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# The Role of South-Slavic Oral Poetry in Building Finnish National Identity

## *Le rôle de la poésie orale des Slaves du Sud dans la constitution de l'identité nationale finnoise*

Par Sonja Bjelobaba

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### Résumé

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In 1828, the Finnish national poet of Swedish origin Johan Ludvig Runeberg came for the first time across the South Slavic oral poetry. Peter Otto von Goetze's translations into German of the *Serbische Volkslieder* (1827) were literally lying on his floor. These songs about the Balkans under the Turkish rule were easily associable with the Russian occupation of Finland. He immediately started translating these songs to Swedish as well as writing his own poetry in the manner and style of South Slavic oral poetry. Several of his songs that were influenced that way became a basis for his position as Finnish national poet. Furthermore, the publication of Runeberg's translations *Serviska folksånger* (1830) drew attention to folklore in general and inspired his friend Elias Lönnrot to compile the Finnish national epic *Kalevala* (1835).

### Mots-Clés

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Poésie épique serbe, tradition orale, transferts culturels, représentations poétiques, identité culturelle.

# Texte intégral

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In texts about oral literature/orality and national identity, the emphasis is usually on the role of the native oral literature in building a nation's identity. Many nations have at some point turned to their local oral traditions in order to strengthen their national identity and develop their literature. But translations of oral literature can play an important part in that process as well. In this paper, I am going to demonstrate the role that translations of South Slavic oral literature have played in building Finnish national identity between 1828 and 1860.

In the fall of 1828, Johan Ludvig Runeberg, the Finnish national poet of Swedish origin, first encountered South Slavic oral poetry. Peter Otto von Goetze's collection of translations into German of the *Serbische Volkslieder* (1827) was literally lying on his floor. Its owner was Fredrik Cygnæus, Runeberg's good friend and roommate. Cygnæus, whose father got the book from the translator, had brought it with him when he came from St Petersburg that fall [1].

Under the influence of Herder's *Volkslieder*, Peter Otto von Goetze (1793–1881) undertook to publish a collection of translations into German of Slavic folksongs: *Stimmen der slavischen Völker in Liedern*. The first of the projected volumes, *Serbische Volkslieder*, with 67 lyric and four epic songs, came out in 1827. In the preface, Goetze specified that all the songs had been collected by Vuk Karadžić, whom Goetze had met in connection with Karadžić's visit in Petersburg in 1819 [2].

Runeberg immediately started translating these songs into Swedish, which was his native language and the language of the cultural elite in Finland at the time. Runeberg's pencilled annotations are still visible between the lines of the copy of the *Serbische Volkslieder* that he got from Cygnæus. In September 1830, he published nine translations in *Helsingfors Morgonblad* [3]. Three months later, all of Runeberg's 59 translations were published in a separate volume, *Serviska folksånger*, or 'Serbian folksongs' [4]. In the foreword, Runeberg divulged his source, stating his intention of adhering as closely as possible to the German translation, and quoting a large part of Goetze's translation. The concluding sentence reveals Runeberg's rationale behind translating those texts:

"I am certain that few will read them without being touched by the naïve prettiness of the short songs that open the collection, and without being carried away by the clear epic beauty that prevails in the four longer ones that conclude it [5]."

The interest in oral literature was nothing new in Finland: Finnish oral literature was presented in the 18th century by the Finnish scholar Henrik Gabriel Porthan in his *Disertatio de poësi fennica* (1-5, 1766-78). In 1817, the Finnish student Carl Axel Gottlund expressed a wish to collect Finnish oral songs into a

large epic, a wish that was fulfilled eighteen years later by Lönnrot, although he had no knowledge of Gottlund's aspiration [6]. Gottlund himself collected oral poetry and published two collections in 1818 and 1821. Five more volumes of Finnish oral songs were published by Zacharias Topelius between 1822 and 1831. Just a couple of months before Runeberg's encounter with the *Serbische Volkslieder*, Elias Lönnrot had set out on his first journey to collect Finnish oral literature. The publication of his *Kantele*, between 1829 and 1831, coincided with that of Runeberg's translation.

Of interest here is a similarity in form between Finnish and South Slavic oral songs. Besides the epic narrative form, both traditions have a variety of lyrical genres. By translating a collection where the lyrical songs dominated, Runeberg and his readers could connect these translations to the Finnish lyrical tradition and to the recently published *Kantele*. A couple of years later, Elias Lönnrot's national epic, *Kalevala* (1835), helped further emphasize this formal diversity through a mixture of epic and lyrical forms. In 1840, he published *Kanteletar*, a collection of lyrical oral songs. It is hard to say whether Runeberg's translations of South Slavic lyric oral poetry inspired his friend Lönnrot to further underline lyrical forms in *Kalevala*, but it is not unlikely: both of them were members of the same group of intellectuals that met every Saturday evening to discuss literature, folklore and politics, *Lördagssällskapet* [7]. Albert B. Lord, in his paper "The Kalevala, the South Slavic Epics, and Homer," has pointed some differences and similarities between Finnish oral and oral-derived poetry, South Slavic epics and Homeric epics [8]. He wrote: "The short Finnish songs, even the narrative ones, are more comparable to the South Slavic 'women's songs' than to the South Slavic epics." This is why it is appropriate to point out that Lönnrot actually got acquainted with that part of the South Slavic tradition through Runeberg's translations.

The interest for oral songs in Finland had thus existed for several decades before Runeberg's work, but one of the roles that South Slavic oral literature has played in Finland was to strengthen that interest in general. Oral literature from different parts of the world was translated: Runeberg himself published several translations in his journal *Helsingfors Morgonblad* between 1832 and 1836. Another illustrative example is the work of Julius Ferdinand Lundahl, whose motive to translate Russian oral songs, according to his own statement, was their resemblance with the South Slavic oral songs that he had read in Runeberg's translation [9].

Heightening the interest in oral literature in general was not the only role South Slavic oral songs played there. Serbian oral songs put Serbia on the cultural map of Europe. As a nation that was just trying to define its national identity, Finland was well aware of the Serbian success. The language situation in Finland at the time was complicated. Swedish was the language of the administration, culture and higher learning, but Finnish was the language of the masses. Efforts were made to create a culture based on the Finnish language and to raise its status. The discovery of South Slavic folklore was an indicator to

the Finns of the importance of turning to Finnish oral literature in order to get a place of their own on the European cultural map.

For some six centuries, until 1809, Finland was part of the Swedish Realm. Finnish provinces were represented in the Swedish parliament in the same way as all other Swedish provinces. As a consequence of the Russian conquest of 1808-09, the Grand Duchy of Finland was created as a separated Finnish political entity under Russian control. Songs about the Balkans under the Turkish rule could be associated with the Russian occupation of Finland: the Serbian people's fight against the Turks could easily evoke memories of the war in Finland a couple of decades earlier. Writing about a small nation's fight against a big empire was of course a bit dangerous in Finland under the rule of Tsar Nicholas, but the Serbs, being orthodox Slavs, had such a high reputation that Runeberg did not have to fear the Russian censor [10]. Runeberg could find similarities between the situation of the Serbs in the Turkish Empire and that of the Finns in the Russian Empire in the epic *Car Lazar i carica Milica*, 'Tsar Lazar and tsarina Milica'. Bo Pettersson suggested that it is possible that Runeberg, through the beauty of that song, learned how to unite a people through a lost war [11]. In 1848, Runeberg helped unite the Finns by publishing a collection of songs about the war in Finland in *Fänrik Ståhls Sägner*, 'Tales of Ensign Stal'. It is a well-known fact that Serbian oral poetry was read that way in other places, in Bohemia for instance [12]. Although politics was not his main reason to translate South Slavic oral songs, his readers, and most notably his readers in Sweden, certainly read these songs as a manifestation of Runeberg's patriotism against the Russian rule [13]. That kind of political reading of Runeberg's work as a translator is not undisputed. According to Matti Klinge, Runeberg, by paying attention to another Slavic nation, was trying to bring Finland closer to the Russian Empire [14]. Runeberg himself has not left any evidence of his political opinions, so it is hard to decide whether or not he had some hidden political motives to translate South Slavic poetry.

Through their influence on Runeberg's work as a poet, South Slavic oral songs had one more role to play in building Finnish national identity. South Slavic oral songs helped Runeberg define his own poetics. He understood that in the process of building a new Finnish identity, it was necessary to move away from Swedish literature. One way to do that was to find inspiration in a source that was unknown and unused in Sweden, namely, South Slavic oral literature. Shortly after he had read Goetze's translation, Runeberg decided to imitate oral poetry. The elements that he was trying to preserve in his translations were the same elements that he was later using in his own poetry: South Slavic meter, repetitive patterns, models of composition and so forth. His primary interest as a translator was not to introduce South Slavic culture, but to lay the foundations for his own poetical production, which he did not want to build on the same foundations as Swedish literature. In a letter to his friend Snellman, he sent six of his own songs with a comment: "Have you seen those Serbian songs? These are all in the same manner [15]." The letter shows that Runeberg's *Serviska folksånger* were meant to be read together with his own *Idyll och epigram*, 'Idylls and epigrams'. These 27 poems constituted a separate part of Runeberg's first collection,

*Dikter* ('Poems'). Besides *Idyll och epigram*, *Dikter* contained several separate poems, most of which had been written earlier, in the 1820s, and a long epic poem, *Svartsjukans nätter*, 'Jealous nights'.

The 1830s, when *Dikter* was published, was a period of transition from Romanticism to Realism in Swedish literature. While working on his first book, Runeberg was wrestling with the two opposite poetics [16]. The result was the metaphorical, romantic *Svartsjukans nätter*, that was firmly based in Swedish literature, and the simple, objective, oral-derived *Idyll och epigram*, strongly connected with South Slavic oral poetry. Today it is easy to realize that *Idyll och epigram* marks a new phase in Runeberg's production, but for his contemporary readers it was *Svartsjukans nätter* that was the main part of the collection [17]. While the reception of the *Svartsjukans nätter* was overwhelming, the reception of *Idyll och epigram* was rather cold. Runeberg had not yet published his translations of *Serviska folksånger* and his readers were unaware of the source of his inspiration. It was assumed by the critics that the songs were translations of Finnish oral songs and Runeberg's originality was questioned [18]. The fact that he had managed to write songs that were thought to be translations of Finnish oral songs helped to position him as the Finnish national poet a couple of years later. But that was not possible until he met the critics and explained that *Idyll och epigram* were no translations from Finnish.

As a first step in answering criticism, Runeberg published his translations, *Serviska folksånger*, that inspired him to write *Idyll och epigram*. But he didn't stop there. As a next step, he sharpened his pen and turned to criticism himself. Between 1832 and 1836, Runeberg worked as an editor for a new journal, *Helsingfors Morgonblad*. Already in the first number, he turned against the established poetics in Sweden. For a whole year, he criticized Swedish literature in a series of articles. His criticism can be seen as an attempt to separate Finnish literature from Swedish literature and to lay the foundations for a new Finnish literature. South Slavic literature showed him another way and he was now prepared to present his literary ideas to others. The new poetics that he used in *Idyll och epigram* had to be introduced to the public and the attack was his best defence against the accusation of not being original. In the same year, he turned once again to translations of oral songs from Herder's *Stimmen der Völker in Liedern*, amongst which there were three songs from the South Slavic tradition: Goethe's translation of "Hasanaginica," and two songs from Andrija Kačić Miošić's *Razgovor ugodni naroda slovinskoga*. Through translation, he was trying to introduce a literature that could serve as a model for a new national literature. In connection with a translation of Madagascan oral songs, he wrote:

"As far as I am concerned, I think that such pieces can give a more accurate picture of people's customs, lives, religion and being than long travel accounts, and even more than long modern poems can ever be able to do [19]."

Only, Swedish oral literature was not satisfactory:

"Even Swedish folksongs from a distant past, where you, if anywhere, would expect to discover a peculiar spirit, are so faint, colourless and unrepresentative that no other

country with an independent culture has produced something comparable in its weakness” [20].

This criticism of the Swedish oral songs might be seen as one more attempt to create a Finnish national literature by separating it from Swedish literature.

*Idyll och epigram* were not the only poems where Runeberg let himself be inspired by South Slavic poetry. Most of the works that he wrote during the 1830s have some connection with South Slavic oral literature. In *Graven i Perrho*, ‘The grave in Perrho,’ and *Molnets broder*, ‘Brother of the clouds,’ he uses once again the tensyllable meter as well as motives that he found in South Slavic oral poetry. The blood revenge described in *Graven i Perrho* originates from the Montenegrin song “Perović Batrić” (Vuk IV, 1), while Runeberg’s description of brotherly affection, in the same poem, can be connected to the description of the nine Jugović brothers in “Car Lazar i carica Milica”, ‘Tsar Lazar and tsarina Milica’ (Vuk II, 45). Several of his songs that were influenced that way became a basis for his position as the Finnish national poet.

Runeberg’s work as a translator – together with the high interest in folklore in general and the political reasons I mentioned earlier – prompted the publication of other translations of South Slavic oral songs to Swedish in Finland. In all cases, translations were made from German. It is interesting to note that although these songs were widely translated in almost all of Europe, including most of the countries of Northern Europe – Norway, Denmark and Finland – they were not translated in Sweden at all during that period: Samuel Ödmann’s translation of “Hasanaginica” from 1792 [21] was not followed by any other translation for more than a century [22]. The large amount of Swedish translations that were made by the Finns was probably enough to meet the needs for such translations in Sweden as well.

Runeberg’s nine translations from September 1830 were the first to be published in Finland. As early as in November – a month before Runeberg published the whole book *Serviska folksånger* – another translator, Axel Gabriel Sjöström, published his version of “Lijepo, ljepše, najljepše” (Vuk I, 619), from Goetze’s *Serbische Volkslieder* [23]. Runeberg’s translation of the same song appeared in his *Serviska folksånger* (“Den skönaste”, nr. 20). Runeberg was followed by a number of translators in the 1840s: K. L. Lindström published five translations in *Åbo Underrättelser* in 1841-42 [24], T. W. Forstén translated three songs in 1847 in *Morgonbladet* [25]. Three more songs were published anonymously in the same paper at the same time, possibly by Fredrik Berndtson [26]. Karl Collan published a series of translations in the calendar *Lärkan* in 1849 [27]. Most of these translations were translations of lyrical songs – a genre that had similarities with the Finnish national tradition. The exception was August Lundahl’s translation from Russian of “Dijoba Jakšića”(Vuk II, 98), which was published in the calendar *Aina* in 1850 [28]. Runeberg’s and Collan’s Swedish translations were used a couple of times as a source for further translations into Finnish.

In 1860, Karl Collan defended a thesis on Serbian ‘historical folksongs’. [29] This work, which concentrates on the epics, can be seen as an attempt to present the narrative tradition in South Slavic oral literature, as well as a manifestation of the political interest mentioned above.

Strongly influenced by the cultural nationalism of Herder, the Finns considered cultural consolidation to be the best strategy for strengthening their national identity. That was done in two ways: by turning to Finnish oral literature and by making a new literature based on non-Swedish foundations. As we have seen, South Slavic oral poetry had a small, but certainly important role to play in both of these strategies.

[9] *Helsingfors Morgonblad*, nr. 78, 13/10 1837.

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*Serviska folksånger* öfversatta af Joh. Ludv. Runeberg, Helsingfors 1830.

## Notes

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- [1] J. E. Strömborg: *Biografiska anteckningar om Johan Ludvig Runeberg*, vol. III: "Runebergs vistelse vid universitetet i Helsingfors", Helsingfors 1889, pp. 17f.
- [2] *Serbische Volkslieder ins Deutsche übertragen von P. von Goetze*, St Petersburg & Leipzig 1827, p. III.: "So waren auch die nachstehenden Lieder grösstentheils schon in dem Jahre 1819 übersetzt worden, und zwar die damals im Original noch ungedruckten nach den handschriftlichen Mittheilungen des zu jener Zeit in St. Petersburg anwesenden Herrn Wuk Steph. Karadshitch."
- [3] *Helsingfors Morgonblad*, nr. 72, 11/9 1830; nr. 73, 15/9 1830; nr. 76, 25/9 1830.
- [4] *Serviska folksånger öfversatta af Joh. Ludv. Runeberg*, Helsingfors 1830.
- [5] Ibidem, Förord: 'Jag är säker om, att ganska få skola läsa dem, utan att träffas af den naiva täckhet, som spelar i de små sångerna, som börja samlingen, och hänföras af den rena episka skönhet, som herrskar i de fyra större, hvilka sluta den samma.'
- [6] Lauri Honko: "Upptäckten av folkdiktning och nationell identitet i Finland", *Folklore och nationsbyggande i Norden*, ed. Lauri Honko, Åbo 1980, p. 37.
- [7] Fredrika Runeberg: *Anteckningar om Runeberg*, Helsingfors 1946, p. 55. Lauri Viljanen: *Runeberg och hans diktning 1804-1837*, Helsingfors 1947, p. 247-258.
- [8] Albert B. Lord: "The Kalevala, the South Slavic Epics, and Homer", *Epic Singers and Oral Tradition*, Ithaca 1991, s. 111.
- [10] Johannes Salminen: "Dettoleranta Turkiet", *Dagens Nyheter*, 7/9 2000.
- [11] Bo Pettersson: "Om Runeberg och mytbildning: Bonden Paavo igår och idag", *Finsktidskrift*, 1, Åbo 1999, p. 21.
- [12] Seet. ex. Nada Đorđević: *Spskohrvatska narodna književnost kod Čeha*, Novi Sad 1985, p. 6.
- [13] I.e. Runeberg's first reviewer in Sweden Johan Erik Rydqvist: "Serviska Folskånger", öfversatta af Joh. Ludv. Runeberg", *Heimdall*, nr 29, 21/7 1832.
- [14] Matti Klinge: *Den politiske Runeberg*, Stockholm & Helsingfors 2004.
- [15] *Serviska folksånger öfversatta af Joh. Ludv. Runeberg*, Helsingfors 1830.
- [16] See: Tideström, Gunnar: *Runeberg som estetiker. Litterära och filosofiska idéer i den unge Runebergs författarskap*, Helsingfors 1941, pp. 213.

[17] Johan Erik Rydqvist: "Dikter af Joh. Ludvig Runeberg", *Heimdall*, nr. 35, 21/8 1830; n 36, 28/8 1830; *Den svenske medborgaren*, den 27 och 30/8 1830.

[18] *Ibidem*.

[19] *Helsingfors Morgonblad*, 21/12 1832, nr 98: "För min del tycker jag att sådana stycken klarare ge bilden af ett folks seder, lif, religion och väsende än långa resebeskrivningar och ofta ännu längre moderna poemer någonsin mäktat göra."

[20] *Helsingfors Morgonblad*, 24/8 1832, nr 64: "Redan de från en ganska aflägsen tid härstammande Svenska folkvisorne, i hvilka man, om någorstädes, borde kunna upptäcka en egendomlig anda, äro så matta, färglösa och obetecknade, att icke ett enda land med oberoende cultur producerat något med dem i svaghet jemförligt."

[21] Alberto Fortis: *Bref om Morlackerna* [Af Abbé Albert Fortis]. Öfwersatte af Samuel Ödmann, Götheborg 1792.

[22] Alfred Jensen translated a couple of oral songs and verses in: *Slavia: kulturbilder*. Ny följd, Från Donau till Adria och Bosporen, Stockholm 1897. However, South Slavic oral songs were presented in reviews, id. Johan Erik Rydqvist: "Något om Ryska, Holländska, Spanska, Serviska och Magyariska poesin", *Heimdall*, nr 17, 23/4 1831 & nr. 19, 7/5 1831.

[23] *Tidningar ifrån Helsingfors*, nr. 87, 15/11 1830.

[24] *Åbo underrättelser*, nr. 85, 27/10/1841; nr. 87, 3/11 1841; nr. 89, 10/11 1841; nr. 98, 11/12 1841; nr. 14, 19/2 1842.

[25] *Morgonbladet*, 26/8 1847, nr. 63; 30/8 1847, nr. 64.

[26] *Morgonbladet*, 29/4 1847, nr. 32, s. 3-4.

[27] Karl Collan: "Serviska Folksånger", i: *Lärkan*. Poetisk kalender för 1849, ed. Emil Qvanten, Helsingfors 1849, s. 81-85.

[28] "Brödratwisten", *Aina*. Poetisk kalender 1851, Helsingfors 1850, s. 67-71.

[29] Karl Collan: *Öfversigt af Serviens historiska folksånger*, Helsingfors 1860.

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## Quelques mots à propos de : [Sonja Bjelobaba](#)

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Sonja Bjelobaba-Miladinović enseigne à l'Université de Göteborg et y prépare un doctorat sur le rôle de la poésie orale des Slaves du Sud dans la poétique du poète national finlandais, l'écrivain d'origine suédoise Johan Ludvig Runeberg. Ses recherches portent principalement sur la traductologie et la littérature orale. Travaux : "Funkcija inicijalne formule *Vino pije* u lirskom usmenom tekstu", in: Naučni sastanak slavista u Vukove dane: Beograd, 11-15.9.2002., Beograd 2004, pp. 109-118.; "Kod Hi ...

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