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**JOVAN JOVANOVIĆ ZMAJ
AND THE SERBIAN IDENTITY
BETWEEN POETRY AND HISTORY**

The recent violent outburst of Serbian nationalism has attracted significant interest in the ever-growing field of nationalism studies. In addition, the so-called „cultural turn“ has engaged scholars in the reappraisal of significant aspects of Serbian culture, namely the ones that make it national, such as literature. Two writers – Petar Petrović Njegoš and Ivo Andrić – pillars of the Serbian literary canon, have naturally been debated the most and their works are often referred to either as illustrations of eternal hatred among South Slavs or as providing impetus for the conflicts.¹ Presenting part of this debate to an international audience, Celia Hawkesworth argued that the main problem of the recent reassessment of major literary figures in the former Yugoslavia was the inability of many commentators to separate the political from the artistic, something I believe is both impossible and futile. After all, the characters at stake here were not lonely riders. One was the spiritual and political leader of his (Montenegrin) state in the 19th century, and the other was the highest diplomatic representative of another (Yugoslav) state in the 20th century. Even more instrumental than their political positions was the influence of their literature on political imagining and identity building over the last two centuries. Nonetheless, their influence was not a one-way and one-dimensional phenomenon. Illuminating the interplay between the two is a task for both historians and literary critics.

In Serbian literature, as in that elsewhere, processes accompanying the building of the nation and its identity cannot be understood without proper explo-

1 Two recent articles in English summarize the debates around these two authors – Hawkesworth (2002) and Wachtel (2004).

ration of several issues. These include the ideological and discursive practices of the national literature as well as modes of its canonization because these factors have defined for individuals who they were and to whom they owed their loyalty. What and how we conceive of literature and literary criticism is rooted in a philological tradition, first formulated with the idea of nations in mind. It was precisely the political task of modern nationalism, according to Kedourie, that directed the course of literature, from the Romantic concepts of „folk character“ and „national language“ to the division of literature into distinct „national literatures.“² In the formation of a national literary canon, which adopts or rejects writers and their works, national concerns have often weighed as heavily as literary ones, albeit not in a linear and conclusive process but in a dynamic, never-ending story of negotiation and modification.³ On the other hand, the rise of modern nation states has been inseparable from the forms and subjects of imaginative literature. As Benedict Anderson has demonstrated, the creation of print media, the newspaper and, especially, the novel were crucial factors in the formation of nations as „imagined communities.“⁴

In Central and Eastern Europe, including the Balkans, the political context of the unresolved national and state issues in the 19th century and the belated and disputed development of the literary language, determined the role of literature in the modern period. Romanticism, which offered the triumphant literary depiction of the nation, was the prevailing literary style almost until the end of the century. The role that the novel played in national representation and dissemination in Western Europe was replaced, in many literatures in this region, by oral poetry and its imitation.⁵ Poetry was valued more than any other genre and all artistic and creative minds were expected to express themselves in verse. A poet in the 19th century regarded himself (women poets in this period were exceptional) as the conscience, if not the leader, of his nation. In that sense the nations of Central and Eastern Europe headed by Germany came close to being unique in their adoration of poets. This was perhaps best expressed in the rituals of the exhumation, transfer and reburial of their bones, a practice that accorded them a saintly status. Serbian literature is a case in point. Serbian folk poetry as well as the poems written by Romanticist poets in the „folk“ spirit were long privileged by the national system of education and generally considered to be the expression, or rather foundation, of national culture.

One poet, Jovan Jovanović Zmaj (1833–1904), attained extraordinary popularity, and thus is chosen to illustrate the argument of this study. During his lifetime, Zmaj had already acquired the title of the „people’s poet,“ an ex-

2 Kedourie (1960), p. 63. See also Lord (1963).

3 Kálmán (2001).

4 Anderson 1983), p. 12.

5 Szikláz (1977), pp. 331–332.

pression of esteem held by the common Serb until today. A tireless publisher and editor of magazines and periodicals, for which he often supplied the whole contents, Zmaj imparted the image of a poet as national activist and acted as a key figure in the cultural and political life of the Serbs in Hungary, Croatia and Serbia during the entire second half of the 19th century. Today, however, he is usually remembered only as a national poet and only on the margins of political events. Revisiting Zmaj's life and deeds in the pages that follow, I intend to show the ways in which literary, ideological and political concerns of men of letters related to, and informed, the Serbian national identity-formation. Often citing Victor Hugo as his ideal, Zmaj never distinguished between his poetic and political expression, believing this to be artificial. Zmaj's unique popularity together with his expressed political engagement inspired the first part of this study. His ideas on the cluster of issues including language, people, state and religion will be reviewed in their historical context as well as against subsequent attempts to adjust or abandon them if they did not fit the dominant national narrative. Already during his life, but especially after his death, Zmaj's place in the national canon was hailed but also questioned, not least because of his politics. This furnishes the fabric for the second part of the article. Using Zmaj and his *oeuvre* in this chapter, I shall highlight the many-sidedness and historical contingency of the identity construction. Within that context I shall question the common essentialist and deterministic views of a certain national culture and its derived political nationalism, whether they are critical or apologetic of its contents.

(UN)USUAL BIOGRAPHY OF THE PEOPLE'S POET

Jovan Jovanović was born in 1833 to a distinguished family in Novi Sad, then a predominantly Serbian town in southern Hungary where his father served as senator and, for a short time, as mayor after the 1748 revolution.⁶ His father came from a merchant family of Vlach origin, something neither Jovan Jovanović nor any of his contemporaries ever discussed, leaving us to assume that the family was fully assimilated or Serbianized.⁷ Nevertheless, the sheer number of assimilated Vlachs as prominent figures in the national movements of Southeastern Europe gives ground to speculation that their need to prove themselves as part of the nation, despite their Vlach origins, contributed to their role as conspicuous 19th century Balkan nationalists. Unlike many other Serbian writers or political activists of Vlach origin, who changed or Serbianized their originally Greek or Hebraic names, Jovan Jovanović only adopted

6 Biographies of Zmaj include Stajić (1933); Leskovac, (1954); and Milisavac (1954).

7 For more on Vlachs, descendants of romanized pre-Slav Balkan population, see Winnifrith (1987).

what later became probably the most popular nickname among Serbs, Zmaj [dragon]. This came from the name of one of the many journals he edited. Later in his life he also introduced himself as Čika Jova (Zmaj) – Uncle Joe, a dear uncle to all Serbian children. For all Serbs this was a name suggestive of his closeness to the people.

Although Zmaj's biography is often mythologized, his career differed little from that of any other urban middle class son of his native Hungary at the time. He attended several high schools throughout the country and studied law at universities in Budapest, Prague, and Vienna before starting his career as a civil servant in southern Hungary. After several years he moved to Pest to head the Serbian educational foundation *Tekelijanuml Tökölyanum*, the post he abandoned in 1867 in order to take a degree in medicine. He spent the rest of his life practicing medicine in predominantly Serbian towns in south Hungary as well as in Belgrade, Zagreb and Vienna. As a physician he was remembered as a champion of the poor for whom he did not charge his services. Still, Zmaj the physician could not prevent, in less than ten years of marriage, his five children and eventually his wife succumbing to the diseases rampaging at that time, particularly tuberculosis. More than anything else, however, this tragedy gave Zmaj the sympathy of the common people who were still dying cruelly of known and unknown diseases, poverty, poor hygiene or from lack of proper medical care. From then on, according to Zmaj's own words, his heart was filled with the pain of his people, of all those who suffered and whose dignity was humiliated.⁸ Zmaj thus became a myth during his lifetime, although, as we will see later, the full force of the myth surfaced only after his death when he was no longer able to influence his own image.

Parallel to his medical practice, from the mid-1850s to his death in 1904, Zmaj was a most prolific and politically active Serbian man of letters. He was an editor and publisher of numerous literary and satirical journals, a writer of short stories and plays and, most importantly, a poet. Zmaj's contribution as a translator is equally impressive. Beginning with the Hungarian Romantic poets Petőfi and Arany János, and later through his translations of major European poets such as Goethe, Tennyson, Lermontov and Hugo, he enriched tremendously Serbian literature despite the fact that literary critics no longer hold his translations in high esteem. His massive poetic opus is heterogeneous in its themes and genres but also of varied and disputed artistic value. Commonly praised are his lyrical, love and family poems published in collections named *Dulići* (Roses, 1864) and *Dulići uveoci* (Faded Roses, 1882). Whereas *Roses* is a lyrical diary or poetic novel about love and happy family life, *Faded Roses* is a book full of sadness and grief, stirred by the death of his wife and children. In addition, Zmaj published the following poem collections: *Pevanija* (Poems, 1882), *Čika Jova srpskoj deci* (Uncle Jova to Serbian

8 Vrhovac (1933), p. 6.

children, 1889), *Čika Jova srpskoj omladini* (Uncle Jova to Serbian Youth, 1901) *Snohvatice* (vols. I–II, 1895; vol. III, 1900) and *Devesilje* (1900).⁹ The poems in these collections established Zmaj, in the words of the literary critic Jovan Skerlić, as „a program poet and freedom singer who was at the same time poet of hatred and revenge for the Serbian people and dreamer of human brotherhood, world peace and better humanity.“¹⁰ In this respect Zmaj stood clearly in line with the *Jungen Deutschland* movement and with one of his greatest poetic inspirations – Petőfi – for whom the emotion of „pure love“ was not allowed and who saw „love for the people“ as the true task of the poet. Even though Zmaj did not leave many expressly patriotic poems, he excelled in political and satirical poetry in which he expressed his political ideas and visions for the nation. Following European examples, the Serbian poets at that time saw themselves as speakers of the nation. Literary clubs were transformed into the first national political organizations and parties. Here former lovers of literature practised their political skills with more or less success but always following the same path leading from literature to politics. This shortcut to „glory“ prompted one contemporary to lament the way many Serbian poets turned overnight into the worst political demagogues.¹¹

During the first half of the 19th century Zmaj’s birthplace, Novi Sad, a free town with the largest Serbian population in the Habsburg Monarchy, became the centre of Serbian cultural life, earning the title of the Serbian „Athens.“ Nowadays it is often forgotten that, for almost half a century, the most important role in Serbian nation building was played by the Serbs from Hungary, with Zmaj in their midst. He grew politically by supporting the liberal United Serbian Youth and then the first political party of the Serbs in Hungary – the Serbian People’s Freethinking Party (Liberals) led by Svetozar Miletić. Miletić remained Zmaj’s political idol until the end of his life. Zmaj became a party poet, his poems often resembling daily political chronicles as emotional, versified commentaries of Miletić’s political concepts. At one point in the 1880s, it seemed that Zmaj would even take over the role of Miletić and become the political leader of the Serbs in Hungary, but this attempt failed as he obviously didn’t have adequate skills. He soon returned to editing political journals, a task he was much more experienced in doing. Yet Zmaj’s poetry, and especially his journalistic work, remained intertwined with political issues of the time, especially the most pressing one – the state of the nation – providing us with important insights into the interplay of literature and politics. What follows is the reconstruction of Zmaj’s political and poetic persona and its ever-changing relationship to what was promoted as Serbian interests and immutable identity. In this enterprise, necessarily limited to a few major topics,

9 Collected works appeared in 16 volumes as Jovan Jovanović Zmaj, *Sabrana dela*, Belgrade, 1933–1937, and selected works appeared in Novi Sad in 8 volumes in 1969 and in 10 volumes in 1983, edited by Mladen Leskovac.

10 Skerlić (1953), p. 289.

11 Rakić (1985), p. 94.

one must begin with Zmaj's understanding of language, which determined not only his style of poetry but also his political views.

LANGUAGE AND NATION

Although he had studied in German and Hungarian, Zmaj never acquired proficiency in writing and expressing himself in these languages. Hardly any other Serbian writer ever did so. For Zmaj, the Serbian language remained his symbolic homeland and the guiding principle of his nationalism. Without education in his mother tongue, but obsessed with its beauty, Zmaj paradoxically became one of the most remarkable philologists of the Serbian language, master of rhyme, creator of neologisms, and certainly its most ardent glorifier. At the same time, the lack of proper linguistic knowledge and Zmaj's exaggerated passion for his language often turned to his disadvantage in terms of form or expression, hence the later criticisms of much carelessness and slovenliness in his work.

Zmaj entered Serbian literature after a long period of „discovering“ the Serbian language, namely the creation of a literary language based on the vernacular. By inaugurating the vogue of folkloric collection that was reigning throughout Europe, Vuk Karadžić, the father of modern Serbian literary language, also opened the way for a new period in Serbian cultural and literary development commonly associated with European Romanticism.¹² The celebration of the autochthonous features of the nation and the originality of its folk poetry was established in Western Europe in the 18th century by Rousseau, Macpherson, Percy and Herder in particular, and spread eastward through Vienna and the German universities.¹³ Moreover, the early Slavicists were influenced by the theory identifying the people with the language which was formulated by the German philologist Schlözer.¹⁴ Cherishing a European-wide enthusiasm for Karadžić's collections, the whole generation of poets which adopted Karadžić's language reform and kept alive his legacy became known as Vuk's Youth or *Vukovci*. Zmaj was at the forefront of this movement. An important aspect of the movement was the purification of the language as many poets desperately sought and invented words to replace foreign imports. An ardent collector of folklore in all its forms, Zmaj is also remembered as having contributed over 3,000 words to the *Dictionary of the Serbian Academy* (16 volumes starting from 1883). In the obituary which he wrote for Karadžić, Zmaj maintained that the folk song was not only the root of his own poetry, but of poetry in general.

12 See Duncan, (1986), Turczynski (1976) and Hopf, (1997).

13 See Sundhaussen (1973) and Kessler, (2002).

14 Ducreux (2005).

In the Serbian case „singing,“ or the so-called song verse, meant lyric poetry, and verse romances stood for epic poetry for centuries. These Serbian oral narratives were usually composed in decasyllable poetic line and sung to the accompaniment of a single-stringed instrument known as the *gusle*.¹⁵ In the 19th century they might no longer have been sung but their versification and prosody endured. The wider public considered as poetry only that which preserved the „singing“ tradition. Zmaj’s popularity also rested on his use of the Serbian folk lyric meter. The taste and expectations of the audience directed authors such as Zmaj to adjust and harmonize their genres and forms with those of folk poetry even when its origins were far apart in time, space and cultural background. Along with the meter and verse, Zmaj also employed the lexica and idiomatic as well as the poetic syntax and expression of folk poetry. This often produced dubious results, especially his attempt to imitate folk poetry in the *Ijekavica* variant of the *Štokavian* dialect of Hercegovina, instituted by Karadžić as the purest form of Serbian language. The result was many lapses and errors in form, syntax and word choice. Recorded as having said that Serbian is not an earthly but a heavenly language, Zmaj stayed aloof of the debate waged throughout the 19th century about the proper grammar, orthography and lexica of the newly-codified vernacular language. Further, he rejected demands for linguistic purity among Serbian and Croatian writers, which later paved the way for the formation of their separate national literatures and identities. In his idealism Zmaj was a hostage of the Romanticist ideal for which, according to Joshua Fishman, the language was the key to unlocking ethnic greatness: with its liberating, unifying and authenticating features it represented the solution to all the problems of the modern era.¹⁶ It is therefore interesting to see how Zmaj’s Romanticist idealization of the language and poetic tradition of the people influenced his understanding of the perennial problem of the territorial and national appropriation of that language. There is no better example than Zmaj’s attitude towards Croats.

ZMAJ AND THE SERBO-CROATIAN PEOPLE

Accepting Karadžić’s interpretation of Serbian and Croatian as one language, Zmaj deemed the Serbs and the Croats to be one people with two names or „brothers of one blood“ and „sons of one mother“ regardless of their confessional differences and the conflicts between their political elites.¹⁷ Hence he was very concerned with political developments in Croatia, the biggest region/autonomy in the Habsburg Monarchy inhabited by speakers of his moth-

15 Koljevic (1980).

16 Fishman (1986), p. 76.

17 As expressed in Zmaj’s poem *Kad vec mora*, written in 1884, published in Jovanović (1975), pp. 48–49.

er tongue. In the early 1870s, when the status of Croatia within Hungary was renegotiated to the detriment of Croatian autonomy, Zmaj, together with other fellow Serb Liberals from Hungary, vociferously demanded the closest possible political links between the Serbs and Croats in order to resist Hungarian interference. He placed his poetic talent in the service of that aim, extolling brotherhood, unity and harmony between Serbs and Croats. Zmaj's counterpart in promoting unity among Serbs and Croats was the greatest Croatian novelist at the time, August Šenoa. Praising Zmaj's poetry in 1879, Šenoa was persuaded that there was hope „that from today's sad quarrel among the members of one tribe, Croats and Serbs, one day something better and nobler might arise based on mutual familiarity, recognition and respect.“¹⁸ Like Zmaj, Šenoa believed that the political antipathy between the Serbs and the Croats might be resolved in time and through education, with a special role attached to literature. But as the years went by, such voices of prominent Serbian and Croatian artists and poets had little effect because the political and clerical representatives of the two peoples could not reconcile their interests, choosing instead separate political and national paths. Whereas almost all Croatian parties and groupings denied any separate national rights to the Serbs in Croatia, the Serbian leaders, by supporting the Hungarian Government party, made any progress towards Croatian statehood impossible. Zmaj, however, urged the Serbs to help the Croats without trying to gain advantages from the Croats' difficulties, exhorting:

Tender a hand to the suffering Croat,
Tell him he has a brother in need;
Let brotherly love show its benefits true,
And then let them decide what they want to do.¹⁹

In reaction to this the Serbian bishop Teofan Živković, a bitter opponent of Zmaj's ideal of unity, wrote that Zmaj would have done better to have kept silent. *Srbski narod*, a journal close to the Serbian Patriarch Andelić, even accused Zmaj of inciting an anti-Hungarian rebellion in Croatia in 1883. In spite of this misapprehension, Zmaj remained instrumental in attempts to overcome the bitter relations between Croats and Serbs. Because of his record in promoting cooperation and accord, he was courted by the Croatian bishop Strossmayer and other prominent Croatian opponents of Hungarian rule. They asked him to persuade the Serbian Liberal leaders to join an electoral coalition. Zmaj responded positively through a number of intercessions, but also worked on his own, agitating among the Serbian and the Croatian youth. He was fearful that some heedless nationalist youngsters could spoil the efforts of elders at reconciliation. In 1887, with the financial help of the Montenegrin Prince Nikola, Zmaj tried to launch a journal named *Jugoslavija*, the

18 Cited in Živančević (1983), p. 433.

19 Krestić (1997), p. 318.

first ever with such a name. Its aim was to propagate the union of the Balkan peoples and lands, but this effort failed before the first issue even appeared. None of these attempts in the 1880s bore any success. Furthermore, party machinations and squabbles, coalitions for material gains or a single deputy position pushed Serbian and Croatian parties away from any collaboration for decades.

In his last attempt to foster rapprochement between the Serbs and the Croats in 1897, Zmaj even moved to Zagreb. Hoping to achieve justice and also reconcile the two peoples, he coined the term „Serbo-Croatian“ or „Croato-Serb“ for his people. At the time this term was odd but was later accepted in Socialist Yugoslavia as the official name for the language spoken by Serbs and Croats. Criticizing the anti-Croatian editorial policy of the Serbian journal in Zagreb, Zmaj rejected the editors' explanation that they were just responding to attacks from Croats. Zmaj also opined that differences in upbringing, characteristics of the people, and views and preferences were the result of foreign rule over centuries. Furthermore, he claimed that since it was scientifically proven that Serbs and Croats spoke the same language, this would sooner or later extinguish inflamed passions and reconcile disparate positions, despite all the efforts of Vienna to poison their relations.²⁰

Paradoxically, the divisions between the Serbian and the Croatian political circles erupted into riots on the occasion of the celebration of the 50th anniversary of Zmaj's literary work in Zagreb in 1899. The Serbian nationalists in Croatia organized the celebrations, ignoring the Croats, and in their speeches praised Zmaj's work as the best symbol under which to achieve the most solid unity of the Serbian lands.²¹ The Croatian nationalists, on the other hand, tried everything to prevent the celebrations. The activists of the extreme Right, the so-called Frankists, staged demonstrations and attacked Serbian institutions. Their attempts to violently disrupt the celebrations were deterred by representatives of the Serbian and Croatian youth of Dalmatia, in what turned out to be the first demonstration of the future, albeit short-lived, in which the struggle of the two peoples was conjoined. After the ill-fated anniversary Zmaj withdrew to Sremska Kamenica, a town just across the Danube from his native Novi Sad, and until his death mostly wrote poems for children. It was only after Zmaj's death, in 1904, that the initiatives aimed at the political and cultural unification of South Slavs got underway. In the following years it became a favorite political activity and was transformed into a widespread movement among the South Slav cultural elites, ending up with the creation of the Yugoslav state after the First World War.

From today's perspective, Zmaj's life itinerary as a symbolic path of unity between Zagreb and Belgrade seems to be an aberration in a trend whereby the

20 Cited in Krestić (1987), p. 46.

21 Krestić, (1997), pp. 387–389.

two cities have grown into clearly distinct cultural and literary centers. Zmaj's belief in the naturalistic determinism of language as the most profound expression of national spirit clashed with parallel identification strategies based on confessional and historical allegiances. Zmaj was ready to accept a certain individuality for Croats for the sake of unity, especially in view of foreign threats. At the same time he opined that belonging to the Serbian nation should replace the religious identification of Serbian (or Serbo-Croatian) speakers; extending this suggestion to Muslim *Bošnjaks* [Bosniaks] as well.

Eventually dialectical variations, the use of different (Cyrillic or Latin) alphabets and, especially, the distinct historical, religious and political backgrounds of the Serbian and the Croatian literatures kept them apart. This despite the fact that linguistically, Serbian and Croatian were, in the opinion of most people and experts, one language, and the fact that their speakers lived on adjacent territories. Contrary to the theory that language is the most important and organic component of an ethnic cluster, it was not the ultimate or crucial factor in unification or ethnic homogenization in many cases throughout Europe. Instead, the idea of peoples as communities of ancient historic statehoods in many cases held sway.²² In the case of South Slavs, the language not only failed to bring about unification or ethnic homogenization but, according to the linguist Ranko Bugarski, the struggle over the language, which lasted for almost two centuries, acted as a cover for other deep-seated conflicts and aspirations of a political and economic nature.²³ Let us now therefore turn to how other political and ideological currents of the time shaped, and were shaped by, the identity-building process.

ROMANTICIST NATIONALISM AND LIBERALISM

Romanticism, which fashioned Zmaj's whole *oeuvre*, was the first artistic movement in which the small nations could proudly take part. Their folk poetry especially was praised as the „People's Gospel“ or, in the words of a Zmaj's contemporary, „people's poetic temple, in which young and old, rich and poor, literate and illiterate, can pray to their own and not to a foreign

God.“²⁴ No matter how traditionalist and conservative the formal and conceptual elements might have been, the imagery and subject matter of folk poetry offered new modes of expression and enabled the new generation of poets to defy ecclesiastical and other constraints. Furthermore, because of the belief in its unchanged existence over time, folk poetry served best to evoke the

22 See Eötvös (1851) which later also influenced political thinking in Croatia.

23 Bugarski (2004), p. 4.

24 Stajić (1930), p. 42.

mythologized past. In a development that is not unique in this part of Europe because of the lack of independent political fora, poets took on political functions. They found folklore to be a useful political means in their struggle for an independent culture and, indirectly, independent national existence. Celebrating the vitality of the people and past glory, Romanticism justified revolutionary nationalist aims expressed in poetic terms of awakening, rise and revival.

Yet, whereas the historical and national goals of the Germans, the Italians and to a great extent the Hungarians were accomplished during the 1860s and 1870s, the Serbian efforts spearheaded by the United Serbian Youth – where Youth was a synonym for Liberal – came to an abrupt halt after the Congress of Berlin (1878). This congress left the Serbs scattered in four states. Following the example of Germany and Italy, where national unification came only after cultural unity was achieved, Zmaj continued his mission hoping that cultural unity would eventually bring about a political one. Writing to his publisher, Zmaj explained his poetry and editorial work as enlightening and educating children but also as building cultural and national ties across political borders. This would connect spiritually the Serbs in Hungary, Serbia, Slavonia, Dalmatia, Montenegro and Bosnia and keep their spirit of freedom alive so that they could respond to future developments and social progress.²⁵ Many issues affecting Serbs in Hungary – their unresolved status, their loss of rights, their military and political significance – along with the turmoil in other countries inhabited by Serbs prompted Zmaj to abandon most of the experimentation of his earlier poetry. Political concerns influenced his stylistic and thematic choices, ushering in a poetry of expressed patriotism and positive self-reliance. This is the message of Zmaj's famous poem *Grandfather and Grandson*, which glorified an instrument, the *gusle*, thus epitomizing the folk spirit and tradition as a source of national rebirth. The ideas of *literati* such as Zmaj clearly contributed to the emergence of the particular Serbian view of political liberalism. Liberalism evolved as a hybrid of its Western prototype and the indigenous Romantic populism drawing upon the glorification of the traditional democratic „popular“ institutions, with national liberation as its major concern.²⁶ Instead of the principles of liberal contractualism, the Serbian liberals opted for the ideas of German Romanticism which emphasized an organic complex of historical elements that made up the spirit of a people such as race, language, religion, customs, etc. Similarly the idea of folk poetry as the manifestation of the true spirit of the people was translated into the political vision of popular democracy. The major elements of liberal doctrine – parliamentary government, equality, rule of law and responsible executive – were considered derivative of the crucial notion of popular sovereignty. On the other hand patriarchal institutions such as the extended family, rural com-

25 Prepiska (1957), pp. 310–314.

26 For Serbian liberalism see Stokes (1975), Mishkova (2001) and Subotić (1992).

munity, local self-government, collective work, and the collectivistic ethos which they nurtured, were politically instrumentalized.

Imbuing folk-style poetry with the modern idea of national values, independence and even superiority, Zmaj's poems often produced pathetic undertones. Unlike his poetic idol Petőfi, Zmaj's lyrics hardly ever overcame their Romantic inspiration and attained a proper level of realism. His political preferences determined the idealized images of the people Zmaj conveyed. Only in his children's poetry did Zmaj approach reality. In it he rendered unforgettable scenes and characters, and it was for this that he was said to be the inventor of childhood in Serbian literature. Proudly situating himself in the tradition of the Enlightenment, Zmaj described his role as that of Benjamin Franklin's messenger and in his verses acted against all the evils of his time – poverty, misery, exploitation, injustice and deceit.²⁷ The journals he edited and their limited readership were often the only public for his ideas and the only place to discuss these problems, despite their being subjected to strict censorship by the Habsburg Monarchy. In them Zmaj published his own political manifestos, pledging to promote truth and justice, extol diligence, solidarity and the common good while castigating and ridiculing duplicity, charlatanism, egoism, conservatism, superciliousness, malice and disunity.²⁸ In all of his poetic-political work Zmaj strove to fill the vacuum created by what children could not learn in school or what political parties avoided bringing up. In his programmatic poetry Zmaj tried to follow Victor Hugo who denounced social evils in his prose and journalistic accounts. But, as it is often the case, social commitment does not necessarily mean artistic accomplishment. Zmaj's poems, impelled by current affairs, written quickly with a militant passion, and obsessed with the idea of pointing to a problem and advocating a solution meant they were often simplistic, superficial, and purely didactic – if not demagogic. Zmaj voluntarily sacrificed his vocation as a poet on the altar of politics and the nation. However the notion of „nation“ changed immensely during the century after his death and those in charge of the nation often obfuscated Zmaj's ideas as will be illustrated below.

A MAN OF TWO „HOMELANDS“

Zmaj began his career as a translator in 1855 when he first translated short poems by Sándor Petőfi. This was followed by his major work, János Vitéz, and in 1858 by the translation of another great Hungarian epic – János Arany's *Toldi*. For these and many other translations of Hungarian poets, Zmaj was elected in 1867 to the Hungarian Kisfaludy Literary Society [*A Kisfaludy*

27 Ostojčić (1908), p. 7.

28 See Milincević (1989) and Maticki (1990).

Társaság], which then sponsored the translation of his poems into Hungarian. Zmaj dedicated the Hungarian edition of his poems to the idea of Hungarian-Serbian brotherhood, expressing his hope that mutual sharing and learning about the life and the spiritual treasury of the two peoples would overcome damage done by the sad past and present politics.²⁹ In his poems and correspondence Zmaj referred to Hungary as his dear homeland, reflecting the widespread pro-Hungarian sentiments of the Serbs in the 1850s and 1860s. These were his formative years when, after years of Austrian absolutism, the Serbs hoped their interests would be better protected under the Hungarian liberals than they had been by the conservative Crown.³⁰ It was a dramatic rupture with a centuries' long reliance on the Habsburgs which is best illustrated by the political program of Svetozar Miletić. Proclaimed in 1860, it demanded the equality of peoples in Hungary, respect for their existence and differences as well as for their language and identity. Yet Hungarian Liberals disapproved of Miletić's call for the institutional status of Serbs, reducing the whole issue to matters of mother-tongue education and the right to use Serbian in Serb-majority counties. Relationships between the two political elites soon deteriorated and Zmaj was caught between his fervent Serbian nationalism and his loyalty to the Hungarian state. In a letter to the famous Hungarian writer Mór Jókai written in 1875, when relations with Hungarians reached its lowest point, Zmaj expressed hope that politics would not contaminate literature which knew better what was „mine, yours, his.“³¹ After the crisis of 1875-1878, Zmaj participated again in Hungarian cultural and political life. Honors and translations of his work by Hungarian writers continued despite Zmaj's staunch criticism of Hungarian politics, especially the policy of Magyarization. Hungarian *literati* celebrated pompously the 40th anniversary of Zmaj's work in 1889. As a sign of gratitude Zmaj translated the famous drama *Az ember tragédiája* [The Tragedy of Man] by Imre Madách. On a more personal note, after the death of his wife, Zmaj lived with his Hungarian housekeeper, Maria Tarnóczy, and most probably fathered one and raised both of her two daughters; information later cleansed from the poet's biography.³²

What complicates most this attempt by Zmaj to locate the meaning of national belonging within parameters established later is that he never bothered with territorial issues. The closest he came to explaining his view of the position of the Serbian minority in Hungary was in 1881 when he rejected criticism about his reporting on Hungarian politics and cultural events in his magazine for children, *Neven*:

We are in Hungary, political conflicts are temporary and might change tomorrow – but we will stay here so why not let our children know about their immediate

29 Pot (1993), p. 108.

30 Poth (1968), pp. 336–337.

31 Prepiska (1957), pp. 161–162.

32 Zmajev bečki dnevnik (1983), pp. 221–222.

environment!? Because it is not Serbian!? I believe I am a good Serb but I will not go as far. I want my young audience to be Serbs, but not only Serbs and nothing more.³³

During the socialist period, Zmaj's activism in Hungary and his translations were used in both Hungary and Yugoslavia as evidence of the brotherhood of the two peoples. On the other hand, Serbian nationalist historiography and literary criticism usually ignored Zmaj's double loyalty completely. The problem was that Zmaj's ideas about people, nation and state scarcely fitted in with the firmly established notion that all political national movements in Hungary were separatist. The Serbian narrative of liberation from foreign domination and of unification in a nation state had to be reconciled with the fact that the Serbs in Hungary, who were culturally and economically the most advanced of all Serbs, were not irredentist and did not agitate for violence in achieving their political goals. Not surprisingly, the Hungarian Government treated them as the least dangerous of all nationalities. The Serbian parties were deeply divided and were losing one election after the other, while many prominent Serbs supported the Hungarian Government right up until the First World War. In addition, many Serbs performed military, police and administrative functions. An interesting account is the testimony of Miletić's daughter describing how her father was arrested in 1876 by a Hungarian state prosecutor, Vasa Popović, a judge called Jerković, and the Novi Sad police chief Maša Manojlović; all of them apparently of Serbian ethnic background.³⁴

Serbian historiography successfully resolved the paradox by enforcing a clear division between cultural nationalists such as Zmaj, who maintained strong attachment to purely Serbian political parties, on the one hand, and the so-called magyarophile intellectuals and elites, who associated themselves with the Hungarian elites on the other. Because of these two clearly polarized camps the nationalist narrative could always take the „right“ side and celebrate the role of the cultural nationalists in the „liberation“ struggle. By so doing, the loyalty of Zmaj or other cultural nationalists to the Hungarian state never entered the picture – nor did their Hungarian patriotism. This „wisdom“ fully ignored the fact that only the cataclysm of the First World War made possible the dissolution of the Habsburg Monarchy and the unification of South Slavs. Posthumous celebrations of Zmaj also saw a twist of irony in the fact that Zmaj's most enchanted hymns to freedom were not his own but translations of Hungarian and German ones.³⁵ But in fact there was nothing ironic that a cultural nationalist, such as Zmaj, cherished the richness of the poetry of peoples with whom Serbs had lived and in whose culture and literature he felt at home – even if that meant using German and Hungarian lyrics

33 Prepiska (1957), pp. 304–306.

34 Zmajev bečki dnevnik (1983), pp. 230–232.

35 Milutinović (1933), p. 7.

to denounce oppression by the Austrian or the Hungarian Government.

Another important moment complicates the „national“ profile of the people's poet. Pugnacious critic of the Hungarian Government and defender of national, political and cultural rights of the Hungarian Serbs, Zmaj attacked with equal ferocity both the government and ruling monarchs of Serbia and the conservative Serbian Church hierarchy within the Monarchy for their corruption, misuse of power, authoritarianism, etc. Zmaj insisted on differentiation between the state and the people and this was best illustrated by the polemic he had with the editor of *Srpski list* [Serbian Magazine], „a journal for the defense of Serbian interests in Dalmatia“ as its subtitle read.³⁶ Zmaj was scandalized by the reporting of the journal which in the mid-1880s supported the ruling regime in Serbia despite its repression of political opponents. He insisted that a good image of Serbia was crucial in the struggle for self-determination and independence of Serbs in Austria-Hungary. For Zmaj, however, the wish to promote a different image of Serbia was no substitute for universal democratic values, which he believed were so blatantly disregarded in Serbia. This might also explain why, despite his pronounced opposition to the Hungarian state and growing discontent with the conditions for Serbs there, Zmaj never seriously considered moving to Serbia despite many opportunities. His stay in Belgrade on a Serbian state invitation and with the prestigious position of dramatist of the National Theatre did not last long. After two years he left for Vienna, disillusioned by intrigues around him and disappointed at not being able to get Serbian citizenship or edit a journal in Belgrade.³⁷

Concerning Serbian politics in Hungary, Zmaj had equally little understanding. As a child of Romanticism, he believed in harmony and the essentially good nature of the people. With such a view, he considered conflicts that arose in the Serbs' struggle for political emancipation as aberrations, and not an inevitable accompaniment to any politics. The ones he deemed responsible for the aberrations Zmaj easily castigated as traitors. In the 1880s, when it became evident that the Liberal block in Hungary could not hold itself for long, Zmaj agitated vocally to prevent the split. However his letters, speeches, articles and verses demonstrated rather his *naïveté* and inability to adjust to modern politics. He belonged to a party that he believed was representing the interests of the whole Serbian national movement, democracy and freedom, and could hardly conceive of a plurality of adversarial political parties. Eventually he took the side of the more radical faction, the young Socialists, who later became known as the Radicals.³⁸ Crucial for Zmaj's decision was their abandoning socialist ideas and the adoption of radical nationalism and anti-

36 Leskovac (1988).

37 Kostić (1951), Zmajev bečki dnevnik (1983), p. 242.

38 Rakić (1985), Milan Sević (1926) and Polit-Desančić (1936).

clericalism as their political badge. This decision cost Zmaj the loss of many of his previous friends and party colleagues who remained in the Liberal party after the split. Old and sick, Zmaj became a Radical deputy and they used his name and fame abundantly in their promotion and daily political squabbles. Throughout his life Zmaj preached unity among Serbs but ended up being accused by one of his formerly closest friends of have fallen in the mud of human evil and malice.³⁹ The exalted nationalism of the Radical party, which Zmaj joined, had little to do with the incipient nationalism of the early liberalism. Instead it excelled in myth making, attacking critical historiography and denouncing intellectuals as traitors. It even soothed Zmaj's criticism of the government in Serbia and made him, in his old age, sing the praises of the Serbian monarch and his wife. Here, as in so many other cases, Zmaj is a good example of how nationalism checked liberalism in Serbian nation building. In the case of women, for example, Zmaj preached that they should be innocent, clean and caring and fulfill their traditional roles. He denied them the right to vote but supported their public activity as long as he considered it to be good for the nation. Similarly Zmaj was a declared pacifist but had a different stance towards the Ottoman Empire. There, his fellow Serbs had all the right to rebel with arms and throw off the Turkish yoke they had borne for centuries. In his poems, Zmaj added a new dimension to the eternal conflict with the Turks by treating Serbian folk poetry as part of the struggle for independence, as protection of Europe from the Heathen, and even using it to justify the superiority of one's culture. According to his contemporary, the poet Laza Kostić, Zmaj contributed to the construction of the view of Turks as *Erbfeind*, thereby exacerbating popular resentment.⁴⁰ Zmaj also published several anti-Semitic poems in his journals. Whether his own or translations from German and Hungarian originals, these poems testify to the prevailing anti-Semitic atmosphere of the period to which Zmaj, a declared enlightener and philanthropist, also subscribed. Finally, one aspect of Zmaj's political persona deserves special attention since it is paradigmatic of how influential *literati*, literary topics and fashions were in political thinking and action. Despite that, it is an issue which was later completely obliterated – illustrating how contingent nationalist ideas and national identities can be.

SERBIAN NATIONALISM AND ANTI-CLERICALISM

As a professed liberal, Zmaj appropriated and radiated many of the ideas unleashed by the Enlightenment and revolutions of the 18th century: republicanism, anti-militarism, pacifism, and most virulently, anti-clericalism. As in

39 Rakić (1985), p. 87.

40 Kostić (1902), p. 441.

French novels of the period, priests and monks were regular targets of Zmaj's criticism and satire – be it for voracity in matters of eating and drinking, be it for sexual transgressions, be it for its hypocrisy in matters of national interest.⁴¹ The political, intellectual and artistic condemnation of churches in Europe, which came with the secularization of social thought, was one of the most important intellectual consequences of the Enlightenment. The separation of socio-political and religious thought did not have to mean the denial of the latter but the historical role of the churches and their opposition to liberal reforms brought about rampant anti-clericalism. This spread from France to all parts of the continent in late 19th-century Europe, a period described as the golden age of anti-clericalism.⁴² Zmaj spearheaded it in the Serbian case and soon the whole genre of mocking the Church and priests evolved among Serbian *literati*. It was taken further by politicians such as Svetozar Miletić, Jaša Tomić and Laza Kostić. They struggled against the hierarchy of the Serbian Orthodox Church in Hungary and turned the two most important Serbian institutions of the period – *Matica srpska* and the Liberal Party – into bastions of anti-clericalism.

Yet in the context of Serbian politics and culture in Hungary, as in much of the region, it is impossible to speak about the division of the religious and secular spheres and the secularization of social thought in the same way as one would about what happened in France where the genre originated. True, most of the changes in the religious sphere in the Habsburg Monarchy, later known as *Josephinismus*, were made in the secularizing spirit of the Enlightenment. But the link between church and state and the state's control over the church in the Habsburg domain was reinforced with the Josephinist reform so that the Catholic, and to a similar extent the other recognized churches, including the Serbian Orthodox Church, remained key institutions in governing people; both in controlling them and providing for their welfare. While secular Serbian intellectuals had already begun clashing with the Church on many issues in the 18th century, ecclesiastical power emerged as a major issue in the 1860s with the formation of the Liberals. They promulgated the view that the Serbian Church, like any other church, was the natural enemy of freedom of conscience. More importantly they repudiated its dependence on the Court and the Hungarian Government. Yet this anti-clericalism was less of a striving for a lay state than an attempt to take over the political authority and power of the Church and convert it into a national institution.⁴³ Influenced by the rhetoric of radical French anti-clericalists, the Serbian Liberals in fact followed instead the Josephinist tradition of not destroying the Church but subduing it by transforming the institution of church autonomy. Zmaj also attacked the hierarchy very sharply for being in the service of foreign rulers and

41 Vučenov (1983), p. 441.

42 Rémond (1983), p. 123.

43 For the conflicts over the Serbian Church autonomy see Bremer (1992).

usurping such autonomy. More mercilessly, Zmaj attacked Patriarch German Andelić who was imposed by the Hungarian Government against the will of the autonomous institutions. He played with the meaning of Andelić's name (meaning „little angel“), calling him a little devil instead. In a famous poem, Zmaj warned the Serbs to hide their children if the Patriarch was passing by so that the children did not get contaminated and poisoned with his evil.

A staunch anti-clericalist, Zmaj was at the same time a deeply religious person. This was almost unique among Serbian intellectuals of the period. In a collection of Serbian religious poems, which appeared in 1902, Zmaj's poems comprised more than half of all entries.⁴⁴ In Christianity Zmaj primarily saw humanism, the resolution of social contradictions, the humane reconstruction of the world, and harmony with nature. In his poem *Jest* [Truth] he came close to Tolstoyan ideas, rejecting the famous verse „render unto Caesar what belongs to Caesar“ (Matt 22:21) and proposing instead „render unto People what belongs to People.“ Inspired by other Romantics such as Novalis and Chateaubriand, Zmaj condemned the bigotry and mysticism of traditional religion and extolled the values of justice, modesty and sincerity. Mediating foreign influences, Zmaj was also an ardent advocate of cremation; a pioneer of this cause among the Serbs. No issue showed his attitude to religion better than his relationship with the Nazarenes. This relationship brought huge controversy for him during his lifetime but, along with his anticlericalism, was later erased in public memory.

The Nazarenes were the first new religious movement or sect to arise in Hungary after the 16th century, distinguished for their rejection of the priesthood, infant baptism and transubstantiation as well as for refraining from military service and politics, and refusing to take an oath.⁴⁵ The bulk of the converts were found in southern Hungary where they attracted members of numerous ethnic minorities – the Orthodox Serbs being the most prone to conversion. The success of Nazarene proselytizing in matters religious lay in the combination of their communitarian morality, work ethic, the proximity of their beliefs to older folk-notions of religion, and a gripping emotionalism. They used everyday language in their services and Serbian Nazarenes spread and read the Bible in the vernacular as translated by Vuk Karadžić and Dura Dančić. Furthermore, Serbian converts were attracted by the Nazarenes' anticlericalism and lay-centered religion. They were especially nurtured by its criticism of the common laxity of nominal Christianity, the idleness of the clergy and especially the decay in the Orthodox Church. Disassociating themselves from the Orthodox and other established churches described in this way, everyone willing to join them was offered an opportunity to learn to read and write and also to speak about as well as interpret their own spiritual experience. A great

44 Sević (1902).

45 On the Nazarenes see Aleksov (2006).

share of the enormous success of the spread of the Nazarenes was attributed to Zmaj for his beautiful translation of their hymnal, the Zion's Harp, which appeared in 1878.⁴⁶ These were the first religious hymns in the vernacular in the Serbian Orthodox Church's services. The earlier hymns and translations from Greek into Church Slavonic were often incomprehensible and, as even priests would confirm, did not satisfy people's religious longings. When Nazarene hymns appeared in Zmaj's translation, he was already one of the most beloved poets whose verses many Serbs knew by heart and accepted as folk poems. Approaching Serbian villagers, the Nazarene preachers were now recorded reciting Zmaj's hymns from their songbook in place of theological explanations.

The Serbian Church was scandalized and launched a campaign against Zmaj, blaming him for covetousness and sacrilege committed out of sheer material interest. The hierarchy of the Serbian Metropolitanate boycotted Zmaj and the seminarians wondered how to admire the popular poetry of a heretic. Church accusations of Zmaj's greediness as the reason for his involvement with the Nazarenes were absurd to say the least, considering his position in literary establishment. The acceptance of Zmaj's hymns, as was pointed out in a booklet by a rare supporter, can easily be explained by his own religious poetry which shares many of the same motifs as the Nazarene hymns, such as condemnation of church ritual, clericalist mischief and a general contempt of religious intermediaries.⁴⁷ Yet unlike Tolstoy, Zmaj never broke away from the Orthodox Church. In his statement responding to attacks many years later, Zmaj was sorry if his translations of the Nazarene hymns were used to the detriment of the Orthodox Church, but remained firm in his belief that they were beautiful, sincere and truly devotional – asserting that they could be beneficial for the Orthodox Church as well. Moreover, although he praised the religious and literary quality of Nazarene hymns, Zmaj never wrote a word defending the Nazarenes from the constant maltreatment by both civil and church authorities; obviously fearing the political consequences of a mass fall away of Serbs to the ranks of sectarians. This lack of reaction is illustrative of how Zmaj and Liberals readily sacrificed their views for the national cause. The domination of the *raison d'État* or *raison de la nation* in the attitude towards the Church brought much success to the Liberals and later their radical splinter group as they attained power in church institutions and transformed the Serbian Church's autonomy for their cause. Yet their success was bitter. The importance of Serbian autonomy was increasingly marginalized by the Hungarian Government, leading to its abolition in 1912. Moreover, the struggle over church autonomy as the chief preoccupation of Serbian secular parties contributed to the identification of church and nation in clerical and conservative discourses, which was finally cemented in the interwar period.

46 Harfa Siona (1878).

47 Maksimović (1911).

In the new circumstances the church hierarchy reversed all gains made by the Liberals. A series of reforms progressively abolished the participation of lay people, culminating in the Serbian Orthodox Church being the sole among Orthodox churches in which the hierarchy had all the power while the lower clergy and lay people had none. A century later, Serbian nationalism was much more clericalist; belonging to Orthodoxy and, especially, the institution of the Serbian Orthodox Church made up the core of self-identification.

RECEPTION OF ZMAJ IN HIS LIFETIME – AND POSTMORTEM

Zmaj's poetry and visions expressed in verse reached the common folk, or at least its literate portion, through the most common reading matter of the time – calendars and almanacs. The calendar with the widest circulation, *Orao* [Eagle], introduced a selection of Zmaj's poetry in 1875 with the title *Great People's Poet*, a sort of *terminus post quem* for dating Zmaj's immense popularity as well as an inspiration for the title of this study.⁴⁸ Zmaj became a synonym for the poet and his poetry became the property of the people. Many of his poems were sung as popular songs whose origins had been forgotten. His poetry was extensively translated into Hungarian and German and even spread across the ocean when in 1894, the most distinguished scientist of Serbian origin, Nikola Tesla, published a collection of Zmaj's poems in America.⁴⁹

The literary establishment and critics were more restrained. The Croatian writer Jagić criticized Zmaj as early as 1867 for spending his talent on humorous and ephemeral political poetry instead of writing serious lyrics.⁵⁰ In 1893 one of the first Serbian professional literary critics, Ljubomir Nedić, opened the period in which Zmaj's work was denied recognition of any artistic value and poetic talent.⁵¹ For Nedić, Zmaj was more of a „versificator,“ a virtuoso in assembling rhymes and producing prose in verses, than a poet or an artist. Nedić rejected Zmaj's playing on words and his use of sophism and syllogism – all deemed to be products of the mind and not of emotions which should be the chief inspiration for poetic imagination. Zmaj's satirical verses on political issues that made him so famous now brought him the sharpest criticism. Despite acclaim in popular circles, Zmaj was admitted into the Serbian Royal Academy of Sciences only in 1896 after several failed attempts. Some distinguished academics opposed this decision, criticizing Zmaj's populism, radical republicanism and his poetry which they perceived as ephemeral. The President of the Academy, Milan Milićević, in his *laudatio* in the

48 Maticki, (1990), p. 526.

49 *Songs of Liberty and Other Poems* (1897); see also Tesla (1894).

50 Milinčevtó (1989), p. 221.

51 Ljubomir Nedić (1893).

presence of both the Serbian King and the Montenegrin Prince, emphasized Zmaj's extraordinary contribution to children's poetry.⁵² This portrayal of Zmaj as mainly a children's poet, established at the end of the 19th century, has remained unquestioned until the present.

The celebrations of Zmaj's anniversaries – occasions for both literary figures and common people to pay respect and confirm his status – were also marred by incidents, not just in Zagreb as we saw, but also in his native Novi Sad. The celebration organized by *Matica srpska* in 1899 turned into the greatest scandal of Serbian literary history. Zmaj's long-time political and literary companion, Laza Kostić, was chosen to deliver the *laudatio* but instead he delivered a bitter pill for the festive audience, stunned by its unusually critical tone. Kostić later wrote a whole book to clarify and justify his position, unleashing a debate which continued for more than a century. Many

Serbian writers and literary critics felt the responsibility to take a stand.⁵³ In his study, Kostić distinguished between Zmaj the nightingale, the poet of the soul, and Zmaj the dragon, prosaic and in service of daily politics. Eventually the dragon consumed the nightingale, lamented Kostić, since Zmaj did not understand and did not want to understand the difference between two kinds of passions – the transient folk passion (or the momentary uproar of the plebs), and the eternal, primal passion of the poet (or the inspiration and aptitude for poetic passion). Kostić warned that language is an organism that cannot be negotiated, as Zmaj thought, for the good of the people. In order to stress rhyme with his laconic word choice, Zmaj, according to Kostić, destroyed many a trope and poem with his carelessness, laziness and slovenliness. Furthermore, his „folklorism“ often buried him in the conventionalities of the form. More bitterly, Kostić rebuked Zmaj's political judgments, his obsession with traitors, and lack of principle. Kostić illustrated this with Zmaj's staunch opposition to the death penalty while at the same time wishing only death to the „Turkish occupiers“ in his patriotic poems. Zmaj even advocated the conversion of Slavic Muslims, which also ran against his own motto of the Serbian nation being above the religious divide.

At the beginning of the 20th century, Zmaj was almost unanimously rejected by the first Serbian modernists who generally turned away from what were considered national and stale literary forms. They were looking for international models, eternal themes and global issues as well as classical or foreign forms. In the most authoritative anthology of Serbian poetry which appeared in Zagreb in 1911, and which was, according to its author Bogdan Popović, based on purely aesthetic criteria, Zmaj did not fare well. The only exception to this initial rejection after Zmaj's death was literary critic Jovan Skerlić, who praised Zmaj's poetic activism and described him as the most

52 Vukčević (1983).

53 For the synthesis of conflicting views on Kostić's book, see Vuković (1984) and Udovički (1983).

capable representative of the literature which was needed by the Serbian people to satisfy their thirst in this idealistic epoch. Skerlić also regretted that Zmaj „squandered his poetic talent in many little coins that he spent on people’s daily needs.“⁵⁴ Nevertheless, it was Skerlić who set the tone for the later acceptance of Zmaj in the Serbian cultural and literary canon, to considerable effect in the interwar period. The new Yugoslav state legitimized its existence through the noble legacy of writers and other proponents of South Slav unification. Zmaj was clearly singled out for his prophetic vision. Critics, school curricula and publishing houses were put to use to construct the Serbian national literature and provide reasons for a nation to associate politically. The literature was endowed with the special mission of forging unity and acting as a substitute for religion, not because the Yugoslav public was highly secularized, but because of its multi-confessionalism and the legacy of bitter religious hatred. On the occasions of the 25th anniversary of Zmaj’s death in 1929, and the centenary of his birth in 1933, the Ministry of Education ordered all schools to hold lectures on Zmaj. At the same time special ceremonies were held in Belgrade and Novi Sad and literary and other journals dedicated special issues to his memory. Commemorations were accompanied by publication of an edition of Zmaj’s collected works. It was clearly the context rather than the literary value of Zmaj’s poetry that was celebrated. The key role was played by literary professionals who offered a new Yugoslav and celebratory reading of Zmaj. So for example, Ivo Andrić, the only Yugoslav Nobel Prize winner in literature, rejected the discussion of the artistic value of Zmaj’s poetry. Instead he praised it as „instrumental for any child who from his verses discovered the magic of the rhyme, learned the basic human values, developed first emotions and thoughts and prepared generations after him for adulthood and creation.“⁵⁵ The great novelist Crnjanski also dismissed the characterization of Zmaj as an outdated poet, insisting on the educational, national and social value of his poetry which immortalized the glory and the pain of Serbian and Yugoslav liberation, stressing:

Our people had a poet who could sing what the whole people felt – one for all. He was political but whatever he touched he made poetic.⁵⁶

Although his *oeuvre* might not be perfect, insisted Crnjanski, Zmaj was perfect in the purity of his experience and representation of the period in which he created. Respected literary scholar, Anica Savić Rebac, deemed Zmaj’s politics and ethics indivisible, his freedom as both national and individual, his equality as both political and social.⁵⁷ The fact that someone who was a Republican, anti-clericalist and virtually a socialist (in Savić Rebac’s

54 Quoted in Stajić (1933), p. 150.

55 Andrić (1997), pp. 167–169.

56 Crnjanski (1966), p. 42,

57 Savić Rebac (1988), pp. 403–406.

understanding) became the most beloved poet of Serbian society of the second half of the 19th century was the highest compliment this society could give. Admitting that Zmaj was courting his audience with nationalist ideas and tone as well as his attachment to folklore and traditional singing, Savić Rebac stressed his libertarian vision and the sense of latent revolt present in his poems. Zmaj's biographer Radivoje Vrhovac dismissed earlier sharp criticism which focused on the shortcomings of Zmaj's poetic language, interpreting it as a natural phase in the literature just being formed and oriented towards practical and non-aesthetic goals on its way to higher and purer forms of art.⁵⁸ Another of Zmaj's biographers, Stajić, celebrated the renaissance of Zmaj's cult, attributing it to „the people who knew to appreciate not only the poetry which is instinctive, subconscious, fantastic, but the poetry that described cultural, national and social life, fed on that life and kept it like salt that would not allow it to become insipid.“⁵⁹ The people needed Zmaj's poetry like daily bread, claimed Stajić, insisting that the nation without such literature is broken and insecure. If Zmaj was a people's poet before, after the Great War and the unification of South Slavs he was institutionalized as their apostle, missionary and prophet. Thanks to his efforts, many a political and personal conflict was resolved. A new illusionary picture of the past was created which obliterated the futility of Serbian political life under the Monarchy, the weak results of Serbian cultural nationalism, and the ever deteriorating demographic and economic situation of Serbs in Hungary. Stajić praised Zmaj as a fighter and celebrated him together with Miletić (the greatest hero of Yugoslavia), naming them the Yugoslav Achilles and Homer respectively.⁶⁰

After the Second World War, Zmaj's position in the literary canon remained basically unquestioned but new explanations were added to account for the changed political circumstances in socialist Yugoslavia. During the war, the Partisan resistance movement took up Zmaj's verses as a wake-up call once more. Their pugnacious outcry had lost no force, according to one contemporary, as freedom again became the basic human longing. The official instruction of Yugoslav partisans on how to perform Zmaj's patriotic poetry during the war offered the explanation:

The struggle of our people against Turkish rule had many similarities with our contemporary struggle against fascist invader; except for the fact that then the fighters-avengers were called hajduks and not partisans. Common to both of them was that they were imprisoned, tortured and murdered while their families were persecuted.⁶¹

58 Vrhovac (1933), p. 13.

59 Stajić (1930), p. 103.

60 *Idem.*, p. 110; Milutinović (1933) compared Zmaj's role to that of Hugo in the French and Carducci in Italian literature.

61 Radišćó (1983), p. 457.

Literary critic, Živan Milisavac, responsible for editing Zmaj's work and maintaining his aura in socialist Yugoslavia, maintained that his greatness emanated from the greatness of the idealist epoch which produced him and his *oeuvre* and that he stood to compensate for the unfulfilled ideals of his time.⁶² In 1955, the first literary journal for children was founded under Zmaj's name. Two more editions of Zmaj's collected works appeared in 1966–1968 and in 1975. Previous criticism was moderated as diametrically opposed opinions were reconciled by recognizing the truth in both of them. Zmaj's poetry was described as a bridge between folk epic and modern individualist artistic and poetic expression. Contemporary poet Ljubomir Simović condemned the spirit of previous epochs for not being able to fully appreciate Zmaj's verses in which he found elements of all later trends in poetry; from modernism to Dadaism and surrealism, absurd humor, and a Kafkaesque apocalyptic vision of the world.⁶³ In Zmaj's poems on death and madness, nothingness and apathy, Simović saw the Serbian predecessor of Baudelaire, and in his political and satirical verses Simović saw the Serbian Brecht of the 19th century. The teleological view of Serbian history remained unquestioned and Zmaj's role crucial in justifying it. Simović singled out a few of the poems as still relevant and valuable – such as those condemning traitors or those warning Serbs not to fall victim to foreign influences or to assimilation because the Serbian people still faced the same problems as in Zmaj's times. Moreover, there are nowadays numerous attempts to rediscover and remake Zmaj as a nationalist and Orthodox poet, divorce his poems from their context and use them to foster feelings of national and religious belonging among children.⁶⁴

At the same time there are a few voices challenging the philological principles and folkloric purism that determined for so long the interpretation and appreciation of Zmaj's poetry.⁶⁵ They target Zmaj's use of epic poetry formulae, which were formulated in completely different social settings, or more generally the way Romanticists employed the spoken language. They view Zmaj critically for his contribution to the canonization of the forms of folk poetry, which reduced the national poetic legacy and led to the complete disappearance of the older poetic tradition. As Miroslav Jovanović recently stressed in his study on Karadžić's legacy, the reduction and simplification of Serbian culture and literature to popular oral (patriarchal) culture fortified political myths that celebrated rural and *volkisch* culture while suppressing urban traditions and culture. It also hindered the formation of a continuous and encompassing cultural legacy, and fostered the rhetoric of political populism and even anti-intellectualism.⁶⁶ Recent nationalist revisionism in Serbian historiography abandoned interwar celebrations of Zmaj's endeavors

62 Milisavac (1967).

63 Simović (2001).

64 Savić (1996); Hadži Kangrga (1983).

65 Koljević (1983); Bogert (1996); and Milincević (1984).

66 Jovanović (2002).

at Serbo- Croatian unity and offered a different point of view. Vasilije Krestić discredited Zmaj as an idealist, not able to see that the whole oppositional struggle of Serbs in Hungary was futile, reaffirming the pro-Hungarian stance of the Serbian elites and the Church hierarchy in Croatia. Krestić claimed also that any reconciling stance towards Croats proved not only damaging, but even detrimental.⁶⁷

Zmaj, the great People's Poet, could never have envisaged that his poetry would see so many uses and conflicting interpretations. His poems were re-contextualised after his death as new extra-literary contexts and political discourses privileged some over other ideas found in Zmaj's verses. In order to demonstrate the constructivist, manipulative and historically dependent and contingent appropriation of literature as part of national identity politics, this chapter has placed them side by side with the „original“ text: namely the evidence from Zmaj's life, thoughts and literary work. The biographical sketch showed both Zmaj's great and liberating thoughts and his grave errors and misjudgments. More relevant for subsequent reinterpretation, it corroborated the multitude of ambiguities and paradoxes in Zmaj's ideas and poetry, which allowed room for the numerous uses and abuses. The story of how this dynamic interplay unfolded in the case of a popular Serbian poet with a national aura is, however, only one part of the historical process through which national identity is articulated and negotiated in time and space.

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67 Krestić (1987), p. 53.

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