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## Radovan and Homer – a Note on the epic Style in Medieval Art

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*The study is dedicated to one of the key monuments of Croatian art, the lunette of the portal of Trogir Cathedral made by Master Radovan and dated 1240. It contains an in-depth analysis of the subject-matter, form and content of the lunette, taking into consideration traditional iconography, and Radovan's familiarity with the drama of the medieval church. In particular, attention has been accorded to Radovan's use of formulaic materials in the light of the research conducted by Millman Parry and Albert Lord into the question of the oral tradition in epic poetry. It is concluded that such an approach may deepen our understanding of Radovan's art within the epic style of the Middle Ages, and his position as a truly significant artist at the very end of the Romanesque period.*

**Key words:** Croatia, Master Radovan, Trogir, Romanesque sculpture, epic poetry, oral tradition, Millman Parry, Albert Lord, Homer

THE CROATIAN people are allegedly very proud of their past. But when it comes to the material evidence thereof, their attitude is dubious at best. This holds equally true for both the general public and the scholarly community. In terms of artistic heritage, there are entire periods or regions which have been scarcely studied at all, and, in terms of theoretical justification, several decades ago a proposal was put forward to consider Croatian art a provincial, peripheral, and frontier phenomenon, making a virtue of its alleged modesty and humility. Such self-abasing ideas are an excellent illustration of what Mislav Ježić has correctly identified as the “Croatian despondency” complex which maintains that everything Croatian is backwards and boorish, neither worthy of attention nor preservation. Needless to say, there are provincial, peripheral, and borderland phenomena within any cultural sphere or artistic circle, and the proponents of the “positive modesty” of Croatian art either disregarded or had no knowledge of the major monuments produced on the territory of Croatia or by Croatian artists in the past. The fact is that Croatia has its share of “great” monuments, but as it was in many periods of the past demographically less developed than, say, Italy, Germany, or even Hungary, there were fewer economically powerful patrons and a smaller public, so the great art was represented by a limited number of monuments, which, however, were as great, as cosmopolitan, and as modern (if not even more so) as in any other European community. In fact, when a given situation was ripe, a powerful patron present, and funds available, Croatia could produce works on par with any other community.<sup>1</sup> There are only two cathedrals in medieval Slavonia, as there were only two diocese: Zagreb and Pécs.<sup>2</sup> One of the diocese even had a con-cathedral Church of the Holy Spirit in Čazma! When faced with an existing and well-funded project our milieu was quite capable of responding by finding the best artists available to produce masterpieces such as the Buvina Doors, the towers of St.

Mary in Zadar or of the Cathedral of Split with its sculpture, the portal of Trogir Cathedral, the churches in Topusko, Bijela and Nuštar, the rose in Čazma, the chapel at Medvedgrad, and Zagreb Cathedral, to list just a few most obvious world-class monuments from the high medieval period.

Prominent on this list is the lunette of the portal of the Trogir Cathedral, signed by a certain Master Radovan and dated 1240. Ever since 1972, I have been interested in the art of the Master within my general interest in the rise of the monumental, epic, style in the Middle Ages. I would like to emphasize, as I have done in the past, that the focus of my interest was Master Radovan, and not the so-called “Portal of Radovan,” which is an awkward patchwork of fragments crafted by various hands over the course of three centuries and in three major styles. It involves the presence of two top artists, Radovan and Niccolo of Florence, two decent artists, the master of Adam and Eve, and the artist whom I have called “The Master of Ugly Faces,” and several lesser but still capable and amusing Romanesque and Gothic hands.<sup>3</sup> Attempts to reconstruct the portal, in my opinion an futile endeavour, have, however, deflected attention from what I consider crucial: identification and appreciation of the contribution of an artist of genius, best represented by the centrepiece of the portal – the lunette. The text below constitutes an attempt to contribute to a better understanding of Radovan’s art and its place within the epic, monumental style of the Middle Ages.

I hasten to say that I sincerely appreciate the contributions on the monuments I cited above made by scholars such as Ljubo Karaman, Cvito Fisković, Duško Kečkemet, Josip Belamarić, Ivan Babić, Josip Stošić, Ana Marinković, Anđela Horvat, and so forth. But the fact remains that none of them has been a topic of a recent dissertation, nor of a modern, thorough monograph study.<sup>4</sup> Something is obviously wrong. Are we really afraid of coming to grips with serious issues, and satisfied with publishing “safe” lists and catalogues? After all, the tower of St. Mary is an extremely unusual “Lombard” tower, the tower of the Cathedral in Split is a quintessential Romanesque tower (among the sculptors who worked on its embellishment, sev-

1 Karaman 2001, *passim*, and especially 181-182 (closing remarks by R. Ivančević), Goss 2007, pp. 411-412, Goss 2005, pp. 92-93, Ježić 2006, p. 472. The research for this article was conducted as a part of MZPŠ project 009-1300623-0946, “Romanesque Art between the Sava and the Drava Rivers and European Culture.” I also thank the Cultural Monument Preservation Office in Split for their kind help with the illustrations.

2 The subsequent establishment of the diocese of Srijem and Đakovo are minor events compared to the role of Zagreb and Pécs.

3 Goss 1976, pp. 85-86, Goss 1980, pp. 34-36.

4 Ms. Marinković’s model study of the tower of St. Mary in Zadar in her master’s thesis at the Central European University comes closest to that ideal. Yet, a study integrating the tower within a broader European context is still missing.



Luneta portala trogirске katedrale (foto: Ž. Bačić)

eral were top European late Romanesque artists), the Romanesque cathedral in Zagreb must have been one of the most sumptuous among the buildings of its kind in the Carpathian basin, and Buvina's Doors are the best among preserved wooden doors in Europe.<sup>5</sup> Master Radovan belongs to this illustrious Pleiad as the greatest bard, a true Homer of an epic art that had been developing in Europe, by Radovan's time, for close to two centuries. Studying this epic component and its significance may, in my opinion, significantly contribute to an understanding of the place of Master Radovan in the Romanesque Europe.

Memory is a very personal phenomenon, closely tied to the course of one's life. It is, according to *The Oxford English Dictionary*, "a faculty by which things are remembered; the capacity for retaining, perpetuating, or reviving the thought of things past."<sup>6</sup> These "things" may be people, objects, feelings, events – things both material and immaterial. As a personal phenomenon, memory is subject to the vicissitudes of human nature. It is unstable, it changes, it shifts its focus, it wanes; as the time goes by, it keeps losing the battle with its chief enemy – forgetting. With the departure of the body within which it is stored, it disappears, also.

5 And yet not even mentioned in a recent survey of Romanesque doors by Barral i Altet, 2006.

6 The Compact Edition 1971, p. 881.

Human beings are, however, social beings, and thus some of their memories may be transferred to a community. A sum of such shared memories creates a collective memory, which can be codified and thus made permanent. By codification (permanent storage) memory is kept alive and transmitted – through words, images, sounds. Repositories include archives, libraries, collections, museums, chronicles, films, photographs, data storage; also rituals, commemorations (anniversaries, public monuments), national holidays. Together they make up the group's tradition, history, and identity.

Group memory is in principle permanent, uninterrupted, and endless. Yet it can also change, acquire new foci and interpretations, erase this, highlight that. It is subject to change as (if) the group itself changes. "*Deletio memoriae*" is a horrible punishment.

Let us consider for a moment the question of memory and contemporary or quasi-contemporary artists. It appears that most of what one does, unless done in front of a model (in a broadest sense of the word possible, from a portrait to a geometric construction), is done "from memory." How about an artist from the past dealing with a typical, codified subject of his group, for example a Christian artist painting or sculpting, say, the Nativity. He may copy a model ("a standard or example for imitation or comparison," "worthy of imitating," "something to

be imitated;” Dictionary.com, *sub voce*) more or less faithfully. He may use several models as sources on the basis of which he would make his composition. One artist may copy the subject-matter more faithfully than form, another may do the opposite. In fact, the formal aspect would be more open to variation, as the subject-matter is usually rather strictly defined. An artist’s originality, his greatness, would be primarily revealed in the formal aspects of his work, as there is less opportunity for innovation in terms of the subject-matter. Some ingredients must always be there! The word which describes such repeated codified pieces of communication is, of course, formula (“any conventional method of doing something”, or “a method of doing or treating something that relies on an established, uncontroversial model of approach;” Dictionary.com, *sub voce*).

How does “formula” relate to “memory”?

It certainly codifies a certain tradition, thus it is an important tool for preserving memory. As such it is supposed to be very rigid, although it can also change, or even disappear. It might be useful here to borrow some insights from literary historians, in particular the students of epic poetry. What I primarily have in mind is the research done by Millman Parry and continued and completed by Albert Lord, as I see it quite applicable to some aspects in the visual arts, in particular for those periods and areas which reveal a strong reliance on formulaic material. Parry and Lord have established that epic poetry contains a large number of repeated verbal units, the smallest containing a word or two (they call it “formulae,” (e.g. δῖος Ἀχιλλεύς, Divine Achilles), a line or a ος δὲν κείναξ νδρωδες τε sentence (“formulaic expression,” e.g., Ἄτρεϊ Ἀχιλλεύς, Atreides, the ruler of the people, and the Divine Achilles), and of several lines (themes, e.g., assembly, sacrifice, arrival of messenger, reading of a letter, etc.).<sup>7</sup> The formulaic and repetitive nature of such units makes memorizing of long texts much easier, and they also serve as fillers and ornamentation as necessary. An outstanding artist does not shun formulas but uses them in novel, inventive ways. To

paraphrase a recent author, the formulaic material is not fixed for ever, and a talented artist who had been exposed to the rules of the line (i.e., the form) since childhood could create his own ways of expression and sequences of events. A good author would distinguish himself exactly by deviations from what is regularly expected, and thus create new dramatic effects.<sup>8</sup> In my opinion, in a different medium, Master Radovan is exactly such an author.

The lunette of Radovan’s Portal in Trogir, the ultimate in Romanesque Nativities (ca. 1240), and the only Romanesque lunette having the Nativity as its central theme, is an entire canto of the Christian epic of the Life of Christ, Childhood section.<sup>9</sup> Formally, the lunette displays two areas – a rectangular box, *paesepe* (1), and the surrounding just barely continuous curving area (2). In terms of the subject-matter, area (1) contains two “themes”: the Nativity, and the Washing of the Child. Area (2) shows, to the viewer’s left, shepherds receiving the good news and hurrying toward the apex, where two athletic angels point to the crux of the composition, the eight point *stella*. This central area is the link to the section on the right where the Magi ride in, also watching the *stella*. In terms of standard Christian iconography, we thus have the Nativity plus the Washing of the Child (1), Annunciation to the Shepherds, the Cavalcade of the Magi, and, in a way, the preparation for the Adoration of the Shepherds (2). The choice of the “themes” follows the Byzantine model (Washing of the Child), but already here Radovan exercises a remarkable freedom while very creatively utilizing the semicircular area of the lunette (*stella*, angel left, angel right, shepherds, Magi).<sup>10</sup> A careful viewer would have by now noticed a figure not yet accounted for, a classically athletic youth to St. Joseph’s left, wearing vine branches in his hair, and identified by an inscription as a shepherd (*pastor*), thus announcing the appearance of his colleagues and their joint recognition of the Divine Child. The penetration of that figure within the central “box” thematically, in a very original way, links the two formal and narrative areas. The formulaic expressions further underline Radovan’s wide knowledge of models, and his originality. The Virgin appears to be in a stable (“in a humble little stable” to quote a Croatian Christmas song), but the new element is the bed, compatible not

7 The monumental research project was launched in the 1930 using the epic materials from the former Yugoslavia, primarily of the Sandak Muslims by Millman Parry, and it was finished after Parry’s untimely death by Albert Lord. Please see Lord 2000, chapters 3 and 4. Also, Rupnik-Matasović 2007, p. 187 for a brief and succinct summary. The examples used come from Lord 2000, p. 143, where the author reproduces the first 15 lines of the Iliad – all being formulae or formulaic expressions.

8 Rupnik-Matasović 2007, pp. 187-188. Also Dukat 2007, pp. 197-198, 201, 203.

9 For a detailed explanation, Goss 1976, pp. 93-97.

10 Goss 1976, loc. cit.



with the Byzantine but with the Western model. The three Magi from the East, traditionally identified by pointed Phrygian hats, are truly kings as made evident by the crown which they wear again according to the Western fashion (“The three Holy Kings of the blessed moment” again from Croatian Christmas song).<sup>11</sup>

It has been noticed long time ago that Radovan was familiar with the drama of medieval church. I wrote about it extensively in 1990, and here I shall proceed by simply summarizing my conclusions in the light of the present topic.<sup>12</sup>

The key formula of the display is the *stella* (“*ecce stella*”, “*ecce stella in oriente praevisa*”, of the medieval Ordo or Officium pastorum and Ordo or Officium stelle, the Play of the Shepherds, and of the Magi, not infrequently conflated). Radovan’s *stella* is obviously a stage prop as described by the *didascaliae* of medieval plays, cut out from some thin panel, most likely of wood, and dragged on a line across the scene leading the Magi to the *praesepe*, or carried on a stick which, as in Radovan’s rendering, also represents the ray of light, the *stella*’s shining tail.<sup>13</sup> The *praesepe* itself is a fine example of a formulaic expression, a box with curtains to be drawn aside by two *obstetrices* (“*duo clerici... item obstetrices cortinam aperientes, Puerum demonstrantes dicentes versum: Adest hic parvulus...*”) revealing an *imago* (“*Praesepe sit paratum retro altare et Ymago Sancte Marie sit in eo posita*”) of the Mother and Child, beautifully accounting for the stiffness of Radovan’s representation of the Virgin and Child, as here the artist represents manufactured, and not natural beings.<sup>14</sup> The *pastor* is representative of another formula fundamentally reworked by the artist. One would hardly recognize in that regal and immaculately dressed of the shepherds’ community if he had not been identified as *pastor* in writing. His position next to Joseph in the Washing is anything but usual. However, in the medieval play he may be the leader of the shepherds receiving the good news from the *obstetrices* who, having drawn the curtain, get busy with their primary task of washing the Child.<sup>15</sup> The angel at the apex of the

lunette is the “*puer ante corum in excelso*” accompanied by seven angels. In Radovan’s version the formula is doubled to accommodate both shepherds and the kings, and seven angels appeared on the original two voussours made by Radovan for the inner arch of the lunette. And, again in harmony with the plays, there are five shepherds in Radovan’s representation of the story.<sup>16</sup> To conclude, allow me to quote my own words from 1990: “Radovan was, I believe, familiar with an ‘Officium Pastorum,’ and an ‘Officium Stellae,’ or with a combined officium such as the Fleury play. As a sculptor in stone, Radovan, of course had to formulate such a language, as to achieve a maximum effect in a medium which becomes illegible and trivial if overburdened by narration and detail.”<sup>17</sup>

Formulae, formulaic expressions, and themes of the medieval play intertwine with those required by traditional iconography. One might even speculate that Radovan was trying to satisfy local “iconographic conservatives” by introducing the Washing of the Child, and at the same time using it in the manner of the medieval drama, thus creating, in fact, a totally novel dramatic effect!

One might maintain that the formulae of the medieval drama belong to the sphere of subject-matter. This is certainly so, yet, it seems to me that Radovan very successfully also incorporates some formal elements. “Any serious student of medieval culture knows that the medieval artist, be it visual or literary, does not accommodate some of the unities or continuities our contemporary audiences would take for granted... Rather... what counts is parallelism, identity of content or idea. Apparently unrelated units become clear members of a logical chain once the core idea uniting them is identified...”<sup>18</sup> This is true of Romanesque art, of sermons, of drama. Each presents a series of tableaux, exempla illustrating the central point, as Jerome Taylor established talking about the Daniel Play from Beauvais. Radovan should be commended for his convincing translation of the language of the medieval drama into that of visual arts, powerfully underlining the chief message of the portal – the arrival of Light born of a woman, or carried on a stick, which, as in Radovan’s rendering, also represents the ray of light, the *stella*’s shining tail.<sup>19</sup>

It is relatively easy to point out formulae, formu-

11 Ibid., pp. 94, Goss 1994, p. 131.

12 Goss 1994. The paper was written and presented at a conference in 1990.

13 Ibid., pp. 131-132.

14 Ibid., p. 132. Quotations come from the Rouen play and, as all other quotations, follow Young 1933, as indicated in the footnotes to Goss 1994.

15 Goss 1994, p. 132

16 Ibid., loc. cit.

17 Ibid., loc. cit.

18 Ibid., loc. cit.

19 Ibid., loc. cit., and Taylor 1977, p. 201

laic expressions, themes, etc. in the area of the subject-matter. We believe that a similar approach could yield profitable results also in the area of form, in as much as those two areas are separable. Or, rather, the key test should be the world of forms, as they constitute the language of fine arts. The literary artist, be it oral or in writing, uses words to conjure up images. The visual artist uses forms instead of words, i.e., the forms are his language. We may wish to translate that language into the language of words, sounds, or letters, but the process is difficult to follow on a general level, since each person, after all, reacts in a different way to an artistic stimulus, be it in the verbal or visual sphere. We can only guess at what the public “sees” when reading or listening to Homer, and, equally so, we can merely guess at what they “hear” when viewing Radovan. Some generalizations are possible, but the margin of error can never be totally shrunk. This should be borne in mind when embarking on the lines that follow.

Let us begin with the obvious. The key formal determinant is, of course, the semicircular frame of the lunette, reinforced by the position of figures and accompanying elements along the lunette's inner curve. On the right, these are the three Magi, whose heads together with a bushy tree clearly mark the curve of the lunette. The same role is taken on the left by two shepherds, a ram, a goat and a sheep, and, in the middle by the two angels and their wings, and the shepherd coming from the left. They, in particular the angels' wings, create a neat foil, a cocoon, to display another crucial circular element, the *stella* at the apex of the lunette. That foil also represents a counter-curve to the major curve motif. Not the only one. It is echoed by the lower portion of the angel whose body penetrates into the *paesepe*, and then by the position of the Virgin's body and by the imprint of the body on the mattress. These lower curves are not “perfect” as they flatten out on the right. However, the cocoon effect has been achieved in a very satisfactory manner by the positioning of the curtains, whereas the resulting small empty spaces have been carefully filled by the heads of the ox and donkey, by the ball-handle of the manger, and by an angel's staff penetrating the *praesepe* area. Everything is filled, but everything is clear, and there is no sense of overcrowding. A well coordinated *horror vacui*.

The hanging curtains make a knot slightly above the beam separating the manger from the Washing of the Child, Joseph and the *Pastor*. They fall in supple, both natural and stylized folds, and by their slight downward fanning out they act both as the frame for

the scene, and as a link to the world of the shepherds and the kings.

The scene beneath the *presaepe* seems to follow a somewhat different, more angular type of composition, which is quite appropriate for a representation which acts as a base. The heads of the four main actors form a frieze, and they turn toward the left in three out of four cases directing our attention to the main topic, the baby Jesus being thrust into the vessel to be washed. The two powerful midwives form a protective cocoon around the font and the baby, and then we realize that within this, apparently, strictly rectilinear area, curves in fact abound, foreshortened as podia for the manger posts, for Joseph, the Child, and the vessel, or shown in profile as in the pot held by the right hand midwife, and the water itself streaming out from it.

The central axis of the lunette runs through the *stella*, its handle, the head of the newborn to hit the left midwife's shoulder and pass just to the left of the baby Jesus's head. The importance of that centralized positioning of Christ and the light has been commented upon, and identified as crucial in explaining the message of the entire work, a message refuting the teachings of dualist heretics.<sup>20</sup>

The arrangement of forms in the shallow segment of the circle above the *praesepe* clearly illustrates Radovan's keen sense of varying well-known formulas. Both angels turn toward the incoming figures, but the position of their bodies is different. They both move and point toward the left, indicating thus the key element of the entire composition – the *stella*. On the left there is the upper portion of a shepherd's body stretching his arm toward his angel, whereas on the right his place is taken by uplifted fold of the curtain. Radovan is very keen on creating balance, one would almost say, symmetry, but equally so on not making it obvious. In the next lower zone, the flattening of the enveloping curves points our attention in a different direction, toward the right, toward the right hand, more important section of the rectangle containing the Washing. And now the daring – albeit a very gentle and unimposing daring – of the master comes to the fore. In a truly Romanesque formula, the *obstetrices* and Joseph around the Christ child and the

20 I proposed this in my 1976 article and reassessed it several times in the course of over 30 years. See Goss 1976, pp. 96-97, Goss 1978/82, 1980, 1983/written and presented in 1977, 1990/written and presented in 1983, 1994, 2003. One is also referred to Belamarić 2001, pp. 51, 54, 55.

font would have made a perfect centralized composition. The shepherd on the left, the *pastor* is indeed an intruder, but a welcome one, both in terms of the story and of form. He does not disrupt the narrative, on the contrary, he makes a link to what is to follow, and formally, repeating St. Joseph's pose (even though not his gestures) he gently integrates himself into the elongated, rectangular scene. A heraldic, three-person composition can be also read as an almost symmetric four person one.

As opposed to the texturally rich and totally filled area of the manger, the lower rectangle is composed in clear bold strokes, and in equally clear contrast of projections and recessions, solids and voids. Let us recall that the composition here does not follow a graven model as is the case of the Mother and Child, and the forms are simply much closer to nature. But there is also a very daring use of large empty areas increasing the sense of monumentality. One wonders if Radovan did it in order to allow for an environment in which one could read, unobstructed, inscriptions which are concentrated exactly in this area, and reinforce the main message of the images.<sup>21</sup>

In terms of that contrasting of the pictorial and sculptural, one can also juxtapose the left (more pictorial) and the right (more sculptural) segments of the lunette. On the right, the streaming in of the Magi (themselves a formulaic expression, each of the Kings being a formula unto himself) has been facilitated by another play on the counter-curve motif marked by the soil, dotted by the hooves of the horses in the same way as the curve of the lunette is marked by the Kings' heads. The result is a sort of an ellipse ending up in the bushy tree above, and the hind part of the third horse below. It is beautifully reinforced by the jars held by the Kings, and the heads and legs of their horses (formulas actually multiply and, so to speak, break into ever smaller units of formulaic material); and by the empty spaces between those legs on the one side, and between the Kings' heads on the other. Carried by the elastic power of the ellipse, the Magi happily ride in led by the magnificent *stella*. One can almost hear their voices: "*Ecce stella, ecce stella, ecce stella!*"

By contrast, the left side is texturally more com-

plex and denser, as if Radovan had wanted to show the organic mess of a natural man's life. As if early medieval fantasies had come back in that symbiosis of human and animal forms, an upward cascade struggling toward the glimmering *stella*; men, a dog, rams, goats, sheep; cooking their meal, sniffing, hitting the horns, taking care of the young, or simply and majestically resting. And even within this apparent disorder we recognize the old trick of Radovan's trade, two links in a chain of cocoon-like foil, each link defined by two bodies, of rams or men, with striking empty areas in between.

Thus Radovan has revealed himself as a true crypto-conservative. The semicircle of the lunette enforcing the "Law of Cadre" is the key compositional form;<sup>22</sup> the frieze composition of the Washing of the Child is also a well known compositional device of Romanesque art. By enframing his narrative bits within a curvilinear, circular and elliptical/oval frame, a time-honoured formula of classical, early medieval and Romanesque art, Radovan is certainly an heir to a well-established tradition. This tradition involves also such devices as heraldic composition of the two rams fighting, the two shepherds cooking, the two midwives bathing the child. Yet we do not experience traditional elements as rigid frames, as their impact is subtle and subliminal. This is even so when Radovan, on the jamb colonettes, uses scrollwork – *rinseau* – the hallmark of Romanesque art, as the frame to display his wonderful little sketches. Incredibly enough, that frame does not appear as a border, but as an extension of a true, living area, a magic forest inhabited by magic creatures. The way Radovan both honours and breaks the inherited formulas is also very well revealed by the group of the Washing of the Child which, as already noted, has escaped being a symmetrical, central composition, whereas the central void indicates the continuity of the action as this is the area the Baby Jesus is about to step in!

It has been pointed out that there are numerous anachronisms in Homeric poetry, that some of the weapons, military techniques, and burial customs follow the forms and procedures of much earlier, Mycenaean times. The famous "Catalogue of Ships" in the second canto of the Iliad could not have been

21 Those inscriptions: "*Institis involvit virgo qui crimina solvit*" below Mary's bed, and "*Vergitur in concha diluit qui crimina cuncta*" on the font in which the Christ is about to be washed reinforce the anti-heretical thrust of the program. See above note 20.

22 Long practice has convinced me that Focillion's famous "Law of Cadre" does not always apply in Romanesque sculpture. Recently, some doubts have been expressed, Barral 2006A, p. 50 as to the validity of the concept. Yet it does appear, in Radovan's work among others.

conceived without some similar model from the past. The same is true of words describing some of such objects or procedures. The public, obviously, did not mind. They were used to it, they understood it, they enjoyed it.<sup>23</sup>

Radovan also harkens back to an art of decorative forms which flourished in the pre-Roman and non-Roman (or provincial Roman) Europe, was fully established in the Europe of the great migrations, and blossomed out in a monumental form in the Romanesque. Scrollwork, the "Law of Cadre," heraldic composition, *horror vacui*, juxtaposition of "tableaux vivants" are time-honoured expressive devices of that art.<sup>24</sup> The miracle of Radovan's handling of that great, epic tradition is that we do not see it as an obsolete barrier to our viewing, understanding, and enjoyment, but as a live artistic solution endowing the actors of the drama with sense and meaning.

The Iliad has been called a typical warrior epic recalling the long gone age of the heroes, the Odyssey an epic of peace-time. The Iliad deals with philosophical, existential problems, the beauty of the Odyssey lies in pure narration. In spite of the differences, which at some points in the past led to theories of two different authors, Homer's authorship of both epics is generally accepted by contemporary scholarship.<sup>25</sup> The Odyssey may be less stark, less superhuman, less monumentally monotonous, but, just like Radovan, it is not sentimental, not descriptive, briefly, not "Gothic." The relief of Radovan's figures may be surprisingly high, or at least create an illusion of considerable projection, yet they are not Giotto's figures which require and create "real" pockets of space, but beings that move parallel to and in front of a flat, impenetrable background. Almost as an interlace sculpture, Radovan's relief has two planes, the action occurs at the surface, and an illusion of space is not even conceived of as a possibility.

As Odyssey, Radovan's lunette has the air of happy narration. Of course, Radovan has chosen to depict the most joyful, the most optimistic segment of the Christian myth, the arrival of the Light, the Salvation, so beautifully illuminated by the shining *stella*. The absence of spatial illusion coupled with "Radovan's cocoons" gives structure and sense to the actions of

his protagonists. They are always well-positioned, they know where they are going, and what their role is. They, as well as animals, plants, and objects may appear "real," but this is merely an appearance. Radovan does not even care much about individualization: there is an old man (Joseph, elder Kings, the old shepherd), the young man (the young King, the younger shepherds, even the Christ Child), the young woman (the midwives), and the icon (the Virgin); but if we look closely, we will notice the same facial traits in the young and old (Joseph and the *Pastor*), even female and male (midwives and angels). His plants and animals are creatures inhabiting and creating an imaginary landscape, Radovan's vision of Odysseus' Ogygia or the land of the Feaceans. Like Homer, Radovan was able to fill the old formulas with new and interesting form and content. As there is only one Iliad and Odyssey, so also there is only one Romanesque lunette with the Nativity as its central scene. As nobody complained about Homer's use of "outdated" materials, and formulaic expressions, so Radovan rightly signed himself on the lintel of the portal as "*cunctis hac arte preclarum*" – no idle boasting, as this kind of hubris would not have been tolerated if it had not been backed up by facts. Bishop Treguanus certainly would not have stood for that.<sup>26</sup>

Around 1100, there came into being in the West an epic style centring on the key Christian theme, the triumph of good over evil, reflected also in some of the key manifestations of the cosmic struggle in this world such as the Crusades, the Investiture Controversy, and the struggle against heresy. The great lunette at Cluny III, known only from fragments, represented the epic style at its purest; the tremendous lunette at Moissac – a Christian version of the heroic world of the Iliad – was probably its direct reflection. Here the actors are few, just those needed, the idea of eventual triumph expressed in its starkest, simplest, and most impressive form. Secondary, narrative, materials are relegated to the lower portions of the portal. But from that Romanesque Iliad we quickly proceed to the more picturesque albeit still tremendously powerful lunette at Autun, to an Odyssean portal at Vézelay, the exoticism of which is easy to understand within the context of the Crusades, or to the portal at Conques, with crowding of figures, reduction of their scale, an urge to narrate even amusing and spicy detail. From

23 Rupnik-Matasović 2007, pp. 188, 192-193.

24 See above note 19. Magnificent pages written on that topic by Jurgis Baltrušaitis, e.g., 1931, second edition (1986) still apply.

25 Dukat 2007, p. 202.

26 For the entire inscription as well as for one of the best assessments of Radovan's artistic quality, see Stošić 1994, pp. 71, 84. On Treguanus, Ivanišević 1994.



an epic for the intellectual, to a soap opera. Cluny is the headquarters of the great heroes of Christianity of its time, Conques is a popular pilgrimage place. Each is a masterpiece, but aiming at a different public. Each uses standard formulaic material, giving it the bent<sup>27</sup> it needs to communicate to its own milieu.<sup>28</sup> A sound example in the fine arts of what Albert Lord has identified as the “fluidity” of content in oral tradition.<sup>29</sup>

In the Iliad and Odyssey, Homer codified various earlier voices, enriched the formulas, perfected *the* poem to the point that somebody had the urge to write it down.<sup>30</sup> And that was the end of the oral epic tradition. Radovan also comes at the end of the varied, albeit essentially common tradition of the great epic style of the Middle Ages. He enriched the formulas to the point that we even fail to notice them, but in no way did he step over the line between the magic and the profane. It was an old tale, to paraphrase Lord, the telling of which was his own.<sup>31</sup> He has accomplished a truly Homeric feat, maybe of the Homer of the Odyssey, rather than the Homer of the Iliad, and there was no way on. The best-in-his-art Radovan has closed the book on one of the great periods of the Middle Ages. The future lay with the lyrical, passionate, descriptive something that monumental sculpture is not at all suitable to do. So from the Cathedral to the Book of Hours, from sculpture to painting, from epic to romance, from general to individual. Trying to make Radovan a “Gothic artist” misses the point, although, technically, he was aware of some of the practices of the “New French Style.”<sup>32</sup> We need not despair that he closes a period. In an art history free from evolutionary, natural science models, what counts is the valour at the moment, which, if true, should translate into valour forever.

I am aware that some of the insights underlying this paper have been made by my worthy predecessors. Still, I believe that the analysis proposed above

can only enrich our experience of one of the great works and great artists of Romanesque Europe. This analysis cannot be considered complete or finished, as I myself see a number of issues that could and should be raised, and maybe their raising could indeed move us toward a more elegant solution to a number of lingering problems in earlier medieval art. A question that arises in my mind, for example, is: What is the “oral tradition” in the world of artistic form?

It has been said that medieval art was the *Biblia pauperum*, the Bible of the illiterate. Or, one might venture to say, the masses did not know how to read, they did not understand the Latin of the official *literati*, but by learning to read the language of visual forms, they were no longer illiterate. I suspect that a renewed study of the great, epic works of the art of the high medieval period may yield results analogous to what Parry and Lord have done for the oral tradition in literature. And, to quote Lord’s, “it is the essential pattern and the significant detail that concern us, not the accidental and incidental,” of the art of other periods and other geographic areas.<sup>33</sup> But for a world in which literacy was for the majority restricted to reading the language of visual imagery, it may be indeed crucial. When did that “oral” stage end? Once the model book and mass production set in, as occurred already in the late thirteenth century? When the world of the formula becomes codified “in writing,” and applied to an “art for the masses,” whereas innovation is reserved for a special patron and a special artist working for the elite? When the printing methods make duplication of an image a routine matter? At this point, I simply do not know. Maybe a closer look at art having Parry’s and Lord’s monumental achievement in mind may shed some useful light on these issues.

27 All of this is covered in detail, with an extensive bibliography, in my new book *Four Centuries of European Art: A View from Southeast*, in print by Golden Marketing, Zagreb.

28 Lord 2000, p. 159.

29 *Ibid.*, pp. 154-157.

30 *Ibid.* p. 148.

31 From 1972 (when my 1976 paper was written and presented) I have maintained that Radovan visited the Royal Domain, but I am fully aware that this may never be proven. More on this in my new book mentioned in note 27.

32 See again Goss 1990, especially the introduction.

33 Lord 2000, p. 159.

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## Radovan i Homer – osvrt na epski stil u srednjovjekovnoj umjetnosti

**Ključne riječi:** Hrvatska, majstor Radovan, Trogir, romanička skulptura, epska poezija, usmena tradicija, Millman Parry, Albert Lord, Homer

NEKA OD najvrjednijih djela srednjovjekovne umjetnosti na tlu Hrvatske razmjerno su malo istražena. Ne umanjujući značenje vrijednih priloga ranijih istraživača, valja ustvrditi da spomenici poput zagrebačke katedrale, velikih samostanskih crkava u Topuskome, Bijeloj ili Nuštru, zvonik Sv. Marije u Zadru i zvonik splitske katedrale (uključujući skulpturu) kao i Buvinove vratnice nemaju recentnih monografija ili disertacija. Isto vrijedi i za umjetnost Majstora Radovana koji godine 1240. potpisuje lunetu portala katedrale u Trogiru, kao jedan od najvećih predstavnika epskog stila u umjetnosti srednjeg vijeka općenito. Razmatranjem upravo te epske komponente ovim se radom nastoji produbiti razumijevanje Radovanove umjetnosti i njezine uloge na samom kraju europske romanike.

Romanička umjetnost, posebice fasadna plastika, odavna je prepoznata kao *epski izraz*. Pritom se uglavnom dosta nejasno misli na njezinu monumentalnost, jednostavnost, snagu izražavanja. Na neke vidove srednjovjekovne (*epske*) umjetnosti može se uspješno primijeniti način analize epskoga pjesništva, kako to u svojem epohalnom radu čine Millman Perry i Albert Lord. Oni su prepoznali da se velik dio tijela epske pjesme sastoji od ponavljanih formula (riječ ili dvije), formulaičkih izraza (nekoliko riječi) i tema (nekoliko stihova, npr., vijeće, dolazak glasnika, gozba itd.). Formulaički materijal služi za lakše memoriranje pjesme, a i kao ukrasni umetak, a nadahnuti umjetnici ne izbjegavaju formule, već ih koriste na nov i originalan način. Vjerujemo da je Radovan upravo takav umjetnik.

Radovan se u izboru materijala obilno služi formulama ustaljenim u bizantskoj i zapadnoeuropskoj umjetnosti. Taj tematski formulaički materijal nadopunjuje se poznavanjem srednjovjekovne crkvene drame, *Officium stellae* i *Officium pastorum*, odnosno ovih dvaju oblika spojenih zajedno (najbolji primjer toga je *Officium* iz Fleuryja). Kao skulptor, Radovan je naravno morao prilagoditi svoje izbore mediju koji postaje nečitljiv ako ga se pretrpa pojedinostima.

Razmjerno je jednostavno utvrditi formule na

području naracije. No Radovana valja pohvaliti za odlično prevođenje literarnog materijala u svijet vizualnih oblika. Upravo svijet tih oblika konačan je test umjetničke vrijednosti djela, budući da se umjetnički jezik izražava kroz oblik. Analiza lunete pokazuje da je Radovan zaista u stanju preuzeti kompozicijske i oblikovne formule repertoara romaničke umjetnosti dajući im nov, originalan život, no, a to je bitno, ostajući unutar okvira ključnih elemenata koji određuju romaniku kao stil. Prostor se izražava paralelnim planovima, pokret se odvija paralelno s površinom prikaza, otkrivaju se heraldički motivi (*čahure*), vezanje ljudskih, životinjskih i biljnih elemenata u nizove poput vitica ili friza. Radovan se dakle otkriva kao pravi *kripto-konzervativac*, umjetnik na kraju stila kojim suvereno vlada, ali koji ne želi prevladati. Tradicionalni se materijal ne prepoznaje kao takav jer je njegov dojam vrlo suptilan i subliminalan. Radovan se oslanja na umjetnost dekorativnog ukusa koja je cvala u predrimskim i nerimskim (ili provincijalnim rimskim) krugovima, koja se u Europi duboko ukorijenila u doba seobe naroda i procvala u monumentalnom obliku u romanici. Vitice, zakon kadra, heraldička kompozicija, *horror vacui*, slaganje nizova “živih slika”, sve su to iskušana izražajna sredstva te umjetnosti. Začuđuje da Radovanovu primjenu velike epske tradicije ne doživljavamo kao zastarjelu branu našem promatranju i razumijevanju njegova rada i uživanja u njemu, već kao živo umjetničko ostvarenje koje daje nositeljima drame smisao i značenje.

Radovan je ostvario pravo homersko djelo, ne možda Homera *Ilijade*, nego Homera *Odiseje*. No kao što *Odiseja*, koja je manje monumentalna i manje usmjerena na temeljna pitanja postojanja, nije sentimentalna ni deskriptivna, ukratko, nije “gotička”, tako to nije ni Radovanova skulptura - premda je majstor, tehnički govoreći, poznavao neke od značajki francuske gotike. Radovan se nalazi na kraju niza velikih “epskih” ostvarenja romaničke skulpture koji započinje s lunetom crkve u Cluniju III, a završava upravo u Trogiru.

