

“A Muse of the Salon”. A rediscovered poem from Laza Kostić and Serbian entertainment in the era of Romanticism

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ABSTRACT

The present article aims to analyse and contextualise a poem by Laza Kostić, published in 1865 in the magazine *Srbski letopis* [Serbian Chronicle] under the title *Beseda*. Both its title and the definition of its genre – an “allegorical drama without dialogues” – were seen as unusual by its contemporaries, provoking a lively debate in the press. This article attempts to analyse the poem in the context of the ambitions of young Serbian intellectuals to reform radically Serbian self-representation and entertainment in the age of national Romanticism. The paper relates the structure and topics of the poem *Beseda* to the so-called Serbian beseda [srpske besede] festivities, continuously organised since 1862. These events included music, choral performances, recitations, and dances, their ticket proceeds were donated to charitable goals. This study traces how this genre arrived from Prague through Vienna to Pest and travelled onward to Novi Sad, and other cities within the Habsburg Empire with sizeable Serbian populations.

The textual analysis of the poem focuses on the allegory of *Beseda*, its meanings and metamorphoses throughout the acts and scenes. The symbolism of the “allegorical drama” connects contemporary music, recitations, and dances from nineteenth-century bourgeois salons with (purportedly) ancient Serbian folk poetry. *Beseda*, as a fairy or muse, introduces various scenes from mythical medieval history, incorporating female figures of Emperor (Tsar) Dušan’s ‘golden age’, the episodes from the Kosovo cycle and the subsequent downfall of the Branković dynasty. The analysis pays special attention to the tragic figure of Mara Branković and the intertextual parallels with Károly Obernyik’s historical tragedy, *Brankovics György*. Like many beseda festivities of the 1860s, Kostić’s text promotes the Serbian National Theatre as a crucial Serbian national issue. The poem and the author’s commentary can be seen as part of an intensifying discourse on forms of

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urban entertainment which are suitable for national self-representation. The paper briefly reflects on this aspect of Kostić's work, presenting *Beseda* as a cultural paradigm, which was adopted by the United Serbian Youth movement, one year afterward.

KEYWORDS

Laza Kostić, beseda, United Serbian Youth, Preodnica, Serbian National Theatre, Pest, Novi Sad

1. INTRODUCTION

Judging from the rich historical sources of the period, being a Serbian student in Pest and Buda in the early 1860s was a privileged position and an uplifting and inspiring experience. At this time, the twin cities on the Danube can be seen as important Serbian cultural and educational centres. At the beginning of the decade, Pest hosted the literary and scientific society *Matica srpska*, together with its periodical *Srbski letopis* [Serbian Chronicle]. The University of Pest can be seen as an important centre in the formation of Serbian intellectuals coming from all regions of the Habsburg Empire and beyond its borders. The life of Serbian students in Pest was centred around the endowment and student dormitory *Tekelijanum* (Tökölyanum), established by the Serbian benefactor Sava Popović Tekelija in 1838, with an aim to provide support for talented students in need.¹ The above-mentioned institutions started their operations in the *Vormärz* period and successfully renewed their activities around 1860, in the general easing of the political atmosphere, following the Serbian-Hungarian conflict in 1848–1849 and the subsequent neo-absolutist period. The local Serbian *milieu* was closely linked to other urban centres of the Empire, especially to the cities located along the Danube, namely Vienna, and Novi Sad. Moreover, the establishment of the regular steamship line which operated on the Danube enabled a swifter circulation of people and ideas. During the 1860s, the focus of the Serbian public gradually shifted from the Serbian diaspora of Pest-Buda to Novi Sad, a city with a relative Serbian majority of population. Three symbolic events in Novi Sad should be highlighted to illustrate this development; the establishment of the Serbian National Theatre in 1861; the centenary celebration of the above-mentioned patron Sava Popović Tekelija in the same year; and the festive relocation of *Matica srpska* from Pest to Novi Sad in 1864.

Simultaneously, a new generation of young intellectuals emerged in the Serbian public, introducing new artistic and political ideas, creating new institutions, promoting international cultural exchange, and creating new traditions. Students of the *Tekelijanum* college in Pest gathered around the student circle *Preodnica* in 1861. The most accurate translation of the name of this students' club is "Predecessor", however the related term "Vanguard" gives a more apt description of their intentions and self-image. Through their regular meetings, lectures, their publications (including an anthology of poems) and other cultural activities, members of the *Preodnica* intended to overcome the limits of a student circle and present their ideas to the wider Serbian public (ПАВЛАС 1907). The term *Vanguard* also refers to their supposedly leading role in the ongoing networking activities among members and groups of the Serbian diaspora in and outside of the Habsburg Monarchy. This process reached its peak in 1866 with the establishment of the United Serbian Youth (*Ujedinjena omladina srpska*), a movement that caused much enthusiasm

¹ On the history of *Tekelijanum* and the student milieu in and around the endowment see КОВАЧЕК 1997.

in the Serbian liberal-minded public, as well as a lot of concern and repressions from the governments in Pest and Belgrade. Jovan Skerlić's *The Youth and its Literature* (1906) can be seen as the most comprehensive literary analysis of the so-called Age of Youth (Omladinsko doba), which the author defines as Serbian "national and literary Romanticism." Skerlić stresses the importance of the influence of Western and Eastern European revolutionary and youth movements (Sturm und Drang, Giovine Italia, Russian narodniki) for this generation as well as the entanglement of belles-lettres, theatre, and national political activism (СКЕРЛИЋ 1906: IX–X).

It is against this background that the poem *Beseda* was completed in 1864 by Laza Kostić, a 23-year-old law student, a leading personality within the Preodnica circle. Kostić had already achieved significant success as a poet, writer and playwright (*Maksim Crnojević*, 1863) and as a translator of Homer and Shakespeare. Despite the recognition Laza Kostić had gained as a leading member of the new literary generation, his *Beseda* did not win the approval of his contemporary critics and did not attract much attention later, after its author had been recognised as a classic author of the Serbian Romanticism. A standalone study about the poem was published in 1960 by Mladen Leskovic, who has provided a detailed analysis of this "allegorical drama without dialogues", the circumstances of its publication and its contemporary reception (ЛЕСКОВАЦ 1978: 46–81). In his essays on the early oeuvre of Kostić, Dušan Ivanić analyses his dominant usage of allegories (and metaphors) as poetic devices or tropes in the context of the Serbian literary tradition (ИВАНИЋ 1992: 229–240; ИВАНИЋ 2011: 15–26). Ivanić highlights the importance of the poem *Beseda*, identifying it as an oxymoron of genre (жанровски оксиморон) (ИВАНИЋ 2011: 15). In his article published in 2020, Mićo Cvijetić reveals how the sharp debate between Kostić and his critics in Novi Sad continued in 1866 on the pages of *Slavisches Centralblatt* in Bautzen, Saxony (ЦВИЈЕТИЋ 2020: 7–29). Sanja J. Paripović Krčmar presents *Beseda* as an example of Kostić's usage of a polymetric structure that is adjusted to the various expressions and the intensity of the emotions. Kostić related the above-mentioned structure to the principles of (Romanticist) poetry (ПАРИПОВИЋ КРЧМАР 2024: 192). In the present article I will focus on the textual and contextual links between the poem and its inspiration, the so-called beseda celebrations, appearing in the Serbian public several years before the publication of the poem. Kostić's work, its structure, and motives, reflect the contemporaneous state of Serbian theatre and entertainment. By summoning popular genres, artistic forms, and motives, Kostić intended to publish a programmatic poem and lay the foundations of artistic self-representation of the new generation of Serbian Youth. Although the contemporary critics – Gliša Geršić and Antonije Hadžić in *Srbski letopis*, as well as the anonymous correspondent of *Slavisches Centralblatt* – did not give a positive review, Laza Kostić defended his text both in the Serbian and the German-language press. Even decades later, the author insisted for *Beseda* (with minor textual changes) to be included into the selected volumes of his poetry (1873 and 1909). Despite its relative lack of success, the poem and its contemporary reception are important sources of cultural history and are therefore worthy of our attention.

2. BESEDA AS A CULTURAL TRANSFER

What did the title of the poem mean and what associations could it possibly evoke among Kostić's audience? What does the definition of the genre in its subtitle – *allegorical drama in the dialogues* – mean? These questions were raised already by Gliša Geršić and Antonije Hadžić in the

issue of *Srbski letopis* which contains Kostić's work (ГЕРШИЋ-ХАЏИЋ 1865: 159–165). They expressed their criticism of the lack of structural and narrative coherence, as well as of the missing “organic unity” between the verses. According to Geršić and Hadžić, “beseda” as an allegory has no clear meaning and is therefore unable to bind the structure together (ГЕРШИЋ-ХАЏИЋ 1865: 161). Kostić defended himself in the first issue of the magazine *Matica* by pointing to one such representative event, a Serbian beseda (*srpska beseda*) organised by Serbian students in Pest in 1864 to collect donations for the company of the Serbian National Theatre (КОСТИЋ 1865b: 9). Kostić displays awareness of the events’ ‘foreign’ Czech origins, however, he does not provide a more detailed explanation of its roots. Despite of the superficial contemporary discourse on the meaning of beseda, it is useful to discover its Czech and Slavic roots, to fully understand Kostić's allegory.

Beseda denotes representative, distinctly national festivities, including music, dances, and recitations. These events – related to contemporary balls and *soirées* – appeared first in the context of the Czech national movement in Prague and were later adopted in other cities and by other national movements as well. The first Czech beseda took place in Prague in 1841 (СТРЕЈЉЕК 1935: 10). The name of the event was invented by Josef Kajetán Tyl, who intended to create a symbolic link between the present and an ancient, mythicised Slavic culture. Besedas gained significant popularity in Bohemia and Moravia in the *Vormärz* period, eventually reaching the city of Vienna (WYTRZENS 1993: 190–192). The imperial capital was an important location of Slavic besedas and Slavic balls starting in the late 1850s. The beseda events inspired Czech writer and journalist Jan Neruda, as well as dance master Karel Link and composer Ferdinand Heller to create the dance entitled *Czech Beseda*, a *potpourri* including folk dances and folk songs from Bohemia and Moravia. This dance became increasingly popular in the coming decades (СКОЉЕРОВА 2018: 382–385). In the interwar period the dance was extended to include Moravian-Silesian, Slovak and Subcarpathian-Ruthenian dances and was widely seen as a state-supported artistic manifestation of Czechoslovak patriotism. Meanwhile, the original meaning of *česká beseda* as a ‘national ball’ gradually disappeared. One should also mention two contemporary Slavic/Czech cultural institutions bearing the same name: Umělecká beseda in Prague (1862) and Slovanská beseda in Vienna (1865). One can conclude that a wide range of contemporary meanings of the term *beseda* can be observed in various urban and national contexts. There are, however, few common traits of these genres and institutions. They were presenting performances of dance, poetry, and music as tools of national self-representation and mass mobilisation. They can be seen as an attempt to develop and practice specific Czech or Slavic forms of entertainment as an alternative to the contemporary German urban culture.

At the time Kostić's poem was published, the first Serbian besedas [*srpske besede*] had been organised in Novi Sad and Pest. The idea of the adaptation of besedas came from Konstantin (Stanoje) Bošković, a Pest-based law student. Bošković initiated the organisation of the first such event in the Hotel Elisabeth in Novi Sad on August 8, 1862 (*Даница* III: 443–444). By 1864, such events were organised in Pest as well. Between 1862 and 1864, thirteen Serbian besedas took place in these two urban centres. These events had several distinguishing characteristics from the Czech/Slavic besedas. The programme of the first Serbian besedas (1862–1863) did not contain dances. Afterwards, the festivities were divided in two main parts. The first half resembled a concert with performances by musicians, choirs, recitations of poems and, at times, short popular lectures on themes such as aesthetics, arts, and social issues. As opposed to the case of Czech besedas, the dance came after, rather than between these performances. The contemporary press

primarily referred to a committee of “Serbian students”, less frequently to “Serbian women,” “Serbs from Sentamaš” (Bácsszenttamás, today’s Srbobran) or particular individuals (for instance, the music teachers Aleksandar Morfidis and Davorin Jenko) as the organisers. Each Serbian *beseda* had a charitable, explicitly national cause, to which part of profit made on tickets, was donated. The most frequent such goal was to support the recently established Serbian National Theatre, an institution that still lacked finances and a permanent venue (TÖMÖRY 2022: 60–63).

Laza Kostić was an active participant of the social life both in Pest and Novi Sad. Kostić was interested in theatrical arts and maintained a fruitful relationship with Jovan Đorđević, the director of the Serbian National Theatre. In 1860–1861 Kostić served as an amateur actor in the company of Serbian students in Pest. He provided the National Theatre with original theatre plays and translations of classical pieces (Eugène Scribe, William Shakespeare, Molière). Kostić – together with Gliša Geršić and Antonije Hadžić – organised a festivity honouring (Serbian) theatre and *Matica srpska* (May 12, 1864) on the 300th anniversary of Shakespeare’s birth (ЕЧИП). Kostić’s biographer, Stanislav Vinaver stressed his role in contributing to the style of contemporary Serbian romantic drama, what Vinaver called “theatrical, declamatory pathos” [позоришна декламаторска патетика] (ВИНАВЕР 2006: 256). Having these facts in mind, it is not surprising to see that, in his poem, Kostić characterises theatre as the most recent manifestation of a centuries old Serbian identity.

3. BESEDA AS AN ALLEGORY

It is not only its topic – theatre as a vital national cause – which links *Beseda* to the *besedas*. The diverse structure of its eight parts, the variety of poetic meters, verse forms, and genres inside the poem mimic the colourful schedule of the festivities. In his answer to Geršić and Hadžić, Kostić stresses the virtues of a recently organised *beseda* event, divided into two parts (concert and dance party), which inspired him to personify *Beseda* and compose her textual “feet,” “belt,” and “torso” (КОСТИЋ 1865b: 10). The author describes different parts (*acts* and *scenes*) of the allegorical drama with both musical tempo markings (*allegro*, *adagio*, and *andante*) and rhetoric devices (*irony*, *pathos*). These features contribute to the formal similarity between the poem and the musical and theatre genres of the era of Romanticism.

Beseda appears as a fairy or a muse [*vila*], a character of Slavic pagan origin who – in a substantially altered form – became a popular figure in Serbian Romanticism. Dejan Ajdačić analyses the usage and profound transformation of seductive fairies [виле љубавнице] in Serbian poetry of the period. According to Ajdačić, in the nineteenth century, the figure of *vila* underwent a substantial change. The figure of the seductive fairy was fading from the popular (oral) culture but at the same time was rediscovered by Serbian romanticist who attached new meanings and characteristics to it. However, despite this metamorphosis, the character of the *vila* was used to underline the links between Serbian folklore and “high” culture (АЈДАЧИЋ 2002: 191–192).²

² The figure of the fairy also appears in the earlier work of Laza Kostić. In 1862 he published the short story *Čedo vilino* [The Fairy’s Child], where the Fairy appears as a divine character loving and helping Serbs against the (Half-)Moon (the Ottomans). Mythicised medieval figures, such as Czar Dušan and the Kosovo maiden (the lover of the *vila* and her only daughter) appear in the short story (see ВИНАВЕР 2006: 283–286).

Kostić's fairy transforms into different (female) protagonists of the mythical Serbian past, throughout the four acts. According to Mladen Leskovac, the fairy can be seen as the genius of Serbian folk poetry (ЛЕСКОВАЦ 1978: 58). Mićo Cvijetić characterises Kostić's historicised allegory as the living palimpsest of Serbian folk poetry (ЦВИЈЕТИЋ 2020: 22). In his commentary, Kostić stresses the importance of folk arts, which gained international recognition, owing to Vuk Karadžić, but experienced decline in the age of modernity. That is the reason, why – using an agricultural analogy – the old apple tree of folk poetry must be grafted with modern foreign genres such as *besedas* (КОСТИЋ 1865b: 10). Also, this is why the fairy appears as *Beseda* at the beginning and as an actress at the end of the text. The transformations do not change the fairy's essence though: “Јупитер остаје Јупитер и у бичијој кожи и у облику златне кише³ и у перју лабудовом; вила остаје вила и у стајаћем руву домољубачки слава у шарама глумачким у забавном преобразу беседином.” (КОСТИЋ 1865b: 33)

The poem has a framed structure; it starts with a contemporary *beseda* celebration and ends with the personification of the theatre. In the first part, the fairy introduces herself as *Beseda*, a “Muse of the Salon”, an acquaintance of (Serbian) girls, living anywhere in the vast area between Buda and Salonica.

[...] Девојка ме свака знаде
Од Будима до Солона,
Ја сам вила од салона,
Што вечерас обећава
Да ће с вама да не спава
Ја се зовем беседа. [...]
(КОСТИЋ 1865a: 144)

She brings the girls presents of songs and dances. *Beseda* announces the following historical episodes. The “sweetness” of contemporary entertainment is mixed with “bitter” memories of centuries-old miseries.

[...] Лепа ли ти носим дара
Од песама од игара;
Ал' је надев у тог слада
Горки спомен слатки нада
Успомена стари јада
У бермету слатки снова
Од зачина пеленова
Талози се слутња нова. [...]
(КОСТИЋ 1865a: 143)

The poem is divided into four acts and eight scenes. In the first act, entitled *Slava* [Glory], the Fairy incorporates a Serbian girl alongside Emperor Dušan in the “golden age” of medieval Serbia. After this short episode of euphoria, the narrator arrives to the Blackbird's Field, facing the disastrous defeat of Kosovo against Ottoman conquest. Then, the fairy first transforms into a key

³ *Златна киша* or golden rain (*Laburnum anagyroides*), a flowering plant.

figure of the Kosovo cycle, the *Kosovka devojka* [Kosovo maiden] vowing revenge. Beseda leads us to the tent of the legendary Serbian nobleman Vuk Branković, a traitor who – according to the myth – did not turn up to the battlefield. The author describes their demonical party and toasts with dark irony.

The second act, *Žrtva Šejtanu* [Sacrifice to Satan] reflects on the tragical fate of the Serbian despot's daughter, Mara Branković. According to the narrative the fairy incorporates Mara, the daughter of the Serbian ruler Đurđe Branković. As agreed in the alliance between the Ottoman Empire and the Serbian Despotate, she is forced to marry the Sultan. She must leave the Serbian court in Smederevo and travel to the Ottoman Emperor, where her two brothers are being held hostages. Nonetheless, her sacrifice is futile (a sacrifice to the Satan); on the way to the Sultan, she has to witness the death of her beloved Svetozar and to meet her brothers on the way, who are blinded by the treacherous Sultan. The following scene takes part in the new, oriental home of Mara Branković, the harem of the Sultan. Her fate is linked to the destiny of the Serbian people; a precious gift from the Emperor drives Serbs into collective captivity.

Ој сарајска
 Ноћи рајска
 Бесцен – кутијо.
 Што је Мари,
 Својој јари,
 Цар поклонио,
 Што је с Маром
 Српски народ
 Зет оглобио [...]
 (КОСТИЋ 1865а: 154)

The reviewers of the text, Geršić and Hadžić, found the “ballad of Mara Branković” the most valuable part and suggested its publication as a separate poem. Also, this act is remarkable due to its Hungarian-Serbian intertextual reference. From the 1850s, the rule and legacy of Đurađ Branković (1427–1456), a prince and despot in sort of a geopolitical limbo between the Kingdom of Hungary and the Ottoman Empire has been a subject of literary reflections, such as the historical novel of Jakov Ignjatović (*Đurađ Branković*, 1855). Moreover, the figure of the despot appeared on the scene of the Hungarian National Theatre in Pest in 1856 in a Hungarian-language historical tragedy written by Károly Obernyik (OBERNYIK 1878: 405–457). The performance of the drama on January 16, 1860 resulted in a standing ovation from the attending Serbian students, which can be seen as a major manifestation of Serbian-Hungarian political rapprochement. One of the students attending the above-mentioned play of Brankovics was Laza Kostić, who dedicated a poem to the main actor, Gábor Egressy. Kostić's poem was published in the contemporary press, both in Serbian and Hungarian (РЉТН 1958: 135–136). Nevertheless, it is not possible to go into a detailed analysis of the play and its long aftermath on the Serbian theatre scene. Although the narrative is slightly different in Obernyik's play, the culmination of the tragedy is comparable in both cases. The painful faith of the despot's children is revealed; the two sons are returned alive, but blinded, whereas Mara ends up in the harem of the Sultan. The reason for this dynastic and national shame is Đurđe (Đurađ) Branković's naive belief in a fair alliance with the Ottoman archenemy. Obernyik's drama has a positive outcome: the united Hungarian-Serbian army de-

feats the Ottomans. On the contrary, Kostić invites us to witness the beginning of a centuries-long national catastrophe.

The prologue of the poem, *Kletvin blagoslov* [The Curse's Blessing] shows the long agony of the cursed Serbian nation using the metaphor of a(n Ottoman) rose strangling a (Serbian) pine tree.

И настало је царство клетвино;
 У раскалашном, бесном раскошу
 Обадио је ружик источни
 Малаксао, уконоу српски бор.
 Дубоким трњем испребадо га,
 Из бора српског живи тече сок [...]
 (КОСТИЋ 1865а: 155)

Beseda first transforms into the persecuted Fairy of the Pine, then – dressed as an actress – offers culture and education as a ray of hope in the dark times. The dream of the fairy is the continuity of the Serbian national identity which can be realised through the establishment of the (National) Theatre.

Тај сан већ вила шести сања век,
 А сад на јави сан ти нуди леп,
 Приват' га, роде, ево ти га, на!
 Позориште је, чим те нудим ја!
 (КОСТИЋ 1865а: 158)

4. AFTERMATH: BESEDA AS A CULTURAL PARADIGM

Kostić intended his *Beseda* to be performed at one of the representative events of his time. This wish was fulfilled during the *beseda* organised at the Pest shooting range on February 22, 1865, as he recited his poem (*Нанпедак* XVIII: [1–2]). However, as mentioned earlier, the poem quickly faded into obscurity. Nevertheless, the newly established tradition of Serbian *besedas* had a bright future. Kostić envisioned that *besedas* would play a key role in Serbian entertainment and self-representation in the future, replacing premodern religious and rural festivities. “Долази време да се бојишта преруше у позоришта, намастирске (sic!) славе и вашари у текелијне светковине,⁴ прела у беседе.” (КОСТИЋ 1865b: 10)

In fact, one can say that Kostić's prediction on the future of Serbian entertainment came true. *Besedas* became more popular in the coming years and the events of the late 1860s became increasingly more massive and more politicised. According to Kostić and his contemporaries (see for instance ЗВЕКИЋ 1867), *besedas* were meant to manifest national unity in foreign, multi-ethnic urban environments. They were seen as an authentic and virtuous form of entertainment, worthy of the heroic myths of the Serbian past. Thus, *besedas* were juxtaposed to the decadent, “German” balls. Whereas balls represented a danger to the moral of its participants, *besedas* (allegedly rooted in ancient Slavic and Serbian traditions) provided an opportunity to experience

⁴ Memorial festivities dedicated to the benefactor Sava Tekelija.

Serbian togetherness and actively promote national goals (ЗВЕКИЊ 1867). This narrative reached its peak with the activities of the United Serbian Youth (1866), an organisation which included besedas in its programme (*Застава* I: [3]). In this sense, Serbian besedas can be seen as a cultural paradigm of the Omladina-generation. Kostić's poem and his commentary helped the creation and theorising of this tradition, deeply rooted in the values of Serbian Romanticism, its mythical approach to history and views on contemporary society.

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