20</sup>

At the same time, the attitude towards medieval heritage was becoming more monolithic. Despite individual particularities among the poets, certain common themes and motifs emerged, most notably a manner of reactivation of that heritage arising from modernist poetry. This is why we stress that a significant and widespread cultural and poetic contact with medieval heritage came in the second half of the 20th century. However, this orientation would not be understandable or even possible without the interest and engagement of poets with this heritage in the first half of the 20th century. For this reason, one may say that it is a matter of a poetic justice of sorts, that in the latter half of the 20th century when the systematic renewal and inclusion of medieval heritage began in modern poetry, it was Stanislav Vinaver who recognized and supported such an orientation and made the connection with poets of the early 20th century, especially with Milan Rakić. Vinaver suggestively entitled his text dedicated to Popa’s *Kora* “New Jefemija” in order to show the spiritual and poetic closeness between Popa’s poems about medieval monasteries and Rakić’s poem about the medieval nun Jefemija. The reactualization of Serbo-Byzantine heritage thus represents a broader movement within Serbian culture of the latter half of the 20th century, and some of the most important poetic tendencies in post-war modernism emerged as a result of the encounter of modern and medieval consciousness. The spiritual foundation of Modernist tendencies was fertile ground which enabled the integration of the old era of Serbian culture and modern artistic forms.

What lies at the basis of such Modernist preoccupations and how have they influenced the experience of medieval art in the second half of the 20th century?

*The Need for Wholeness:* The poetry of this time period was created in an atmosphere of extreme fragmentation and deconstructed reality, which on the one hand was a product of the historical circumstances of post-war reality, and on the other, a product of the previous generations of Yugoslav surrealists. Thus, as a spiritual counterbalance to such an atmosphere, a natural need for stable viewpoint arose within a certain group of new poets. Such a viewpoint enables the world and its chaotic changes to be seen as meaningful, connected and whole, because “the universe is neither scary/ nor enormous/ when it is whole,” as said by Miodrag Pavlović in *Kantakuzin*, a poem on the theme of medieval history. Formally, this desire for wholeness was realized as a reactualization of older poetic forms, such as prayer and culminated in the search for a great form, a new kind of epic.

<sup>18</sup> М. Павловић, *Антилолија српској ђесничкој, XIII–XX век* (Београд: СКЗ, 1964); В. Попа, *Јуџиро мислено: немањихско доба, зборник средњовековне српске ђезије* (Нови Сад: Академска књига, 2008).

<sup>19</sup> Ђорђе Трифуновић, *Из ђимине ђојање – сџари српски ђеснички зајиси* (Београд: Нолит, 1962); Ђорђе Сп. Радојичић, *Сџаро српско ђесничко IX–XVIII века* (Крушевац: Багдала, 1966).

<sup>20</sup> М. Павловић, *Огледи о народној и сџарој српској ђезији* (Београд: Просвета, 2000), 198.



Such a form was supposed to represent a composition which should be able to express in a coherent and meaningful way the heterogeneity of the modern poetic consciousness and historical experience. Post-war Modernist poets sought such an integral form in long poems, sonnets, or by organizing poems into cycles. This kind of pursuit was not exclusively tied to the Middle Ages, although that era was characterized by an integralist worldview that took various forms such as hagiographies, church services, hymns. Hence, it was quite natural for poets to have sought inspiration and encouragement from it as well. In their own way, they followed in the steps of Vinaver, who sought precisely in the language of the medieval tradition a new mysticism and a different manner of expression in Serbian literature. It is the modern reactualization of the medieval canon and the integral form of old literature which enabled one of the most significant and complete new epics, Ivan V. Lalić's *Four Canons*. The medieval form of canon used in the liturgy of the Orthodox Church, known to us from John of Damascus, proved to be useful in the creation of something that could be called an epic expression of modern poetry. In the *Four Canons*, through certain cohesive and limiting formal and semantic elements within the canon, the main anxieties and hopes of post-war poetry were articulated: the longing for wholeness and the demand to accept and celebrate creation despite the horrific historical experiences of the 20th century. Lalić attempted to establish communication on a level common to both religious and secular poetry, the deepest poetic-spiritual level, that makes them what they are—poetry, above all other things. This is a completely legitimate poetic method, thanks to which the medieval canon became part of modern poetic forms. The dividing line between medieval and modern poetry, which also appears as the divide between religious and secular poetry, was creatively overcome; religious poetry became part of modern poetry without losing its deepest sacred traits, while modern poetry found its distant spiritual roots without losing its modernity and freedom of expression.<sup>21</sup> Lalić's votive collection is quite important not only to medieval heritage but also in the creation of some of the main poetic endeavors of post-war modernism, such as the pursuit of wholeness and integral form. In *The Four Canons*, the 20th century relationship towards the Middle Ages reached its peak in terms of its universality and quality of expression.

*The Idea of History.* In the medieval worldview, the idea of history played an important role and was most comprehensively articulated in works of literature. It is a specifically Christian perspective of historical processes, which contextualizes real historical events through signs of God's wisdom and human salvation. In the second half of the 20th century, marked by crises and the consequences of a world war, the idea of a historical process was quite important and closely related to the search for a firm standpoint, or the idea of wholeness. Therefore Byzantium, both as a real historical entity and a symbol of the poetic understanding of the world, played an important role for post-war modernist poets. Above all, what attracted them to a medieval view of history was the concept of *the meaningful*, a stable point from which one could see spiritual constants and find deeper meanings in the chaotic passage of time. In other words, a search for archetypes. Just as the medieval poet searched traces of God's presence in history to achieve transcendence, modern poets sought out myths—great stories from which history is derived and which transcend history. In that sense, the function of medieval literature for them was twofold: it was simultaneously rich with archetypal

<sup>21</sup> Cf. "The poet did not, therefore, just take an old form and fill it with new content. New wine in an old wineskin. This relationship between separate form and content in poetry does not exist, but one implies the existence of the other, with a mutual dependence which we rarely can explain properly. Not even the ancient canon remains alone. With Lalić we find it together with the sacral understanding of the world, in it as a contrasting background the poet describes a new human experience, filled with anxiety and unrest...." Новица Петковић, „Обнова канона“, in *Словенске њчеле у Грачаници* (Београд: Завод за уџбенике, 2007), 191.

figures, while Byzantium in its essence resembled a semi-forgotten archetype of its own culture, a mystical and dark symbol that called out for discovery and interpretation. The search for archetypes, as noted in the essays of Jovan Hristić and Zoran Mišić, was rooted in the late 20th century poetic fascination with history.

*The Poet as Chronicler.* In relation to history, one of the most important roles belongs to the person who writes about it. Just as medieval writers often had to create in unfavorable historical circumstances and saw their work as a way to preserve the spiritual and cultural core of human existence, post-war modernists were witnesses to historical processes that they felt seriously endangered the spiritual foundations of the culture to which they belonged. Hence, similar to medieval scribes, they found themselves as witness to crucial historical events and challenges, which they poetically transfigure preserving the values of a culture from oblivion and destruction. In Popa's collection *Upright Country*, many of the poems are built upon parallels between the historical predicaments of medieval artists and the modern poets. The poetry of Ljubomir Simović, Lalić's *On Deeds of Love*, Pavlović's *Great Scythia*, and many other individual poems function along similar lines.

*The Poem as Prayer.* Hugo Friedrich characterized modern poetry with the phrase "empty ideality" pointing to the paradoxical position in which poetry found itself between the desire to flee reality and the simultaneous lack of transcendental content to make such a departure possible: "[t]he confusion of such modernity is manifested in its neurotic desire to escape reality, while being powerless to believe in or create a transcendence whose content can be determined and meaningful."<sup>22</sup> Post-war modernism attempted to open a dialogue with that kind of reality; to locate it in history, mythology, and poetic religiosity. Thus, prayer became an important form of creative output, a poetic genre, which was best realized in our medieval literature. Old prayers contained two rather important components for the beliefs of post-war modernists: communication with ontological reality and articulation of the collective voice. As a result, some of the most poetically successful prayers in the history of Serbian literature came out of the late 20th century. These poems simultaneously attempt to establish contact with a higher reality, whether defined as God, a saint, a historical oath or mythic tradition as well as to express collective historical experiences and anxieties of the communities to which the poet belongs.<sup>23</sup>

The search for wholeness and an integral poetic form, poetic historiosophy, and poetry as prayer (a method of establishing contact with a higher reality) were realized in the poetry of leading poets of post-war modernism such as Vasko Popa, Miodrag Pavlović, Ivan V. Lalić, and Ljubomir Simović. These moments in poetry were formed by an innovative interaction of modern creative needs and the spiritual experience of medieval literature. Thus, the work of these poets represents an important example of how a distant era can transform and return into modern poetry, contributing to the laying of foundation of some of its most significant poetic features.

<sup>22</sup> Хуго Фридрих, *Структура модерне лирике – од средине XIX века до средине XX века* (Нови Сад: Светови, 2003), 49.

<sup>23</sup> Post-war modernist poetic prayers were the kind of poetry that was most well received precisely because it resonated most deeply with the experience of the community.

## Alternative or Codification

Inspiration from the Middle Ages and the study of its heritage in the latter part of the 20th century were taking place in the context of a wider relationship with tradition established by post-war modernists. Namely, the effort to see the spiritual experience of humanity and artistic creation as one of its highest expressions, as a whole with its constituent parts, hidden relationships and unseen connections, was very important to their poetry. As a result, poets of this provenance often sought out distant cultures and eras that had sunk into obscurity. The Middle Ages thus appeared to Serbian poets as an era that belonged to their native literature, insufficiently studied, somewhat belittled, and could provide some important “spiritual gems” necessary for poetic knowledge of self. Aside from that, the culturological importance was significant because it is through the Middle Ages that Serbian literature is connected to Byzantium, and as a result to ancient literature, that is to the European classics in the historical sense. While for Vinaver Serbo-Byzantine literature represented a possibility of discovering and building an alternative foundation for Serbian literature, in the second half of the 20th century at first glance it seems as though the integration of medieval heritage into modern poetry was to confirm that Serbian literature has its own, long tradition. One gets the impression that Vinaver was talking about an alternative, while post-war modernists were talking about codification. However, that impression shows how tricky the very notion of tradition is, as it appears in post-war modernism, which was most fully defined by literary critic Zoran Mišić:

Tradition is the line of spiritual and poetic identification, not excessively popular and not always restorative, often even perilous. In any case, non-canonical, sometimes abysmal, heretical, and infernal, but also enlightened and radiating inner peace, which stretches from primordial memory to the threshold of the future to be foreseen by the poets.<sup>24</sup>

It is clear, therefore, that tradition as understood by the post-war modernist poets was above all a reaction to the previous generations of poets, the historical surroundings in which they found themselves, and a deep creative urge. It thus emerges as authentic, revolutionary and affirming.

## The Middle Ages—Regained

The attitude towards the spiritual potential of medieval heritage was of exceptional importance to the establishment of some of the key poetic stances in post-war modernism. Leading poets of the genre, each in their own way, found in medieval Serbian spiritual poetry some of the archetypal situations of the entirety of Serbian literature. These do not just represent the general expressions and possibilities of poetic creativity but shape and realize visions of historical experiences of Serbian literature. Rather, they represent the attitudes their medieval predecessors had towards various existential situations, but which continued to exist later in the changed political, cultural, and civilizational circumstances and assumptions. Hence our claim that in its very foundations, medieval heritage carries energies which are inherent to Serbian historical and cultural being and as such represent its internal contents. When this attitude towards the medieval in Serbian literature is authentic, it simultaneously expresses awareness of one’s own tradition. Together with folk literature, medieval heritage represents the classics of Serbian culture: “Both Serbian patriarchal and clerical

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<sup>24</sup> Зоран Мишић, *Кријтика ђесничкој искуства* (Београд: СКЗ, 1976), 251.

culture, which represent national classics in the historical sense, are built upon specific understandings of life, personality, history, and culture.”<sup>25</sup>

It is thus natural that 20th century modernism found its distant roots and poetic forebears in medieval heritage. In this way, medieval poetics were reactualized and integrated into modern culture, proving an inspiration to poets belonging to a different era in poetry and civilization. In other words, history crossed over from Skerlić’s denial of medieval literature and the question ‘to whom do the Middle Ages belong’ to the Middle Ages reclaimed. Therefore the 20th-century rediscovery and integration of the medieval into contemporary culture does not only represent the poetic program of a certain generation of poets, but rather a way in which a culture once more discovers and reclaims a (semi-)forgotten era of its own history.

Connoisseurs of literature know that poetry does not only develop out of external progress and innovation, but from within: it renews its past. Everything that existed in it before can return into living poetry, of course, in a modified form.<sup>26</sup>

The question we posed at the beginning—is the attitude towards the Middle Ages from the main representatives of post-war modernism a product of exclusively modernist poetics of their time and the search for forgotten traditions, or is it dictated by the logic of their own literature?—can now be answered. The general search for forgotten tradition in modernism served for post-war Serbian poets to revive marginalized traditions within their own literature. However, this endeavor was never tied to just one poetic framework, but rather it always strived to grow into a wider cultural program, often touching on some of the main tendencies within medieval studies of the time. Thus, in addition to poems with motifs, stylistic, and structural elements of medieval literature, poets also worked on anthologies, wrote essays, and participated in the publication and editing of medieval texts.<sup>27</sup> The second half of the 20th century represented a rare and fortunate encounter of philological discoveries and endeavors with poetic tendencies and preoccupations. Quite simply, it was a struggle to shed light on a layer of a tradition that was insufficiently studied but for which it was correctly felt that it held important answers to crucial questions in Serbian literature.

The poetic dialogue with medieval literature after the Second World War represented something more than a modernist turn towards the past and tradition; the discovery of the Middle Ages was inspired by a search for identity of one’s own culture. The poetic revitalization of Serbo-Byzantine heritage is, therefore, authentic, directed by the inner logic of its cultural development, a creative self-recognition of a new age<sup>28</sup>.

It is through such studies and creative dialogues that this legacy gained a new and unexpected life in the 20th century. The discoveries made about Serbo-Byzantine heritage in the second half of the 20th century and the authenticity with which that legacy became part of the modernist poetic experience can lead us to a different, more careful reading of the entire literary past and to search for unnoticed medieval traces within it. It also enables us to pose questions about the future of this heritage in Serbian literature, that is, when it comes to poetry, can we imagine medieval heritage outside of the poetic context of modernism?

<sup>25</sup> М. Радловић, *Раскрића српског модернизма: идеолошки и културни контексти српске књижевности 20. века*, 21–22.

<sup>26</sup> Петковић, „Обнова канона“, 189.

<sup>27</sup> Of particular importance was the cooperation between the poet Vasko Popa and one of the leading Serbian medievalists Đorđe Trifunović in the magazine *Delo*, in a column that translated medieval texts to modern language.

<sup>28</sup> Марко М. Радловић, *Српсковизантијско наслеђе у српском послерајном модернизму*, 47.

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