

# The Role of Dositej Obradović in the Construction of Serbian Identities During the 19th Century

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In 1911, on the occasion of the centennial of Dimitrije “Dositej” Obradović’s (ca. 1741-1811) death, the *Hrvatskosrpski almanah* published the following essay:

A Hundred Years Later

Belgrade, May 15, 2011

A typical morning in May in the year 2011 A.D. is dawning, bright with sunshine, over quiet Belgrade.

On the hills surrounding the vast city are villas and houses with gardens full of brightly coloured flowers. High up in the sky, aeroplanes are carrying mail to Ljubljana, Zagreb, Zadar, Sarajevo, Skadar na Bojani [Shkodër in Albania], Ohrid, Prizren, Skoplje, and Niš. Zemun and Pančevo, which used to be small towns, have also become big cities, both connected with Belgrade by an electric tramway. There are several bridges over the Sava and Danube rivers, and countless steamboats run on both waterways. At every moment, railway trains rush from the central station in all possible directions, but the most frequent and the most packed ones are those to the Adriatic Sea...

We have just arrived by train from Zagreb and are looking for accommodation, and then we will go and look for the Dositej Building. Tonight there is a lecture and a discussion, which we were invited to from Zagreb, on the erstwhile cultural situation of the Serbian and the Croatian people.

The Dositej Building is a magnificent palace, situated in the most beautiful spot in the city centre. From the terrace you have a splendid view, over the rooftops, of the surroundings, which are stunning by nature and which man has made even more stunning by means of modern culture. All Serbian cultural societies have been united in the Dositej Building. There are several conference halls, many working sections, and an excellently equipped reading room, which holds journals and newspapers from the entire Slavonic South. Ladies and gentlemen go in and out of this cultural meeting place. All the signs are in Latin and Cyrillic letters. The largest of the conference halls, splendidly decorated, is being prepared for this evening’s lecture. ... A new topical subject has been chosen for the lectures tonight: the unification of Bulgarian and Serbo-Croat literature, which merged with Slovenian literature ages ago (excluding purely popular literature). ... [O]f particular interest is the lecture on the erstwhile, i.e. separate, state of the Ser-

bian and Croatian people, which has been a compact indivisible unit for a long time now, welded together by a series of severe crises and experiences.

... Professor Vidović lectured in the Dositej Building. ...

... After two more days in Belgrade, we went on to Sofia in order to see the fruits of Bulgarian culture and in order to appraise the currents in Bulgaria's highly developed society.

After that we took the train to Skopje to travel to Prizren and to the Adriatic; finally, we returned to Zagreb via Dubrovnik and Sarajevo. Everywhere we felt at home, and everywhere we encountered the trend towards unity and national concord in full bloom, deeply rooted in public opinion and everyday life, and inspiring the vigorous and passionate life of the people. We remembered the lecture of Mr. Vidović in the Dositej Building and wondered how one could ever have lived under conditions so different from our days! How primitive and barbaric those times were! But history is their living witness and there is nothing we can do but hope that its memory will always prevent the return – God forbid! – of the bad times we have safely left behind us! (Novaković)

A major message in this article is the nationalist claim to certain territories, then in the Habsburg and Ottoman Empires. The author stakes his claim by listing the names of cities (Ohrid, Skopje, Prizren, Zagreb, Dubrovnik, Sarajevo, Niš, and even Shkodër) and by constantly mentioning the Adriatic, and the rolling, flying and swimming vessels moving freely in this national space that is aspired to: “Everywhere we felt at home.” The centre of this space is Belgrade and in the centre of Belgrade is the Dositej Building, a tall beacon. The symbol of “Dositej” serves here as a device to connect the places mentioned and construct an imagined national space. This highlights, on the one hand, how important Dositej Obradović was for identity constructions in the past, serving them as a powerful symbol. The particular identity construction quoted here is a Yugoslavist one; the author is the influential Serbian intellectual Stojan Novaković. On the other hand, this quote perfectly illustrates that the status of Dositej Obradović in Serbian discourse today is far less eminent than one could have expected approximately one hundred years ago.

The contrast could hardly be sharper. Today, in 2001, ten years before the fictional date of Novaković's essay, ten years before the bicentennial of Obradović's death, there is no Dositej-skyscraper. The building commemorating Dositej in Belgrade today is a museum located in a small old Turkish house (*Illustration 1*). The museum is not even dedicated to Dositej alone but also to Vuk Karadžić (1787-1864), the language reformer, who was born the generation after Dositej. Today, Obradović is generally remembered as a learned Serb who founded the first school and who educated the son of the leader of the 1804 “revolution,” Kara Djordje (1762-1817). Typically, Obradović is called the first modern Serbian writer. However, over the last 100 years, another feature of his has become more



*Illustration 1: The Vuk and Dositej Museum in Belgrade*

prominent: the alleged link to Vuk Karadžić as his predecessor. The following five short quotes from mass media texts, from the 1960s and 2000, should suffice to illustrate this. The texts are from communist and nationalist as well as from “neutral” sources, including a tourist-guide, a daily newspaper, and the Internet (*italics added*).

From a 1967 tourist guide, printed in German:

Beograd

... Dositej Obradović (1742-1811), writer, pedagogue and *enlightener of the people*, *founder* of the Belgrade lyceum and *first Minister* of Education in Serbia. (Beograd 94)

An extract from *The History of Serbian Culture* (Porthill Publishers, 1995), as found on the homepage of the *Serbian Unity Congress* (“© 1996-2000”):

The History of Serbian Culture

... the *famous writer* Dositej Obradovic... *helped* Ivan Jugovic open the Great School (1808) and took care of the education of Karadjordje’s successor, his son Aleksa. ([http://www.suc.org/culture/history/Hist\\_Serb\\_Culture/chb\\_Rados\\_Ljusic.html](http://www.suc.org/culture/history/Hist_Serb_Culture/chb_Rados_Ljusic.html))

Next is a clipping from the “On-this-Day”-column of the March 27, 1961, issue of Borba, the former daily newspaper of the Yugoslav communists:

He Paved the Way for Vuk

Obradović was, to put it simply, *Vuk's predecessor*. In order to apply his ideas on national emancipation, he wrote in the vernacular language, in contrast to all of his immediate predecessors and contemporaries. This *language*, of course, was *not yet pure*, but, as streaked with Russian-influenced Serbian-Slavonic words and with Germanic word orders as it was, it deviated from the language hitherto used by its intelligibility. ... That is why the qualification of Dositej as *a predecessor and a precursor for Vuk's reforms* is not incidental. (Rajković)

The following final two quotes illustrate differences in the various perceptions of Obradović's importance for Serbian culture. The first is from the *serbia-info-homepage*, “© 1998-2000 Ministry of Information” (the *Information Ministry of the Republic of Serbia* rather than Yugoslavia):

Explore Serbia

... the building which once was Serbia's first school of higher learning... now houses the Dositej Obradovic and Vuk Karadzic Museum, dedicated to the *two founders* of modern Serbian culture. (<http://www.serbia-info.com/enc/monuments/belgrade.html>)

The *serbianlinks homepage* practically ignores Dositej. The following clipping is from a document “prepared by: ‘Vuk St. Karadzich’ Foundation Belgrade, Serbia and the Serbian National University ‘Vuk Stefanovich Karadzich’ Cleveland, Ohio”:

Who are Serbs?

After 1690, Serbia was engulfed in total silence – people copied old works, nothing new was written. The new age began with the work of the great lexicographer, collector of folk oral literature, and reformer of the Serbian alphabet – Vuk Karadzic. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, Serbian literature adhered to folk realism, which was later replaced by social and national realism. Other literary trends, like Enlightenment (Dositej Obradovic) or Romanticism (P.P. Njegos, J.P. Sterija), did not develop fully. (<http://www.serbianlinks.freehosting.net/serbs.htm>)

The statements in italics are part of what can be called the Dositej myth. I use the term “myth” in this context, as there is no such thing as one individual “founding” a culture or “starting” an age. Such concepts of “culture heroes” belong to the realm of metaphor and metonymy – the realm of narrative. What the quotes above convey is a narrative of the origins of a culture, also known in Cultural Anthropology and in the History of Religion as a myth of creation. The obsession of texts such as those quoted with beginnings, with founders and precursors is quite characteristic of identity constructions, including modern ones. Telling the story of foundation and remembering the founder(s) is a way

of imagining a homogenous community across time and space. A myth is thus basically a simple and stereotypical text that contains certain basic information about a community. The ability of myth to conserve this information for long periods of time makes it of vital importance for constructions of collective identities. Knowing the myths is a cultural prerequisite for successfully taking part in a community. From a sociolinguistic point of view, or that of the History of Ideas, texts like those quoted above do not make sense: they contain too many contradictions. As myths, however, they have a cultural meaning and a social function. When, for instance, Vojislav Djurić, author of the preface to Obradović's 1961 *Complete Works*, brings together Saint Sava and Obradović – a medieval saint from present-day Bulgaria and an eighteenth-century rationalist from what today is Romania – in the same sentence, this makes no sense unless it is understood within the framework of mythology and identity construction. Against all rational thought, this parallel has proven very popular.

#### OBRADOVIĆ'S SELF-PRESENTATION

Nika was very industrious, cleaning the church and putting in their proper places all other church appurtenances. ... But a month later his mother and my elder brother Ilija put in an appearance. The woman, as soon as she entered the monastery enclosure, took her stand in the middle of the courtyard and began to scold and revile the monks, shouting that if they did not give back her child at once she would straightaway burn down the monastery, church and monks included, and saying that, if the monks enjoyed having children, they should marry like other men and beget children and bring them up. A certain Dionisije..., an eloquent man of remarkable daring, went down to meet her and see what all the commotion was about and to meet shouting with shouting, but he was so utterly dumbfounded and overcome that he could not utter as much as a peep in her presence. She was such an Amazon that she would have attacked a hundred Dionisijes! When she redoubled her shouts in a still higher key, you would have thought that the monastery was on fire and that the mountains round about were re-echoing. 'Hurry up and bring my child,' she bawled at Dionisije in a thunderous voice, 'or if I ever get hold of you I'll pull out your beard and scratch out your eyes! Children aren't born the way you think they are, you confounded black scarecrow!' He never knew how he made his retreat. In double-quick time they sent out her son; when she caught sight of him in lay garments and observed that he had not yet assumed the black monkish habit, she quieted down. (Obradović 197)

Where is the connection between this typical passage from Obradović's most famous book of 1783 and the nationalist projections of space and time cited at the beginning of this article? Why should someone invent a skyscraper in honor of this author? How could the man who wrote these words become a national hero in nineteenth-century Serbia? The first part of this article will describe how Dositej Obradović actually presented himself in the late 1700s, while the second part will be a discussion of what happened to this image in the following century. Another focal point will be on the question of who used "Dositej"

for what purpose and when. As my research is still in progress, the answers that can be given to these questions so far are still but flashlights on the complex and contradictory development of cultural attitudes.

### *Language*

My book will be written in pure Serbian, just as this letter is, so that all Serbian sons and daughters may understand it, from Montenegro to Smederevo and the Banat. (Obradović, Letter, 133)

A great deal of Obradović's self-presentation is contained in the book on which much of the later celebration and hero-worship has been based: *Život' i priključenija*, or *The Life and the Adventures of Dimitrije Obradović Who as a Monk Was Given the Name Dositej*. As mentioned in the initial quotes, Obradović's semi-autobiographical novel entered the annals of Serbian cultural history as the first piece of literature in modern Serbian. It has been perceived as a precursor of the reform of language usage and literature usually associated with Vuk Karadžić. This view, however, is not entirely accurate because it emphasizes the similarities between both projects while masking the differences. The readers *Život' i priključenija* was intended for were the Serbian elites living in the Habsburg Empire at the time: merchants, officials and priests and their wives and children, as well as monks in Sremski Karlovci, Novi Sad, Budapest, Trieste, Vienna, etc. Although the entire "Serbian people" is addressed in the preface to the book, both the novel's real audience and the one addressed implicitly are members of the elites. This is "the people" which the author has in mind and it is for this reason that he uses the idiom of these elites, an idiom also to be found in the everyday correspondence of the time or in the hand-written poetry of the Serbian petty bourgeoisie. The author calls this idiom *prostonarodni*, which translates as "our simple dialect" or "the dialect of our common people" (Obradović 211). This is not the language of the peasants, nor of the Serbs in Serbia or in Bosnia and Hercegovina, i.e. the Ottoman Empire. Obradović's *prostonarodni* language and his "people" were not the people and the language Vuk Stefanović Karadžić had in mind when he published his own books in the first half of the nineteenth century (Karadžić 88).

Obradović did not pave the way for the nineteenth-century language reform as much through the language and style of his texts as by establishing "the people" and "their language" as positive notions in discourse. A closer look at the editorial history of *Život' i priključenija* reveals another dissonance: the autobiographical account is generally remembered as a single coherent work although it was actually published in two parts, the second merely being a collection of letters appended to a much larger collection of fables published in 1788. This so-called second part of Obradović's autobiography differs markedly from Part One in terms of language as recent glottometric material reveals. It shows a

tendency towards a more uniform language, exhibiting more Russian and Russian Church-Slavonic forms than Serbian forms.

#### THE CONTENTS OF THE "AUTOBIOGRAPHY"

The first book, published in 1783 as *Život' i priključenija*, contains the famous foreword and an epilogue, both of which serving to explicitly expound the author's cultural-political program. Between these two chapters are five more, which form a portrait of the hero, Dositej, as a young man. They depict his education, his time in a monastery and how he left it. However, the second book, published in 1788, or to be more exact, the letters published in the collection of fables, basically consist of an account of the hero's travels in the Eastern Mediterranean (Corfu, Mount Athos, Peloponnese, İzmir etc.), and in Central and Western Europe (Venice, Zadar, Vienna, Karlovci, Bratislava/Prefßburg, Trieste, Galați, Iași, Halle, Leipzig, Paris, London) up to 1788. In order to interpret this story, it is more than useful to make a basic narratological distinction. There are two Dositejs in these texts: the first one is the hero of the novel at the age of approximately 15-20 (in the first part) and 20-25 (in the "second part"); the other Dositej is the narrator, a mature man of 40-something.

#### *The Autobiography as Opposed to the Myth*

The features of the autobiographical texts written by Obradović, which most strikingly differ from the posthumous myth surrounding him, are to be found in the preface and afterword of Part One. Here Obradović calls on the "learned Serbs" to publish books in the *prostonarodni* language, to think rationally and to adopt deistic ideas of religion and of God. The author demands that the monasteries be closed down, that a major educational program for all Balkan Christians be launched under the supervision of the enlightened despotism of Emperor Joseph II, and as a precondition for this, that the Ottomans be driven out of Europe. Interestingly, the following claim is also directed at the Austrian authorities:

Oh fair ruler, O Joseph the Mighty,  
 Show thy favor unto all Serbians!  
 Let thy face shine and thy gentle aspect  
 On the nation thine ancestors cherished,  
 On poor Serbia, likewise on Bosnia,  
 Which now suffer woes beyond endurance! ...  
 Pour thy mercies upon us in abundance:  
 Let Bulgarians once more have their nobles,  
 And thy Serbians their time-honored heroes;  
 And let Greece now once more have their Pindars[poets]!  
 (Obradović, Letter, 132)

The author urges “the Serbs” to improve themselves by education in order to catch up with the leading “more fortunate nations”:

In Breslau... we tarried seven days, and after Leipzig I proceeded to Halle... In this abode of the Muses and of all manner of divine sciences, when I saw how more than a thousand young men were studying... when I compared these places and men with beautiful but poor and barbarous Albania, and with Serbia, Bosnia, and Herzegovina, which were lands of even greater compassion because they were dearer and more precious to me, then I often sighed and shed bitter tears, saying to myself: ‘When will there ever be in those fair lands schools like this? When will their young men drink in these sciences? ...’ (282-83)

Obradović was not, as his interpreters often have it, in favor of democracy and equality; he was a champion of enlightened despotism. He was neither a Serbian nationalist nor a forerunner of South-Slav unity but advocated trans-confessional Christian solidarity while, at the same time and in interaction with his readers, playing on Orthodox imagery. This was a rhetorical strategy in order to negotiate traditional orthodox identities with his “westernizing” reform program. Obradović was not “firmly based in his people,” as Andrija Stojković maintained in 1989 (112-19), but quite the contrary; he called for the abolition of old customs, which he generally called superstition: “the common folk will not be deprived of their relics and their bones” (216). What he criticized were usually habits of the lower classes: “Today we have various learned and intelligent archpriests, free from all superstition and fanaticism. But, to confess the truth, the ignorance and simplicity of the common people is the cause of the whole trouble” (215). While he did pay tribute to Byzantine and Orthodox cultural elite traditions, his support for assimilation to “Western” elite culture was unshakable. This hegemonic attitude of Obradović’s might provide an answer to the question posed earlier as to why he became a national hero in the nineteenth century. For the repressive and hegemonic discourse of centralized state authority and the supremacy of the ruling classes, plus a hegemonic attitude towards neighboring peoples, i.e. the Habsburg Empire, this kind of thinking came in handy. The Western colonial perspective contained in Obradović’s texts makes it easy to take on a “white Western” self-perception while transferring the role of the hegemonized to the lower classes and to “underdeveloped” peoples:

I would have my fellow countrymen venture to think freely in all matters, reflecting and passing judgment on all they hear. You know well, my dear friend, that all nations which merely cling to old opinions and customs must needs lie in eternal and hopeless darkness and stupidity, like all the nations of Asia and Africa. Not thinking, not reflecting, and making no use of the reason and intellect that God has given them, not taking example from the learned and enlightened nations, they remain forever in an endless and lamentable torpor. (211)

The double assimilation claim – both of Serbian elites to “Western Europe” and of others to these “westernized” elites – is also evident in the structure of the



novel. After the death of his parents, young Dositej feels that his vocation is to go out and search. At first, he thinks that his quest is for sanctity, which he seeks in the monastery. As he does not find it there, he discovers that what he really wants to find is classical knowledge, symbolized by the Ancient Greek language, Latin books and the lost Library of Alexandria. The beginning of this quest forms the end of Part One. In "Part Two" he first goes to the traditional place of Orthodox learning, the Holy Mountain (Athos). Disappointed by the internal quarrels of the monks there, i.e. disappointed by the degenerate traditional culture, the hero turns to other, more recent places of study, in Smyrna/İzmir and Corfu/Kerkyra:

... that I came to Smyrna, a city of which I had not known or thought or even dreamed; that I lived there three years, while I had not thought of even staying a day or two; ... that there I met that divine man, a new Greek Socrates, namely the teacher Hierotheos; that I was graciously received by him and found worthy of his kindness, his love and his teaching... So in all this I clearly recognize the invisible hand of a kindly Providence that guides me and directs me. (242)

Forced to leave the Anatolian city by the prospect of the Russo-Ottoman war (1768-1774) and still hungry for more education, he turns northwest, stays in Vienna and reaches Halle about ten years later, via stops in a series of Mediterranean and Central European cities. The hero's Halle days form the climax of the story's development. Halle is where the hero achieves his goal. The descriptions of the new Greek schools (Smyrna and Corfu) are definitely a first climax in the narrative, while Dalmatia and Slavonia are clearly less important. Even Vienna, however influential it may have been in Dositej's real biography, is described as no more than a waiting-room for the hero's "hopes of going to Germany and farther" (Obradović 272). Although the author says that his experience in Smyrna was "of so much importance for me that I shall be unable to present it as warmly as I have felt it throughout my life" (242) and although he addresses his deceased Smyrna teacher, Hierotheos Dendrinos, exclaiming "I will tell thy name to my brethren; I will sing of thee among many nations" (247), this is only one of two turning points in the story. In Germany, the hero is so impressed by the library and the editorial activities of the pietist *Francke-Foundation* that he decides to "publish something in Serbian":

Looking at the sort of books that every day were planned, written, and published in those German lands, I was overwhelmed by a deep sense of sorrow whenever I thought how among our own people they kept shouting, 'Go bring us books from Russia!' And what sort of books? Of the books that in Russia are translated from the learned languages or composed and published in Church Slavonic and Russian, there is not even a catalogue that would at least inform us of their names. Ceaselessly meditating on these topics, I remembered the desire that had come over me while I was still in Dalmatia and the plan that I had formed there of gratifying the earnest and pressing need of our

people to have some books written and published in the popular language spoken by all of us. (283)

In Halle the hero finds what he has been looking for for so long, and this he intends to take to his fellow countrymen, in the form of modern books printed in modern Serbian. At the same time, however, he is always keen on passing on the experience he has gained along the way to his imagined readers ("the Serbs"). While the Smyrna experience is eminent because it is described and underlined with so much rhetorical ornament, the Halle episode is the crucial turning point as Germany is the last place where the hero receives something new. The decision made there leads to the denouement of the story, which at the same time forms the outermost frame of the narrative, the explanation of how the story came to be told (or printed).

The Dositej myth, which was constructed during the nineteenth century, is simpler and complies much more with the model of a culture-hero narrative than the original novel does. Here, Dositej leaves the world of the Serbs, enters the outside modern world by fleeing from the monastery, and brings back Enlightenment (represented in *Illustration 2* by a small sun). This story was reiterated in virtually every published work about Obradović in the nineteenth century. The same is true for the treatment of Obradović's fictionalization of his own life. It was repeated uncritically, as illustrated by the following example:

The life and works of Obradović are closely intertwined. His biography shows us his endeavors and his ways of thinking, his works show to which degree this striving came to a visible manifestation. No contradictions come between his life and his works, the same traits appear here as there: not only to achieve truth and erudition, but also to spread it. (Šević 5).

The structure of the novel, however, is highly complex and even if one tries to reduce it to a simpler plot, which structuralists assume to be underneath the surface of any text, it is not possible to extract anything consistent and straight-forward like Vladimir Propp's "morphology of the folktale" or André Jolles's "simple forms." True, the novel is reminiscent of a culture-hero myth because its main character leaves home in order to obtain an important cultural good for his community (modern knowledge and books). But the path the hero takes in the novel is definitely not an out-in movement and the out-space he enters is far from being alien, such as Lotman's artistic spaces (1968): it is first a Serbian monastery, then places of Byzantine and Orthodox education. The country he first reaches after deserting Hopovo Monastery is Slavonia (seventh chapter), which was in the same empire as both Ciakova, Obradović's birthplace, and Hopovo: the Habsburg Empire. This is, at last, a more alien space to the hero – he meets his first Uniates here (227). It is a long trip before young Dositej finally enters the Ottoman Empire (eighth chapter) and a remarkably longer one until he reaches Germany (fifteenth chapter). The most significant difference

between myth and novel, however, is that the novel not only contains elements of a culture-hero story but also the motif of the noble savage who leaves his world, which is outside civilization, to enter the civilized world. Additionally, there are elements of a third basic narrative.

### Three Plots

In search for basic narrative patterns in *Life and Adventures*, it is more accurate to distill fragments of three antipodal structures, the culture hero and the noble savage stories, plus a story of discovery. In the novel, the hero initially follows the path of a culture hero, in this case Saint Sava, a medieval saint, remembered as the founder of the Serbian Orthodox Church, i.e. culture. This goes together with the culture-hero model. Slowly, the protagonist of the novel acquires classical (Greek) wisdom and approaches the centers of “advanced” civilization and enlightenment. Actually, the journey starts inside civilization, at its border, circling out of it and around, and finally reentering it. This is a structure similar, in its second part, to the noble savage narration. But then, back inside, in the center, he decides to expand this world into the entire globe, starting with the Balkans:

The part of the world in which the Serbian language is employed is no smaller than the French or the English territory, if we disregard very small differences that occur in the pronunciation – and similar differences are found in all other languages. ... When I write of peoples who live in these kingdoms and provinces, I mean the members both of the Greek and of the Latin Church and do not exclude even the Turks of Bosnia and Herzegovina, inasmuch as religion and faith can be changed, but race and language can never be. ... They are called Turks while the Turks rule those lands; but when the real Turks return to their own vilayet, whence they came, the Bosnians will remain Bosnians and be just what their elders were. ... My book will be intended for every person who understands our language and who with a pure and honest heart desires to enlighten his mind and to improve his character. (Obradović, Letter, 135)

This is about spreading the word of Enlightenment to the Balkans and beyond, included in the preface to the autobiography. But the hero is also described as transforming into a new, powerful westernized being:

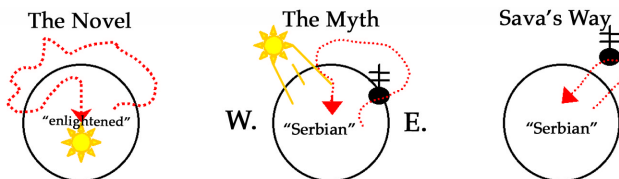


Illustration 2: The ways of the heroes (the sun stands for Enlightenment, the church sign is the monastery)

Concerning my feelings the next day, when I gazed from an elevation at the awe-inspiring greatness of the limitless expanse of London, the most beautiful and the most famous city in the world, I cannot utter a single syllable. The Irish priest and I had the front seat in a grand English coach, but when we left Canterbury I yielded my place to another man and took a seat on the roof of the coach, where it is comfortable riding when the weather is fine, so that I might have a better view in all directions. And I crossed myself and marveled in what a happy hour my dear mother had conceived me. Where am I now and who am I? It seemed to me that I had been born again into a new world. I found it hard to understand that I was the same person [!] who a few days earlier had walked with my neighbor Nika Putin from the Banat, following the course of the Begej, into Srem, and thence with Atanasije, wearing red haiduk sandals, in great haste along the Danube into Croatia. Now on the roof of a coach like this – which you can get into only by a ladder – I sat like a Roman dictator [!] and, after overcoming fierce poverty and that grim oppressor, want, I entered, as in triumph following a victory, a more glorious and a more beautiful city than Rome ever was, accounting myself quite as fortunate merely because I looked upon it and was entering into it, just as if that whole beautiful London belonged to me. (Obradović, *Life*, 289)

Here, the hero, and the author, assume a Western hegemonic perspective instead of doing what the noble savage is supposed to do: either assimilate to his “guest world” or bring its fruits back home. In consequence, this hero can only be described as a mixture of noble savage, conqueror and culture hero, and the narration as a conglomerate of the corresponding stories.

#### RECEPTION

This is what comes out of shrinking both parts of *Život' i priključenja* to a “simple form”: a conglomerate of narratives. One of them, the story of the noble savage, is not exactly flattering. The question arises as to which Serb could have possibly identified him/herself with such a hero. The most probable answer is that Obradović was not addressing “the Serbs,” even though it says so in the preface, but rather the Serbian elites in the Habsburg Empire, as already indicated earlier in this paper. Elite readers were able to identify themselves with the narrator of the story, the mature, 41-year-old Dositej. The younger hero, who is depicted as eager to learn but naïve, they could equate with the Habsburg Serbs of the lower classes and/or with all Serbs in the Ottoman Empire. Thus they could gaze at themselves in the looking glass of the mature teacher-editor-discoverer, while at the same time they would not have to see, resting their eyes on the young pupil Dimitrije/Dositej, someone completely other to themselves, but an earlier stage of themselves: their own youth. The author put the Habsburg Serb middle and upper class reader in the position of a father and appealed to him to educate his son. In doing so, he managed to create the concept of a larger Serbian community across all political, cultural, and social borders and still impose the hegemony of the Habsburg elites over the remaining Serbs (and others who understood Serbian):

This is a very useful object, seeing that when learned men write their thoughts in the general language of the whole nation, then the enlightenment of the intellect and the light of learning are not confined to persons who understand the old literary language, but are spread abroad and reach even the villagers, being taught to the humblest peasant and to the shepherds, provided only that they know how to read. And how easy it is to teach a child how to read his own language! (Obradović, Letter, 134)

#### THE DOSITEJ - MYTH AND ITS ENACTMENT

It is not hard to imagine that the Serbs from and in the Ottoman Empire were not willing to take on the part they were given in this narrative. This is why the Dositej-story was modified during the nineteenth century as new elites arose in the semi-independent Serbian state. But who changed the story and when, and which new meanings were attached to the symbolical figure of Dositej? In a first step, between 1780 and 1820, Obradović was turned into a hero. This symbolic interpretation still roughly complied with the self-image provided by Obradović's own writings. This early form of hero worship was made possible by the followers and patrons "Dositej" already had during his lifetime. These were to be found both among students in Vienna and Budapest and among merchants in Trieste and other cities. A move that fascinated his contemporaries was that Obradović went to Belgrade in 1806, during the first Serbian uprising (1804-1813). There he was obviously welcomed by the Serbian political elites, or at least by their most influential sections: both by the leader of the uprising, Kara Djordje, and by members of the newly established National Council. Unfortunately, the National Council's attitude towards Obradović has not been transmitted to us in their own words. All we can rely on are witnesses from the Habsburg Empire, whose account lets the indigenous Serb elites appear as savages full of admiration for the wise man from the north. Dositej was like a "fox among wolves and lions," as one witness has it (Kostić 265-67).

##### *First Modification:*

##### *Transformation of the Noble Savage Narration*

This kind of hero worship deprived the Dositej story of its noble-savage aspect while retaining this attribute for the Ottoman Serbs. At the same time, the culture hero and conqueror elements were emphasized. After he died in 1811, Obradović was praised in classicist odes as a "new savior," as "the most famous first enlightener of the people" and as "founder of the new literature" (Kostić 261). These texts were generally composed by Habsburg Serb priests and/or teachers and often sponsored by tradesmen, such as the Novi Sad bookseller K. Kaulicia, who offered 6 ducats and 20 free copies of Obradović's booklet, *Bukvica*, for the best Dositej ode in 1830 (Obradović, 1830). Comparisons with Socrates, Ulysses and other Ancient Greek characters were made, in the tradi-

tion of Obradić's own texts, sometimes only perceptible in the literary form of the texts (classical metrum) and/or intertextual connections:

Сазнат' нове языке и старе,  
 Многе землѣ и народа чуди;  
 Све у онымъ Мінервине даре :  
 Чимъ се красе и ничиже люди.  
 (Ђеодоровићъ)

The veneration of Dositej took on several forms. Not only did intellectuals write reverent texts but wealthy Serbs commissioned oil paintings with Obradović's counterfeit. From these paintings, copies were made on copperplates, and prints of these were disseminated – we do not know how widely (Kostić). Another form of worship, one exclusively employed by better-off Serbs, was to fund prizes for the winners of Dositej-poem competitions as in the case of K. Kaulicija. The same patrons also traded in his manuscripts, and some competed in publishing them (Kostić 272). Soon his early followers undertook the publication of his literary bequest. The first publications by the *Matica Srpska* in Budapest from 1800 to 1830 were directed at a narrower audience; the editors were Hungarian Serbs (272-73, Stojanović 1971, 7-11). In 1825, publishing houses in present-day Vojvodina began printing his works in Pančevo, Novi Sad and Karlovci. Finally, from 1833 onwards, editions appeared in Kragujevac and Beograd, i.e. in Serbia proper. Between 1825 and 1884, fifty editions of books by Obradović were published in Vojvodina, while in the same period thirteen were published in Serbia proper. Between 1892 and 1911, four editions appeared in Vojvodina and nine in Serbia proper. Thus, the ratio had reversed from 10:3 to 10:23 (Lazić). Of course, the figures can only show trends but these trends are quite clear: the book production and hero worship slowly wandered from northwest to southeast. At the same time, it broadened its target group. One indication of this is that among the late nineteenth century editions, there were cheaper ones, and presumably the number of copies published increased as a consequence.

*Enforcing vs. Toning Down*  
*The Hegemonic Elitist Aspects*

The worship of Obradović was also supported by the first coronated Serbian dynasty. Three direct relatives of Prince Miloš Obrenović (1780-1860) were at the top of the list of subscribers to the first edition of Obradović's complete works, which was published in the *Princely Serbian Typographical Institute* in Belgrade and Kragujevac in 1833-1845 (Gg. prenumeranti). Miloš initiated a neo-Baroque rebuilding of the Belgrade cathedral in 1837. He was buried in this church, the Saborna Crkva, in 1860 and Obradović, too, was to find his final resting place right at the entrance to this little pantheon of Serbian heroes (*Il-*



Illustration 3: *The Saborna Crkva*  
(Cathedral)

Illustration 3). Among the clergy, however, there was much opposition to the hero worship of Obradović, which probably looked like an illegitimate new cult to them, and especially to the printing of Obradović's books. This protest, however, never took a public form. Even when, in 1834, the patriarch in Constantinople ordered the Serbian Metropolitane to take action against the printing, he did not succeed (Kostić 278-79).

Around the middle of the nineteenth century, two other culture heroes (re)emerged and started to compete with "Dositej": Vuk Karadžić, the hero of the romanticist movement, and Saint Sava, remembered as the founder of Serbian orthodoxy. As far as I can tell at this stage of my research, these three figures were initially worshipped by separate groups, while towards the end of the century more and more amalgamations of features of these heroes are discernible. Vuk was cross-bred with Dositej, and Dositej with Sava. What could these hybrid symbols stand for?

1. Merging the Vuk symbolism with the Dositej myth would emphasize the anti-clerical and the language reform aspects of "Dositej." It would neutralize the assimilation claim and also the negative attitude towards folk culture (elitism). It would redirect the Dositej myth towards social equality values and towards a negative stance concerning "Byzantine traditions."
2. Amalgamation of Sava and Dositej, however, would mean emphasizing elite culture, neutralizing anticlericalism and assimilation, and turning to the *pravoslavni* (Orthodox) heritage (Kostić, Stojanović 7-14).

The protagonists of the several elite groups could make their choice between these two combinations, and also recombine them (Sava+Vuk, Sava+Vuk+Dositej). One would expect conservatives to tend to the second version, and progressives to the first. However, it is not that easy. It is possible to assert, at this stage of my research, that Dositej symbolism prevailed in official Serbian discourse on culture until World War I although it was sometimes mixed with Vuk symbols. In 1864, Vuk's bones were buried in the same place as Dositej's. What happened in less strictly controlled streams of discourse or discursive realms of other ideological, cultural and political orientations, is still hard to say. In the 1860s, the nationalist liberal movement started amalgamating all three figures and thus deprived each of them of any but a national meaning. In 1876, the *Omladina* movement had posters of both Vuk and Dositej attached to the podium during their national conferences (Kostić 282). This move took the elitist meanings away from the Dositej symbol and utilized it for a democratic nationalist agenda. In Socialist newspapers of the late nineteenth century, there is virtually no mention of Dositej. If there is, as in the one case I have found thus far, the picture complies with mainstream discourse on Obradović: Dositej as the father of Serbian literature (Srbija na istoku). It would, of course, be interesting to see whether Socialists did completely buy into the modernist westernizing image of Dositej, ignoring its elitist aspect, or whether they tried softening this by mixing in Vuk symbolism (unlike in the newspaper quoted), or whether they considered the way they saw themselves as revolutionaries sufficient to neutralize the ruling class ideology aspects of the Dositej symbolism.



*Illustration 4: Topčider Park with Miloš's palace*

There are two versions of the story about where Dositej himself wished to be buried. According to one, it was in the place where his grave is today, the cathedral (Vilovsky 207). Another claims, however, that he wanted to rest in Belgrade's Topčider Park (Illustration 4). Both places symbolize a posthumous connection to the Obrenović dynasty – the first due to the kings' graves in the Sab-





*Illustration 5: The Dositej-statue in Belgrade's  
Students' Park*

orna Church, the second because the palace of Prince Miloš (built 1831-34) is in the same park and an obelisk, named after him, was erected there in 1859 (Stojanović 1866, 40). This says more about the intentions of those who made the claims than about Obradović's own preferences. It could mean an attempt to appropriate the minister of Kara Djordje for the Obrenovići. In 1838, during the demolition of the old cathedral and the construction of the new one, Obradović's bones were dug out, cleansed, wrapped in silk and reburied in a coffin. They were not, as a contemporary emphasizes, exhibited to the public, so that claims that there were pieces of his bones circulating would appear not to be true (Vožarović). The Dositej statue in Belgrade was erected in 1911 in front of the university, while there has been a Vuk monument only since 1937 (Illustration 5). If, as Katherine Verdery suggests, "statues participate in stabilizing particular spatial and temporal orders" and "freeze popular values in it" (6), and ritual burials and re-burials add importance to the values associated with the names of the corpses (19-20), then the chronology of the burials and the erection of statues of Vuk and Dositej are not only due to the generation gap, but also to a changing symbolism of power and politics as well as of popular values. In 1911, the bourgeois Serb veneration of Dimitrije Obradović reached a climax. The centennial of his death that year was honored in rituals throughout the kingdom and also on Habsburg territory. Not only was the statue un-

veiled (which actually happened at the beginning of 1912), but school-classes were made to gather in schoolyards to sing songs in praise of the founder of the educational system. Speeches were held, folk bands performed songs about Dositej at commemorative evenings, institutions were renamed, and books were edited (Popović).

One of the biggest discursive events in the history of the Serbian state had been unleashed. It was for this occasion that the essay entitled *A Hundred Years Later* quoted at the beginning of this paper was written. Today, nearly a hundred years after the first centennial of Obradović's death, what matters is which meanings are now attached to Dositej Obradović. The last struggle over his image took place in 1999 when two of his statues were overthrown in Kosovo. If Albanian activists were behind it, as the Yugoslav press agency claimed, the deed shows that the symbol of Dositej did not lose its hegemonic character in Communist Yugoslavia. It is, of course, not clear which kind of hegemony it stood for: Communist, Serbian national, Western, or for the educational system as such. In the case cited, the Serbian national and the Western hegemonic traits seem to have played a role, as in a clipping from the Yugoslav press agency from September 21, 1999, taken from the homepage of the Serbian Unity Congress. Interestingly, in order to present Yugoslavia as a Western country, Obradović is foregrounded, while "Albanian nationalists" appear as anti-Western outlaws:

NATO Aggression Against Yugoslavia. New Bits

PRISTINA – On Saturday, ethnic Albanian nationalists pulled down a monument to Dositej Obradovic, Serbia's enlightener, philosopher and writer, which had been located in front of the Pristina University chancellor's office.

Obradovic (1742-1811), author of a large number of works written in Serbian and other languages, established cultural and educational links between the Balkans and Europe, creating a basis for the Serb's modern literature. ...

Since the deployment of the U.N. peacekeeping force KFOR in the province, ethnic Albanian extremists have also pulled down monuments raised in Pristina, the main city in the Yugoslav Republic of Serbia's Kosovo and Metohija province, in memory of Vuk Stefanovic Karadzic, Serbia's nineteenth-century language reformer, and Petar Petrovic Njegos, Montenegro's nineteenth-century ruler, poet and bishop.

They have also destroyed a monument in Prizren to Emperor Dusan, who ruled Serbia in the thirteenth century, and a monument in Gnjilane dedicated to Emperor Lazar, who died in the battle of Kosovo in 1389 making it impossible for the Turkish army to continue its advance towards Europe. (Sept 21)

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> On culture heroes, see van Deursen, Long, Lotman/Uspenskij, Meletinskij, Rank, Tegnaeus and Ward. On saints, see Brown and Kunze. On myths and their functions, see Carroll, English/Buchler, Parr, and Weiner.

<sup>2</sup> On national identity construction, see Anderson, Hobsbawm, and Wallerstein. Alexander Greenawalt shows in this edition of *spacesofidentity* that the contents of the myths, which have been instrumental in the creation of a Serbian national identity, were changed in the 19th century in order to better support modern self-images.

<sup>3</sup> These contradictions are reflected, for instance, in the preface to Stojanović 1971, where he on the one hand argues that Obradović was just one "creative inspirational literary phenomenon" among many eighteenth century Serbian intellectuals who made up the cultural change, and on the other calls him "the creator of Serbian national culture and modern literature" (7). For a more detailed and balanced picture, see Šević and Kostić.

<sup>4</sup> See e.g. Djurić: "There are two epochs in the history of Serbian culture: the ancient period – from Saint Sava to Dositej and the modern – from Dositej to our days. Sava is the first Serbian writer, Dositej is the first modern Serbian writer. ... In the right moment [Dositej] launched a merciless critique of medieval backwardness and created an extensive long-term programme and the first specimens of a new culture, which is a western and a popular culture" (7).

<sup>5</sup> The original appeared as *Život' i priključenija Dimitria Obradoviča, narečenoga u kaludjerstvu Dositheia. Nim' istim' spisat' i izdat'*. U Laipsiku: u tipografii Braitkopfa 1783.

<sup>6</sup> See Karadžić, 88, Latković and Unbegaun.

<sup>7</sup> *Ezopove i proćih raznih basnotvorcev, s različni ezika na slavenoserbski ezik prevedene sad prvi red s naravoučiteljnimi poleznimi izjašnjeniami i nastavljeniami izdate i serbskoi junosti prosvečene basne*. U Lajpsiku: u Tipografii g. Ioanna Gotloba Emanuila Brajtkopfa 1788.

<sup>8</sup> See Kuna, 21 and Neweklowsky. In the preface to the second volume of wordlists of *Life and Adventures's* language is moving away from the vernacular, and instead reapproaching Church language.

<sup>9</sup> For a discussion of Dositej's ideas, see Šević, Kostić and Stojković.

<sup>10</sup> Stojković wrote that Obradović was based on the "positive folk traditions" (114-15), thus merely taking over Obradović's own attitudes instead of analyzing them from a distanced standpoint.

<sup>11</sup> It is easier to mention those that deviate from this pattern: Vuk opposed the hero veneration (Karadžić), but never published his polemics, while Šević commented in a critical way at least on Obradović's abilities as a philosopher (32). Much earlier, in 1837, Petar II. Njegoš had also commented in a negative way (Kostić 277). For more on Vuk's attacks, see Fischer.

<sup>12</sup> Kovačević, Milutinović, Kostić 98-110, Noyes 34-70.

