

The cultural collaboration between Jacob Grimm and Vuk Karadžić

A fruitful friendship connecting Western Europe to the Balkans

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Abstract:

The following article aims at presenting a significant case of intercultural relations between Germany and Serbia that took place during the first half of the 19th Century thanks to the epistolary correspondence between Jacob Grimm and Vuk Karadžić. The German scholar started exploring Serbian language and culture in order to reach a better knowledge of the folk songs Vuk Karadžić was collecting at the time.

These songs constituted for Jacob Grimm an essential term of comparison which allowed him to give more concreteness to his theories and researches about “natural language” and encouraged him to explore the field of Indo-European comparative philology. On the other side, Jacob Grimm's support helped Vuk Karadžić in the struggle for the codification of a written language on the basis of the popular one in his country.

The role played by Grimm, together with Goethe, in the diffusion and appreciation of Serbian folk songs is inestimable: thanks to him Western Europe got to know the culture of a part of the continent, towards which prejudices and ignorance were still prevailing. The idea of reciprocal approaching of cultures was also inscribed in Goethe's conception of *Weltliteratur*, which considered translation as a fundamental part of German culture since Luther's translation of the Bible and the condition for its further growth.

Keywords:

Vuk Karadžić, Jacob Grimm, Serbian Folk Songs, Indo-European Philology, Cultural Translation, *Weltliteratur*

1. Introduction

Jacob Grimm (1785-1863) is generally remembered for having been a Germanist philologist who collected together with his brother Wilhelm the German folk tales which still constitute part of children's imagery all around the world. Actually, this represents only a part of his very extended literary and scientific work, and it would be reductive to define his rich cultural path simply as "Germanist" or "romantic".¹ Born in Hanau, (Kassel) Jacob Grimm started his career studying law at University of Marburg, and soon became fascinated by historical and antiquarian investigation, a focus he would have continued to follow in different forms for the rest of his life. He also discovered the interest for Old German popular texts and their language, coming into contact with German and Indo-European mythology. The first work Jacob Grimm published was *Über den altdeutschen Meistergesang* (1811) and was soon followed by the first edition of the *Kinder-und Hausmärchen* (Children's and Household Tales), published in 1812–1815. In order to publish this work, Jacob and his brother Wilhelm had been collecting all the folktales they could find, partly from the word of mouth, partly from manuscripts and books. The two brothers were attracted to all national poetry, whether in the form of epics, ballads or popular tales, and later in 1816–1818 they published a series of legends collected from diverse sources in the two-volume *Deutsche Sagen* (German Legends).

The interest nourished by Jacob Grimm for traditional cultural expressions such as folk tales, legends, popular songs and riddles was enhanced Herder's conception of "natural language"² that deeply influenced his work, stimulating him in exploring foreign cultures such as the Slavic one.

This became possible also by virtue of the friendly relationships linking him to scholars coming from

1 Bojić, Vera, *Jacob Grimm und Vuk Karadžić, Ein Vergleich ihrer Sprachauffassungen und ihre Zusammenarbeit auf dem Gebiet der serbischen Grammatik*, Verlag Otto Sagner, München, 1977 p.11

2 Herder had expressed his conception on language in the essay *Abhandlung über den Ursprung der Sprache* ("Treatise on the origin of the language", 1772) proposing a new role of the "Folk" as creator of culture. Folk and language were seen as indissolubly linked and popular language expressed in this view the original natural poetry.

countries of that area. One of the most significant examples in this respect is represented by the deep cultural exchange cultivated with Vuk Stefanović Karadžić (1787-1864), undiscussed protagonist of Serbian philological romanticism, a linguist and the major reformer of the Serbian language. Due to the situation of political instability in the context of the Serbian uprisings and Ottoman repression, in 1813 Karadžić had fled his native Serbia to Vienna, where thanks to the support of great Slovenian philologist Jernej Kopitar, (1780-1844) censor for Habsburg Empire, he came into contact with Herder's theories about the role of popular poetry in a nation's collective consciousness. In 1814 and 1815, Karadžić published in Vienna two volumes of *Srpske Narodne Pjesme* (*Serbian Folk Songs*), which afterwards increased to four, then to six, and finally to nine tomes. Kopitar's crucial support and the following meeting with Grimm encouraged him to carry on a continuous work of valorization and affirmation of Serbian popular culture's specificity.

As a token of the fruitful exchange between Jacob Grimm and Vuk Karadzic, we have the reviews, translations and the articles through which Grimm succeeds in promoting Karadžić's collections of folk songs and linguistic works in Germany, as well as the epistolary correspondence between the two philologists, which has been defined "an enduring document of human and scientific solidarity".³

From the analysis of these letters, together with Grimm's reviews of Serbian *Volkslieder* from 1823-24 and the preface to the *Kleine Serbische Grammatik* ("Small Serbian Grammar") he translated, I will try to outline an intercultural path of reciprocal influence between Serbian and German cultural world of the time. If the first manifested its presence in a variety of Grimm's scholarly fields, the same benefits derived from Karadzic's contact with Germany and the support of the intellectuals living in this country.

Serbia and its culture were for Grimm a fundamental term of comparison that allowed him to confirm the validity of some of his deepest insights and theories. The type of Romanticism that influenced him in this path had obviously ripened and opened up to a series of further connections, thanks to the refinement of scientific and historical instruments applied to the study of specific cultural fields. Grimm also tried to figure out how to make popular poetry more current through a necessary historical overview turned towards the future. This explains the function of openness to "the other" and the need to follow historically this original principle's path in linguistic, religious and cultural fields. His efforts were those of a sensitive personality, but scientifically rigorous, idealistic and realistic at the same time, convinced of the impact of the philologist's work on the cultural situation of the countries he addressed.

We will follow this twofold influence between Serbian and German world in relation to Grimm's and Karadžić's work on folks songs, popular language and mythology, showing how both of the sides benefit from the exchange with the other in the enriching of their theories and studies.

3 Žmegač Victor, Skreb Zdenko, Sekulić Ljerka, *Breve storia della letteratura tedesca: dalle origini ai giorni nostri*, Einaudi, Torino 1995, p. 181 (or. ed. *Kleine Geschichte der deutschen Literatur - von den Anfängen bis zur Gegenwart*, Hirschgraben – Scriptor, Frankfurt am Mein, 1981)

2. The Rising Attention for South Slavic Popular Culture

Jacob Grimm's interest for South Slavic world was not an isolated one during that the period. Indeed, beginning from the end of the 18th century, we could witness to the awakening of a certain attention for the Balkans in Western Europe: the countries of the area started being perceived for their value in terms of intact cultural treasures, which could be discovered thanks to new ethnographic, linguistic and scientific studies. In 1774, the Padoan abbot and naturalist Alberto Fortis published his *Viaggio in Dalmazia* ("Travels into Dalmatia") in Venice. The book encountered from the very first moments a big success, probably explainable from the fact that it was much more than a simple travel account. Fortis had become a passionate estimator of popular songs after having heard particularly suggestive ones in Dalmatia, on indication of a friend. By virtue of this, his work, initially conceived as a simple recording of geological characteristics of the area, lingered over in the description of the places and the people in a way we could define as "ethnographic". Among the other things, he gave significant space to the Morlachs, the Slavic inhabitants of Dalmatian hinterland, focusing on their rich folklore and traditional practices and he translated for the first time in Italian language a beautiful and dramatic love ballad, the popular *Hasanaginica* ("The Mourning Song of the Noble Wife of the Asan Aga").⁴ This song became a sort of literary case, arousing interest for South Slavic folk poetry in Europe. After only one year, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749-1832) had made his own translation of the poem from Italian to German, and Johann Herder had included it in his work *Stimmen der Völker*, ("The Voices of Peoples"), a collection of songs in six volumes, which can be considered as a pioneering work in Grimm's and Karadžić's future field of interest. In effect, the book contained popular songs from different places and times (Sami, Latvian, Estonian, Greenlandic...) which constituted a sort of "poetical history of mankind", on the basis of popular cultural creation and prepared the ground for the affirmation of the centrality of the role of popular language in the development of national history. In addition to this, Slavic and Serbian world were present also in the 17th chapter of Herder's work *Ideen zur Philosophie der Geschichte der Menschheit* ("Ideas for the philosophy of a history of mankind"), published in 4 volumes between 1784 and 1791.

Herder's references about the Slavic world were probably important elements which encouraged Jacob Grimm to approach the culture of the area. The most important contact with Slavic cultures though dates back to his epistolary exchange with Josef Dobrovsky, (1752-1829) the Czech scholar considered to be the founder of Slavic philology. It was him to provide Jacob Grimm with the first informations about "Dalmatian or Illyrian" popular songs. In a letter of 1811, while referring to Slavic mythology, Dobrovsky reminded Grimm that this was *Indian*⁵, aiming to underline the fact that it was closer to the Indian rather than to the Greek or Latin one. The young Grimm started soon becoming passionate about the Slavic world, sensing in it the presence of old and original traces of a culture common to the whole Indo-European space.

4 This Ballad is of clear Muslim influence.

5 Mojašević, Miljan, *Jacob Grimm und die serbische Literatur und Kultur*, Hitzeroth Marburger Studien zur Germanistik, Marburg, 1990 p. 21

3. Jacob Grimm's first contact with Serbian language and Vuk Karadžić

The further step in exploring the South-Slavic cultural world consisted in the study of the languages.

Jacob Grimm started learning Serbian during his participation in the Vienna Congress in 1814:⁶ he was present there as a delegate from Hesse, his German region and it was in Vienna that he met Jernej Kopitar, who encouraged him in pursuing his studies of this language

Some months before that, Kopitar had motivated and supported Vuk Karadžić in exploring the lands of Serbian language⁷ in search of oral popular poetry to be collected and transcribed. Kopitar was in contact with the main German and Slavic scholars of the time, and was also an expert philologist who mastered an incredible number of languages. Considerable had been the influence of Herder's linguistic ideas about natural poetry in his cultural formation, and he had then transmitted them to Vuk Karadžić.

The latter was a talented self-taught scholar, who had grown up in a small town in Western Serbia, Trsić, in close contact with the tradition of the folk songs which had left a deep impression on him. After having taken part to the first anti-Ottoman uprising in 1804, Karadžić had escaped to Sremski Karlovci in Vojvodina, under Habsburg Empire, and had there learnt both Latin and German at school.

After his involvement in the second revolt, he had obtained an institutional position with important political roles, but with the bloody Ottoman repression of 1813, Karadžić had finally found refuge in Vienna.

Kopitar appreciated in him the sensibility for popular culture and believed that with his talent and work, the Serbian scholar could give an essential contribution to the promotion of Serbian folk songs in Western Europe.⁸

Kopitar familiarized Jacob Grimm with Serbian popular tradition that Karadžić was collecting; this raised his big admiration and interest, giving him impulse to continue his study on the culture of the area and deepen his knowledge of the language. The discovery and consequent esteem of Serbian Folk songs would have been fundamental in the construction of Grimm's path of poetical, philological and mythological studies. Kopitar consequently put Jacob Grimm and Vuk Karadžić into contact through epistolary way.

The very first letter dates back to the 2nd of April, 1815, and it is the one Kopitar attached to his letter to Karadžić of the 15th of May of the same year, writing: "I here enclose the invitation of Grimm. The society is interested in popular works of all nations. You can this way understand what German people may have retained. You (*in Serbia, my note*) have more and better things, in part also different ones".⁹

6 Bojić, Vera, cit., p. 188

7 I adopt the term "Serbian" in this article the way it was used by the scholars of the time, keeping in mind that it comprehends a wide linguistic variety corresponding to nowadays Serbian, Croatian, Bosnian and Montenegrin Languages.

8 Mojašević, cit., p. 27

9 "Hier Übermache ich Ihnen eine Einladung von Grimm.. Volkssachen interessieren die Gesellschaft, von Allen Nationen. Sie werden daraus ersehen, was das deutsche Volk noch erhalten haben kann. Ihr habt mehreres und besseres, zum Teil auch anderes" in Karadžić, Vuk, *ПРЕПИСКА I, САБАРАНА ДЕЛА ВУКА КАРАЏИЋА*, ПРОСВЕТА, Beograd, 1988

Jacob Grimm addressed Karadžić in the letter praising his engagement with Serbian folk culture and added that in Germany a Society had been established, aiming to save and collect every possible song and legend present among common German rural population.¹⁰ According to him, such cultural elements represented the memory of the ancestors, which had survived throughout the centuries resisting the denigration they had to be confronted with, and it was essential to make the effort to collect it and defend it from the risk of disappearing. “If they are not studied in greater depth, neither our poetry, nor our history nor our language can be understood in their ancient and truthful origin”, claimed Grimm.¹¹

The German scholar recognized in Karadžić's work the same motivations that pushed him as well in researching forms of popular creativity and concluded the letter inviting Karadžić to send him any kind of material collected to his address in Kassel.¹²

This is just the first of a series of letters the two scholars exchanged throughout their whole life. Karadžić did not reply directly to Grimm, but to Kopitar, and in the letter of 28th of June, 1815, he wrote that thanks to Grimm's precise indications, he finally understood which kind of “popular stories” he was looking for, assuring that the Serbs did indeed possess a lot of them.¹³

The epistolary relation between Grimm and Karadžić became very intense during the period between the years 1823 and 1824; for the rest, they exchanged letters throughout the course of their whole life, but only around fifty. Nevertheless, they had the chance to meet in person and consolidate their friendship several times in many occasions.

As a result of what has been defined “The Kasseler Period”,¹⁴ the most intense period of scientific work on Serbo-Croatian culture, Jacob Grimm published the review of the first collection of *Srpske Narodne Pjesme* of Karadžić (Serbian Folks Songs, 1815), the review of the *Srpski Rječnik* (Serbian Dictionary, 1819), the review of the first three volumes of *Srpske Narodne Pjesme* of the Leipzig edition (1823-1824), the translation of the *Mala Srpska Gramatika* (“Small Serbian Grammar”, 1824) with an important preface, the review of the almanac *Danica* (1826) and the review of both the volumes of *Srpske Narodne Pjesme* translated into German by Talvj (1826). Then it is the turn of the review of the fourth collection of *Srpske Narodne Pjesme* and the preface to the German translation of *Srpske Narodne Pripovijetke* (“Serbian Folk Tales”, 1854).

10 “...es hat sich eine Gesellschaft gestiftet, welche durch ganz Deutschland ausgebreitet werden soll, und zum Ziele nimmt, alles, was unter dem gemeinen deutschen Landvolke von Lied und Sage vorhanden ist, zu retten und zu sammeln.” In: Karadžić, Vuk, *ПРЕПИСКА I*, op. cit.

11 “Ohne es genauer zu erforschen, vermögen weder unser Poesie, noch Geschichte, noch Sprache in ihren alten und wahrhaftigen Ursprungen ernstlich verstanden zu werden”. In: *ibid.*

12 In the same letter of the 2nd of April, 1815.

13 *Ibid.*

14 Mojašević, cit. p. 121

4. Jacob Grimm's Reviews of the Serbian Folk Songs

Grimm's first review of the Serbian Folk songs appeared in 1815 in Vienna, on the Journal *Wiener Allgemeinen Literaturzeitung*. The German scholar affirmed in it that he had found the essential, real *Volkston*,¹⁵ in the simplicity of expressions, in the playful and constant words and rhymes, sounding as melodic as German medieval poetry, and in the popular figures of speech that made them comparable to the Edda and the Homeric poems.¹⁶ In the preface to his work in 1814, Karadžić had similarly remarked how the Folk songs sounded so natural and how important they were for the Serbian nation, as they guarded the people's language along with its traditional character and habits.

However, the comparison between German and Serbian folk songs led Grimm to claim that his country's contemporary language and culture had lost the traditional popular values of the past and that on the contrary, in the poetical expression of the South Slavic area many authentic elements of *Naturpoesie* still survived.

His review of 1823, published on the Journal *Göttingischen gelehrten Anzeigen*, was a productive occasion to affirm analogies and diversities between the two traditions. Grimm correlated once again Karadžić's *folk Songs* with the ones of his country and confirmed a sort of superiority of Serbian traditional poetry on the German one. He considered the language of the latter as a common and rough dialect, and its content characterized by a lack of linearity. Serbian songs were seen on the contrary as an example for a clean, "noble" language, without any gaps in the narration, distinct and clear from the beginning to the end.¹⁷ Grimm affirmed that there was nothing to be surprised by in the beauty of Serbian songs, because also in Germany one thousand years before the language was like that, as "Lords and servants shared the same language".¹⁸

He also pointed out another important thing: in Serbian folk songs, as in the German ones, there was no way to date back the name of the author, and this was one of the features of the so called *Volkspoesie* or *Naturpoesie*, according to the conception expressed years before in his debate with Achim von Arnim.¹⁹ Nevertheless, it was possible to circumscribe certain figures who played an essential role in the poetical creation, as "talented narrators and cantors, sometimes blind elders (...) who can remember in a linear way an incredible amount of poems".²⁰

Grimm was surprised by the persistence of Serbian songs in present times, as expression of the inextinguishable creativity of what he defined a nation "particularly gifted in poetical terms".²¹ The fact that

15 An expression the Romantics used to define the "popular style".

16 Mojašević, cit., pp. 43-44

17 In: Karadžić, Vuk Stefanović. *СПИСКЕ НАРОДНЕ ПЈЕСМЕ III, САБАРАНА ДЕЈА ВУКА КАРАЏИЋА, ПИРОСВЕТА*, Beograd, 1973-88, pag. 443 Grimm's review of 1823 is contained as "addition" to the 3rd Volume and from now will appear as (Grimm:1823).

18 Ibid. p. 449

19 And in polemic to the *Kunstpoesie*, perceived as an artificial one.

20 (Grimm: 1823), p. 450

21 Mojašević, cit. pag.31

these songs were in continuous transmission and reinterpretation during the popular anti-Ottoman uprisings of the time was for him the proof of their strength as a tool of popular support and union.

Actually, during the anti-Napoleon wars of the years 1813 to 1815, German folk songs too had been filled with new political meanings, having been used and performed with the aim of creating an atmosphere of patriotism and national unity. In this case though, according to Grimm, it was a fact mainly due to the popularity of the *Des Knaben Wunderhorn*, a collection of folk songs published between 1805 and 1808 by Achim von Arnim and Clemens Brentano. Grimm considered this as pretty artificial, for the poems had been heavily redacted and in his opinion they did not represent a popular or spontaneous tradition.

“Our Serbian songs did not come out from old papers of parchment, they are taken from the warm mouth of the people, they probably have never been transcribed before, in this sense they are not old”.²² According to his vision, Serbian folks songs were accessible to everyone, people appropriated them and reworked them according to specific historical or social circumstances, so that they were constantly evolving: that is why there were often different versions of a same song. Following his view, in Serbia popular poetry was the cultural expression of a real collectivity, the poetry of an entire nation as it had been the German one in ancient times. Furthermore, it was at the same time the voice of a subordinate, subaltern class in an inferior economical position towards foreign rulers.

In Germany, a country fragmented into several different entities and realities, the folk songs belonged to a marginalized class, that considering the huge amount of peasants did make up the numerical majority, but it was not properly appreciated and recognized as a creative cultural force. For him, this meant that the lack of political unification of the country was an obstacle to the emergence of a cultural expression of the people.

On the other hand, collecting the songs, Karadžić contributed to fix them in a certain sense forever as immutable, maybe foreseeing as Grimm for the German folk-tales that the moment of their disappearance was not too far in the future. In relation to this, it is useful to make a connection with what Grimm had written to Karadžić in a letter dating to the 20th of November, 1823: “We collect songs and words not for today but also for future times, in which it will be no longer possible to collect”.²³

Grimm started acquainting his circle of intellectuals with the Serbian folk songs, arousing enthusiasm for their poetical content and contributing thus to mold a common Romantic literary taste.²⁴ At that time, in Western Europe, readers were starting to discover popular poems coming from different areas of the continent, especially the Modern Greek ones. The Greeks, in parallel with the Serbs, were fighting for their Independence from Ottoman Empire. Philo-Ellenism had spread consistently, and the Greeks were considered to be the direct descendants of the ancient civilization of the past, so a number of European

22 “Nicht aus alten Pergamentblättern hervorgesucht worden sind unsere serbischen Lieder, sie sind alle aus dem warmen Munde des Volks aufgenommen, sie waren vielleicht vorher nie aufgeschrieben, sie sind in diesem Sinne also nicht alt” in: (Grimm: 1823), p.449

23 “Wir sammeln Wörter und Lieder nicht bloss für Heute, sondern auch für künftige Zeiten, die nicht mehr sammeln können” in: Karadžić, Vuk Stefanović, *ПРЕПИСКА II, САБАРАНА ДЕЛА ВУКА КАРАЏИЋА*, ПРОСВЕТА, Beograd, 1988, p. 322

24 Mojašević, cit., p.37

intellectuals were mobilizing to support them culturally and politically. The authors of the Serbian Folk Songs were instead not so highly esteemed as the Greeks: the Serbs were to a certain extent considered a “half-civilized” nation, that had regrettably fallen under the dominion of the Turks, relegated since centuries to a marginal and frontier position. Therefore, the beauty of Serbian poems provoked big surprise among this unaware audience.

Another important review Grimm wrote to Serbian Folk Songs, appeared on *Göttingischen gelehrten Anzeigen* in May of 1824, provides us with a possible explanation of their success. Grimm detected in these works a particular mixture between West and East which was in his opinion easily perceptible. He mentioned the passionate lyricism combined with a sort of clear freshness, a combination that made them very different from those of other European traditions. He affirms how they were not overly sentimental as the “Oriental” ones, but still more colorful and rich than those of Western Europe. The poems were compared to some Spanish ones, an area that had also been exposed to “Oriental” influences: those texts shared with the Serbian ones important features such as the “the subtlety and richness of relationships, the clearer tone of the metaphor”.²⁵

Notwithstanding the great suggestion exerted by cultural expressions coming from other countries, it would be a mistake to take Grimm's words as an idealization of Serbian popular world or a lack of esteem for his own German tradition. It is important to recognize the fact that he was a multifaceted intellectual with well-established scientific-historical tools, neither nationalist nor “orientalist”. The deep knowledge of his homeland's culture and history guaranteed him the objectivity and most of all a serious dealing with other cultures implying an important looking back to his own.

5. Grimm's Support to Karadžić's Struggle for the Language

By virtue of his philological and linguistic studies, and inspired by the incredible linguistic material contained in the folks songs, Vuk Karadžić had started dealing with the thorny question of the language in his country. In particular, he was trying to formulate a standard model that could defend what he considered the high values of the folk songs' language.

In Serbian territories under Ottoman Empire, modern written language had not been codified yet; only in the late 18th Century in Vojvodina, a region where many Serbs lived under Habsburg Empire, many schools and linguistic centers had been founded with the support of Russia. This had encouraged the development of a “middle style” language, a sort of mixture between Old Church Slavonic and popular Serbian.²⁶

25 “die Feinheit und Reichheit der Verbindungen, der hellere Ton der Gleichnisse” in: Karadžić, Vuk Stefanović, *СРПСКЕ НАРОДНЕ ПЈЕСМЕ II. САБАРАНА ДЕЈА ВУКА КАРАЏИЋА*, ПРОСВЕТА, Beograd, 1973-88, p. 481. Grimm's review of 1824 is contained in this II volume.

26 The abolition of the Serbian Orthodox Patriarchate of Peć in 1766, had eliminated the reference to a Serbian national church and laid the foundation for a cultural and linguistic duality. Therefore the Metropolitan of Sremski Karlovci, in Vojvodina, had emerged as the highest religious authority for the Serbs. This cultural center had become very important, being exposed to cultural influences from Germany, France, but especially from Russia.

Karadžić did not agree with such “hybrid” solution and felt the urgent need to affirm the aesthetic and literary value of the language of the people, basing it on the dialectal variety of Eastern Herzegovinian he had grown up with. He therefore began working on the drafting of a vocabulary of the Serbian language, purging the language of all foreign elements and drawing inspiration from the vast repertoire of the folk songs, anecdotes, fairy tales and riddles. The huge success and recognition obtained by his songs in Europe were for him the confirmation of their literary quality and at the same time the demonstration that his ideas about the language were correct and had to be pursued. Simple people in their wide range of cultural manifestations were the real inspiring source of this peculiar dictionary, conceived as a versatile work filled with ethnographic and folklorist comments providing the necessary explanation to the origin of single words and their relation to different popular habits.

Jacob Grimm showed big interest in this ethnographic material, because in the explanation of many words, some of them even very “vulgar” (that is even more authentic), Karadžić embraced the whole rural life, the material and spiritual situation of the people, making his vocabulary a sort of almanac of vibrating popular life. Even though Grimm's Dictionary of the German Language differentiates from Karadžić's one because it is a historical Dictionary of High German Language, one has the impression that Grimm used Karadžić's approach to go over the borders of the unifying norm of the language following the popular one, inspired by the suggestive material of Serbian language he entered in contact with.²⁷

In order to fulfill his aims, it is important to remind that Karadžić introduced an orthographic reform of the language, basing it on Adelung's principle “write as you speak” and conferred therefore to his brand new Serbian Cyrillic alphabet a phonemic imprint. The *Srpski Rječnik* came out in 1818 and Grimm in his review of 1819 praised the work of the friend, pointing out the advantages of a phonetic orthography and the need of the new characters introduced by Karadžić, which simplified the alphabet reducing it from 46 to 29 symbols perfectly transcribable to the Latin ones.

In Serbia, the socio-economic conditions were favorable to the success of his linguistic reform such as the almost absolute lack of any form of aristocracy, the absence of true large cities and a middle class at an embryonic state. To this we add a little class of writers, limited and almost entirely confined to clerical circles, and most of all the huge majority of illiterate people. The mass of the population was made up of socially homogeneous rural communities living in villages, precisely the bearers of that culture in which the language proposed by Karadžić was preserved and strengthened over the centuries. It was therefore thinking about this mass that he could use the notion of the *narod*, people, “nation”, to which refers continuously. In his view, Serbian non-popular literature, the one written in the “high” language of the Church, was in comparison with the works of Serbian folk songs pretty irrelevant and had no reasons to impose its archaic language as the common one.

In support of this, Grimm wrote: “How could an Occitan Troubadour, a German Minnesänger sing in the

27 Bojić, cit.,p. 27

ecclesiastic language? In practical human matters it is poor and clumsy (...) Such words and living constructions exist instead in the popular language, which contains in itself things of high and low level, according to any need.”²⁸

Jacob Grimm got involved in the question, fully supporting Karadžić's efforts: he felt that in the situation of this Balkan country he could finally see the realization and actualization of his ideas about the function of the written language and the political role of the grammarian. In this we can also better delineate the sense of his contemporary work at the huge German dictionary: in the linguistic theory of Grimm, the development of the language and the national spirit were inseparable. That is why the critical situation of Serbian language was seen as an obstacle to the subsequent cultural development of the country. From this point of view Grimm valued and supported Karadžić's efforts as a necessary step to save the Serbs and Serbian language from what he saw as the risk of a total humiliation and annihilation.²⁹

Grimm also claimed that the grammarian had to be active in the history of his nation and could play a fundamental role, having the authority to express before the others the truth in this context.³⁰ The *Volk* represented the continuity, the ability of recovering a fundamental ethical and cultural unity that would go beyond the changes which had taken place over time. According to Grimm, it was the common German language to constitute the highest degree of fraternization in terms of national consciousness.

In 1824, Grimm published in Leipzig a Grammar of the Serbian language translated by himself, with a very important preface. The book was designed as a necessary tool helping German readers in the comprehension of Serbian folk songs and presented higher scientific quality, thanks to the various additions, clarifications that both philologists considered essential. Grimm had devoted a lot of time and energies to translate the Grammar, accomplishing in this way a huge mission in favor of his colleague Karadžić and Serbian culture. In the preface, Grimm suggested to those Germans willing to pursue the study of Slavic languages to devote themselves to Serbian for the clearness, beauty and cultural memory contained, recommending the usage of the *Srpski Rječnik* in Serbian-German-Latin.³¹ Grimm had been the first to prove the effectiveness of the linguistic materials of Karadžić and had written to him that in a letter of 24/4/1824 : “I understand everything thanks to the aid of the dictionary, even the minimal details”.³²

Through the review of the *Srpski Rječnik*, but most of all with the *Kleine Serbische Grammatik*, Jacob

28 “Hätte ein provenzalischer Troubadour, ein deutscher Minnesänger in der Kirchensprache singen können?(...) In weltlichen Dingen ist sie unbeholfen, arm (...) Solche weltliche Wörter und Bildungen leben aber in der Volkssprache, die Höhes und Niederes für alle Bedürfnisse in sich trägt”.In: Karadžić, Vuk Stefanović. 1974. *Kleine Serbische Grammatik mit einer Vorrede von Jacob Grimm*, Munchen: Verlag Otto Sagner, p. XIII . From now on marked as (Grimm: 1824(2))

29 (Grimm: 1824(2)), p. XVII

30 Ibid., p. XXIII

31 Ibid., p. XXI

32 This letter is contained in: Karadžić, Vuk Stefanović. *ПРЕПИСКА vol. II, САБАРАНА ДЕЛА ВУКА КАРАЏИЋА, ПИРОЦЕТА*, Beograd, 1987-96 .

Grimm gave a significant contribution expressing his solidarity to the mission of his Serbian colleague, opposing the high powers of the Orthodox Church in Vojvodina.

It is interesting to notice that Karadžić completed his linguistic career in Serbia translating the New Testament from old Church Slavonic to popular Serbian language (in 1847). This challenging work acquired a highly symbolic meaning, proving that popular language, considered by many intellectuals of Vojvodina to be lacking abstract terms and thus unable to reflect the complexity of such contents, was instead perfectly suitable. In this context, his work in this codifying direction can be interpreted as having the same meaning of Luther's linguistic Reform in Germany three centuries before. However, Karadžić did find some difficulties, and in order to overcome them he coined or “serbianized” many terms, acting dogmatically purist against Russian and Slavonic words and introducing (surprisingly) 30 turcisms.³³

Karadžić's reform of Serbian literary language modernized and distanced it from Church Slavonic, bringing it closer to the speech of common people, specifically to the štokavski dialect of Eastern Herzegovinian of his Folk songs. In 1850, together with Đuro Daničić, Karadžić would have become the main Serbian signatory of the Vienna Agreement which, encouraged by Austrian authorities, laid the foundation for the Serbian language. Conservative Serbian cultural milieu was though not ready to open up to Karadžić's views on the folk language, and it was only in 1868 that his reform was fully accepted in Serbia.

6. The Indo-European Way

Thanks to the relationship with Vuk Karadžić and his culture, Jacob Grimm's interest for Slavic studies continued to evolve, implying the chance of making reference to an important term of comparison that was enriching his theories and studies. In this reference, we can remark how Jacob Grimm gradually started putting to the test his historical-comparative method, applying it to a wide series of fields. The recurrent presence of Slavic elements is traceable indeed even in his works apparently dealing with the German culture exclusively, as the *Deutsches Wörterbuch*, the *Deutsche Rechtsaltertümer*, and especially the *Deutsche Mythologie*.

Following the inspiration drawn by many folk songs, characterized by pagan and pre-Christian elements, Jacob Grimm went deeper in the exploration of South Slavic cultural world and Indo-European mythology as well. In a letter to Karadžić dating to 1849³⁴, bearing still in mind the information on the “Indian” feature of Slavic mythology provided by Dobrovsky many years before, Grimm commented on the presence of particular rituals consisting in the burning of dead bodies. He asked him advice on how to translate into Serbian the German word *Scheiterhaufen* (funeral pyre), reminding the friend that old Slavic pagans used to practice that custom too.

33 Nedeljković, Dragan, *Vuk Karadžić et le problème de l'héritage médiéval serbe*, in: AAVV. *Vuk Stef. Karadžić : actes du Colloque international tenu en Sorbonne les 5 et 6 octobre 1987*, Paris: Université de Paris-Sorbonne, 1988, p. 137

34 in: Karadžić, Vuk Stefanović, *ПРЕПИСКА X, САБАРАНА ДЕЛА ВУКА КАРАЏИЋА*, ПРОСВЕТА, Beograd, 1996, p. 531

It is clear that Grimm's interest was directed towards the traces of pre-Christian, heathen traditions, helped by the innumerable stimulating data contained in the Serbian folk songs. Furthermore, already from the first letters to Dobrovsky,³⁵ a peculiar interest had emerged, involving a number of Slavic folk-tales in which mythological animals such as the wolf or the fox played a main role. It is curious to notice the tie linking his good friend Karadžić to the pagan figure of the wolf through the name *Vuk* (coming from Sanskrit *vrkas*), which in Serbian language designates this animal.³⁶ According to Grimm, Serbian people had maintained many “magical” feelings within traditionalist societies of rural vocation: they were therefore the most faithful inheritors of certain aspects of the original Indo-European world, the roots of which had never been extirpated.³⁷ In many popular songs he found an intense fantastic and religious component, which he considered a substratum of ancient natural beliefs and superstitions that created a suggestive atmosphere comparable to the ones of the myths.

Grimm was particularly amazed by the presence of the Moon and the Morning Star (*Danica*) in a Serbian epic song, *Dioba Jakšića* (“The sharing of the heritage”). In his review of 1823 he made reference to it citing some verses he had translated, which reminded him of the events narrated in the ancient Germanic Epic poem *Edda*.³⁸ He then sent the poem to Goethe, who showed so much enthusiasm about it at the point of deciding to publish it in his journal *Kunst und Altertum*.³⁹ This poem became thus one of the most famous and appreciated ones after the *Hasanaginica*, contributing to nourish even further German interest for Serbian popular culture.

In this context, Goethe wrote an article about Serbian poems, *Serbische Lieder*, in which he defined Serbia in the following terms: “The whole nation is a poetical superstition”.⁴⁰ Lingering on the description of the elements of pagan religion that were so present in the songs, Goethe communicated to the readers his perception of certain and singular “supernatural” elements. One example consisted of a sort of irrational deity ruling over many texts, which controlled the fate of it all: from mountains to forests, to clouds and skies, giving orders and providing prophecies. This entity, called *vila*, was in Serbian popular culture a kind of fairy, who could be benign or malignant according to the circumstances, invested by special magical powers, and sometimes taking the form of an owl. The same character had attracted Grimm's attention as

35 Mojašević, cit., p.21

36 In Indo-European mythology but not only, the wolf represented the complexity and ambivalence of the forces of sacred and mystery. In his *Srpski Rječnik* at the voice “vuk” Karadžić added some information on the rites of initiation and protection in Serbia at the basis of naming *Vuk* the son of a woman whose previous babies did not survive. The purpose is to prevent the witches from eating him. The name *Vuk*, according to popular beliefs, was a sort of amulet protecting a baby from evil spirits. This ritual was practiced among the other also in Vedic India. In: Karadžić, Vuk Stefanović, *Srpski Rječnik, САБАРАНА ДЕЛА ВУКА КАРАЏИЋА*, ПРОСВЕТА, Beograd, 1988, pag.88

37 Conte, Francis, *Gli Slavi*. Einaudi, Torino, 1990, p. 90. Or. Ed. : *Les Slaves*, éditions Albin Michel, Paris, 1986

38 (Grimm: 1923) p. 307

39 “Goethe replied and thanked me for having addressed you to him, he liked the song of the two brothers so much that he decided to immediately publish it in his magazine *Kunst und Altertum*. In Germany the Serbian songs have drawn general attention and this makes me deeply happy”. In: Karadžić, Vuk Stefanović, *ПРЕПИСКА vol. II, САБАРАНА ДЕЛА ВУКА КАРАЏИЋА*, ПРОСВЕТА, БЕОГРАД, 1987-96, p. 307

40 Goethe's essay *Serbische Lieder* of 1825 is contained as “addition” in: Karadžić, Vuk Stefanović, *СРПСКЕ НАРОДНЕ ПЈЕСМЕ III. САБАРАНА ДЕЛА ВУКА КАРАЏИЋА*, ПРОСВЕТА, Beograd, 1973-88, p. 470

well,⁴¹ occupying a special place in his imagery. It was intriguing for him the fact of finding a similar character in Lithuanian folk songs too.

It is interesting to notice how Jacob Grimm was giving his attention to other nations whose literature was practically unknown, like Lithuanians and Finns. In this context, Grimm turned towards the East, but then came back to his own German tradition, affirming that also his people, before converting to Christianity, possessed a big amount of oral epic poems, animal folk tales and legends, that had taken with them through the migrations from Asia to Europe. According to him, the Slavs and the Finns were the people whose legends were closer to the German ones.⁴²

In 1853 Karadžić published a new collection of folk tales, dedicating it to Jacob Grimm. The latter, in his review of this work, gave once again voice to his theories about the folk tales as remnants of ancient myths orally transmitted and as useful element in the research of relations and affinities within European people and Asian ones. In his vision, Slavic folk tales were a privileged source of information that could lead to the detection of original ancient elements of a common Indo-European culture.

But in fact, the linguistic and mythological Indo-European comparative principle proved to be insufficient to explain the complexity of cultures created by the people of this linguistic affiliation. Indo-European mythological comparison was indeed not always historical, because it excluded the contacts among people of different linguistic families. In opposition to this limit, Grimm came to determine the similarities between Finnish, German and Slavic legends, demonstrating thus not to have fallen into the “trap” of mainstream Indo-European philology, as Finnish was a language belonging to the Finno-Ugric family and not to the Indo-European one. His comparative method had a universal vocation, was free from linguistic preconceptions and therefore potentially extensible to all cultures. It was thanks to his scientific and rational focus that he was ensured in his efforts in the comparatist's activity: the interdisciplinarity of his thought and his open-mindedness allowed him to confront himself with the study of any “original principle” and its historical path while protected from the risk of falling into distorted and anachronistic visions of cultural facts.

7. 'Anti-Orientalism' and *Weltliteratur*

In dealing with Eastern European and “Oriental” cultures, both Jacob Grimm and Goethe seem to have avoided “the Orientalist risk”. “Orientalizing, I find it very dangerous..” affirmed Goethe in his *West-Östlicher Divan*. A sentence surely shared by his colleague Jacob Grimm, whose way of dealing with other cultures is probably one of the most scientific expressions of German Romanticism. His contact with the South Slavic world represents what I would dare defining as an “Anti-Orientalist” approach: the deep study of the language, the consideration and engagement in many aspects with the culture and the people he

41 He talks about it, besides, in the review of the Serbian poems of 1824, in the preface to the Serbian fairy tales, and in many letters.

42 Mojašević, cit., pp. 136-7

took into account and his efforts in promoting a positive image of the region clearly speak in this favor.

At the same time, the critical dynamics activated by the confrontation with the “foreign” Slavic world helped him reach a deeper consciousness of what his own culture represented. He could measure it thanks to the perception of the “alterity” opened up by through the extension of his cultural perspectives. Grimm deeply loved his country, but did not renounce the chance of looking at it with new eyes, aware of the richness and wideness of foreign horizons. In contrast with those who exclusively tend to underline his patriotism,⁴³ I want to emphasize that his important merit consisted in the fact that he was intensely involved in the relationship with other cultural worlds, devoting himself fully and without prejudices to it, conscious of the several benefits his poetical and scientific vision could achieve.

Jacob Grimm's position stands out even more distinctly if we place it in the historical context in which he was active, that is a period in which the peasant's world of not yet industrialized countries was denigrated by aristocrats and emergent middle classes, who considered it in the best of the cases as a legacy of ancient costumes and beliefs, or a stereotyped living folklore.⁴⁴ While praising the cultural activity of Vuk Karadžić, he was regarding with esteem at the cultural tradition of farmers and simple people, in a world in which the traces of this culture were vanishing under the urgent and violent needs of modern changes.

As we have already seen, Goethe too was stimulated in exploring the wide field of this culture. Moreover, the contact with Serbian popular poetry, favored by Jacob Grimm, played a very important role in his conception of *Weltliteratur*: it has been said⁴⁵ that he actually formulated for the first time this conception (on the basis of his precedent formulation of *Weltpoesie*) precisely in the above-mentioned essay *Serbische Lieder*. In this essay, he also found space to explicitly thank Grimm for his translation and promotion of Karadžić's works.

In the idea of *Weltliteratur* expressed by Goethe, German language was seen as a medium for the reciprocal approach of all world cultures, that should have spread beyond regional and national borders in order to create a spirit of common international literature. Herder's work *Stimmen der Völker* could be probably seen as the first effective example in this direction.⁴⁶

In Grimm's and Goethe's vision, translation was a fundamental part of German culture, and German language, becoming a privileged instrument of exchange, could get into contact with a wide treasure of cultural forms and sources that would help it expanding and enriching its expressive potential. This sort of mediating function, historically and symbolically related to Luther's translation of the Bible, suggested that in the formation and the development of an own national culture German language and culture had to go through the process of translation, which meant an intensive and intentional relation with the different, the

43 As Giuliano Marini, when he affirms that: “(...) his study of the language, as it is known, turned to the Germanic field (...) but not beyond.” in: Marini, Giuliano, *Jacob Grimm*, Guida, Napoli, 1972, p.92

44 Todorova, Maria. *Imagining the Balkans*, Oxford University Press, New York, Oxford, 1997, p.111

45 Mojašević, cit., p. 11

46 Foi, Maria Carolina, *Il Volkston nella poesia romantica: appunti su un equivoco produttivo*. In: Prospero, rivista di culture anglo-germaniche, III, 1996, p.107

stranger.⁴⁷ Goethe himself declared that you can be able to recognize the “other”’s merits only when translations are an essential part of your culture.⁴⁸

The influence of Serbian popular world on Jacob Grimm's work is surprising and, as we have already seen, can be traced in many of his books like in the “German Mythology”, and even in the “German Dictionary”, where he makes reference to a lot of examples from the Slavic languages.

In his preface to the *Kleine Serbische Grammatik*, giving a general frame of the history of Slavic people's settlements in Europe and Germany, he mentions the influence of their language on German: “Slavic linguistic root has obviously many more points in contact with adjacent High German dialect (...) That manifests itself in the resemblances of sound in (..) High German consonant system (...) in the lingual, sibilants sounds and in singular Slavic terms that have been introduced”.⁴⁹ The same historical-comparative tendency is present in his *Deutsches Wörterbuch*.

What Grimm does with German language is to look critically at it through the contact with another one, going beyond conventional borders, reconfiguring it within the process of translation from a less advantaged language like the Serbian one. This process is a desirable one even nowadays for the purposes of of creating deep intercultural communication. It is indeed extremely important to promote good translations⁵⁰ from languages and literatures that are in “weaker” position within the logics of the global market, so that they can contribute to influence dominant conceptual categories on culture.

8. Conclusions

Goethe’s conception of *Weltliteratur* still represents an ideal orientation which can allow us to acknowledge that national and cultural boundaries exist, but literature circulates across them, helping to reshape relations among peoples. This is why we should consider literature as a space that extends beyond historical, linguistic and traditional disciplinary borders.

Scholars as Jacob Grimm, Goethe and Vuk Karadžić believed that in the common cultural motives of many nations it was possible to recompose a sort of international vision of the past, in the sense that one could turn to the “World Literature” of ancient times. As Grimm demonstrates, it is fascinating to observe that some of the recurrent motives of the poems of Serbian area are common to cultural traditions of different spaces and times: “so close to one another echo the motives of all natural poetry”, he claimed.⁵¹

After almost two centuries, the utopian message contained in the conception of *Weltliteratur* is still current

47 Berman, Antoine, *La prova dell'estraneo. Cultura e Traduzione nella Germania Romantica*: Macerata, Quodlibet, 1997, p. 46. Or. Ed: *L'épreuve de l'étranger*, Editions Gallimard, Paris, 1984

48 Magris, Claudio, *Goethe, la prosa del mondo e la “Weltliteratur”*, in: *Utopia e Disincanto*, Garzanti, Milano, 2001, p. 124

49 (Grimm: 1824(2)), p. XXXIX

50 Cfr. Asad, Talal, *The Concept of Cultural Translation in British Social Anthropology*, in: Clifford, James and Marcus, George, *Writing Culture: Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*, University of California Press, 1986

51 “So nah an einander reichen die Motive aller Naturpoesie:” (Grimm: 1823) p. 454

and its potentiality in creating a dimension of cultural exchange is also linked to the need of overcoming the growing risks of a dominant nationalism, never extirpated from Europe .

If the idea of Western Europe and its literatures as the center of irradiation for the whole world wasn't realistic anymore at that time, it is even less now. There is the need of a new intercultural approach, capable of recognizing the role that marginalized literatures have been playing also in the past, through a circulation of texts and cultures that a nationalist gaze is not able to see.⁵² In order to challenge Eurocentrism it is also necessary to re-read classical texts and authors of Western culture with different and deeper perspectives, even the scholars who were considered to be purely nationalist as Grimm erroneously was (and to a certain extent still is). Furthermore, the task of detecting elements neglected by ethnocentric vision has to be essentially combined with the knowledge and promotion of “minor” languages.

Jacob Grimm's role was also the one of the translator, whose purpose was not to merely transfer meanings from a language to the other but to mediate between different cultures and traditions. Turning his attention to different and less known cultures, Grimm managed to extend European literary horizons to marginalized areas of the Continent. This did not imply the predominance of a cultural current among others, but rather the necessity of communication between worlds that had remained until then almost completely isolated. Thanks to the cultural activity of German language scholars like Grimm and Goethe, readers of many countries had the possibility of discovering cultural expressions coming from a neglected part of Europe, and becoming acquainted with this region. The contribution of Grimm to the diffusion and the appreciation of Serbian folk songs is inestimable. In a letter of 1823, Karadžić thanked the German scholar for the review of his collection of folk songs and affirmed that he represented “the biggest luck for our songs, for our language and our literature”.⁵³ This successful intercultural relation brought benefits to both sides, as well as to Europe as a whole, enriching its conceptual background with new and unexpected cultural elements, and contributing to structure a fundamental idea of a shared European heritage.

52 Cfr: Spivak's approach in: Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty, *Death of a discipline*, Columbia University Press, New York, 2003

53 Letter dating to the 14th of november, 1823, in: Karadžić, Vuk Stefanović, *ПРЕПИСКА vol. II САБАРАНА ДЕЛА ВУКА КАРАЏИЋА*, ПРОСВЕТА, Beograd, 1987-96

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