

# FROM DALLAS TO THE BALKANS:

By Gjekë MARINAJ

Dennis Kratz's intellectual reach is enormous. He has written and published widely on a wide array of literary subjects, from the medieval Latin for which he earned his doctorate, to the modern fantasy and science fiction he has taught. He currently serves as dean of the School of Arts and Humanities at the University of Texas at Dallas where he has been a faculty member since 1978.

But Kratz's true expertise is in translation. He is the long-time editor of the *Translation Review*, former president of the American Literary Translators Association, former head of the Center for Translation at UTD, and has published numerous translated works, in addition to four original books. Through translation and scholarship, Kratz has made tremendous contributions to the accessibility and understanding of literature.

**Gjeke Marinaj:** I would like to hear your thoughts on how and why oral epic poetry was created in the first place. My area of interest is on Balkan oral epic poetry.

**Dennis Kratz:** Well, I have several thoughts on that. The first is the obvious fact that human beings are by nature, storytellers. I believe that there is increasing evidence that the human brain processes information more effectively both in creating information and understanding it when it is embedded in a story. The second is that we are natural self-aggrandizers. By that, I believe the heroic context, in which oral epic poetry originated, was a context that recognized and took seriously the human desire to be recognized. You know, in contemporary sociological theory there is the belief that when a person becomes a part of a group, the first question that occurs to him or her is: "Will I fit in," or "Will I have a role?" The question that inevitably follows, if the answer to the first is yes, is: "Well then, how much authority or power will I have in this group?" And the third natural question is: "How much recognition will I get?" So, I believe



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epic poetry, oral epic in particular, responds to the innate human drive first to tell stories and specifically for those people who accomplish things to gain recognition for their accomplishments. Therefore, it seems natural to have a merge in a society in which everyone tells stories. Everyone tells stories even in a modern world that make us look as good as possible, and then as a natural outgrowth of that, as the society becomes more structured, storytellers of excellence emerge and they become the needed media for the promulgation of the deeds and fame of those in power. Though I am more familiar with Homeric Greek society, I am sure that the same occurred in the Balkan society where fame and the ability to distribute wealth were the primary factors in having authority in the society. So, then epic poetry emerges when there are going to be great poets in any human endeavor. Some people will have more skill or power than others. And they, of course, would become the sought-after person. You know there is a famous story of Alexander when he proposed to conquer Persia.

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First, he visited the site that was believed to be the site of Troy, and Alexander was the first warrior in Greece to take along a public relations officer with him because he wanted not only to conquer Persia, he wanted regular reports sent back. He stood on the site of Achilles' tomb and began to weep. And the story says that one of the people he brought with him said, "Are you weeping because you will never be as great as Achilles?" And Alexander is said to have replied, "No, because I have you and not Homer." So, epic poetry is the natural poetry of accomplishment, particularly in cultures that had a heroic code and no vision of an afterlife when one would be rewarded by some gracious entity for one's behavior. The reward, as you know, in a heroic society was "thanks". The ethical code was based not on "was it right or wrong to do it," but, "what will people say about you?" So, a bad deed was a deed that would lead to obscurity or perhaps even worse than obscurity, a negative reputation with people saying bad things about you. The impetus for noble behavior was, "People will say good things about you over and over." You read in epic poetry, "If you do this, you will gain fame." Not that, "you will be a good person." Not, "the gods will love you," but, "you will be famous."

**GM:** Would it be right if I say that most of oral epic poetry doesn't have a specific author? We know the major ones, but can we say that about the others?

**DK:** Well, they don't have an author that we know. You know, Homer is a fictitious name. But Homer was surely the creator of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* and a consummately great artist.

**GM:** That's true.

**DK:** Homer just means "the blind man."

**GM:** So, what does that tell us about the poet in poetry?

**DK:** Well, it tells us a similar fact that in that same time period we don't know who the artists were either. we don't have their names. you know, cave painters didn't sign their names. It tells us that the author did not think of himself as a creator in the same way that later anyone from Vergil to T. S. Eliot thought of himself as the poet. Remember, the nature of all oral-heroic poetry. Generally, you're standing in front of a crowd. You are performing. As you know, poetry was oral poetry; therefore, all poetry was performance. When you are performing, you are under pressure. Generally, I think the great and most famous poets were invited to speak before powerful warlords. The powerful warlords were not nice people. Chances are when they asked the poet to get up and perform, they were drunk. So, this is not the happiest of circumstances. Under such pressure, how do you explain psychologically these thoughts popping into your head? You know, there's the famous scene in the *Iliad* when Agamemnon and Achilles are angry with each other, and Achilles is going to kill him, he pulls his sword and it says in the poem "Athena grabbed him by the hair and pulled him back." Well, as I was taught, in this scene of the great book by Bruno Snell, *The Origins of Consciousness*, he argued that this was the Greeks' early vision of psychology. Homer had no way of saying "He thought better of it suddenly." He has only said, "Someone grabbed him" in the same way we say, "A little bird told me" or "God put this thought into my head". So, the poet thought of himself as simply a conduit for inspiration coming from outside through his mouth, so he never used the word "I".

**GM:** That's true and we should learn from that.

**DK:** All my examples are from Greek poetry; sing muse of the man of many twists and turns, not as Vergil would say, "I sing of...." So, I think we don't

know the poet, not because the poet had a low place in society. Just the opposite, because the poet thought of himself as the conduit for a kind of divine inspiration. Even in the *Odyssey* we do know the names of some of the poets. There was Demodocus and Odysseus says in the *Odyssey* to him, “Give the hero Demodocus the best cut of meat. He calls him “the hero” and yet in the poem celebrating poetry, Homer doesn’t say “I, Homer, sing this”. That may come from other people saying these are the Homeric epics.

**GM:** Does this take away the shame from the fame we talked about earlier? So, actually, it is not the poet looking for fame, it is his subject.

**DK:** This is intriguing to me. This is probably off your point, but, it’s part of my life-long fascination with the *Odyssey*. Here you have a poem that celebrates Odysseus, the hero, but, the hero in the *Odyssey* is powerful because he tells stories better than anyone else. Homer has Odysseus telling his own story. He has Odysseus call the storyteller the hero because if you think about it, if fame is the quintessential value, then the person who can grant you fame is the most valuable person in the society. So, it raises the poet to a level of greatness that surpasses even wealth. In Homer, in a heroic society you can almost say anybody can do great deeds, but if you do them and no one knows about them, then it’s equal to not having done them, so therefore, the poet is the ultimate key in the heroic society.

**GM:** As in the modern idea, if it is not written down, it did not happen, right?

**DK:** Right! And there is no such thing as the intrinsic value of a deed in the heroic code. You act to gain fame.

**GM:** So, you are saying the poet didn’t have to promote himself to fame, because they were subjects and by promoting the poet, they are promoting themselves.

**DK:** And the intriguing thing is to get into the mind of the poet, because usually when the poet

is speaking, he is so busy performing. Remember that he is operating presumably out of this long memory of hundreds upon thousands of lines and partial lines and episodes of poetry. My guess is he is concentrating so hard on how to weave this story so that the warlords don’t kill him that he doesn’t worry about anything. And of course, that is the height of creativity of that intensity of creating at the moment.

**GM:** Going back to the Balkans, and specifically the Kosovo epic oral poem, did they serve a purpose? If so, what was the purpose? If they failed to serve the purpose, that is, to promote the good man, to promote the good stories, and to promote the heroes, why is that, do you think?

**DK:** I don’t know if they didn’t.

**GM:** I am asking you if they did or they didn’t.

**DK:** I think they did; I think the purpose of poetry is not the good man, but the powerful man. Actually, let’s be blunt, it was primarily to celebrate the person who was paying you. Poetry is a very practical business and we’ve created this image of the artist, but there is the famous line by Samuel Johnson, who said, the man who writes for other than money is a fool. Surely, there were shepherds and others who just sang songs. And I think in part, we do that so we’ll gain fame. If we say, “Ivan can sing, let’s go hear him,” and that raises his level in the society. And imagine how many oral societies there are even in the Basque society today. The person who can do extemporaneous poetry is admired. It’s a skill and since they have no writing, this is how information is communicated. You know, even in the Mayan world, there were these great monumental pictures with all of the deeds spelled out, but that only works when you go into Chichen Itza or another site in order to know the deeds of this man. There is no more powerful way to spread fame other than through the spoken word, particularly in the ancient world. It goes faster because you would have to carry the picture around to show it to a few people and you can’t copy it, so you are limited, but, if you tell a story, then another storyteller hears that story and he changes it a little bit. So your fame can defuse through the entire

world and through stories. And that is how we spread information today - through stories.

**GM:** By protecting the story, they protect the territory, isn't that right?

**DK:** Judaism is based on an epic poem. The exodus is a great epic poem; and it is not about the poem that "God gave us this land" but it's also the story that's the glue of Judaism. And it's a way of thinking. The Exodus way of thinking is very different than Christianity. I grew up in both stories. In the story of Christianity, the story of death and redemption is very different than the story of Exodus. And it creates your mindset. Yes, so I had not thought of that. It's a totally wonderful point. The most dangerous thing you can do to an individual or to a culture is to say, "We're going to take your story away. You have to use somebody else's story now."

**GM:** Then, what does that tell us about the human beings as the readers? That means we are willing to kill our people and our opponents' people just so we can protect that story, so, doesn't that, at a certain level, make epic poetry and oral epic poetry dangerous to a society in a point in time?

**DK:** Oh, sure! But all good things are dangerous. It's the mere fact that you create this generative myth, gives you values and limits your thinking, but it is the old notion of the hermeneutic circle... to learn anything you have to have a method and the method enables you to learn but it blinds you to what is not applicable to that method. So, you have a story and it's dangerous because it may celebrate vengeance, it may celebrate anger, and it may celebrate things that you hope you've outgrown. This is the problem of the Greeks. The Homeric ethos is very dangerous. Is it the ethos of the Balkans maybe still today... if you hurt me or have to hurt you back or you can make fun of me? If you do something to me and I forgive you, then there will be a story about how you hurt me and I did nothing back. If I say, wait a minute I have to avoid this story; I have to take vengeance and then I'll gain fame. The Greeks ran into this. They had to, in some way transcend and make metaphorical their great epic, which is the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, which

is about gaining fame. I still think, particularly in the western world, that that's a more powerful and in some ways, I think giving human evolution a more natural story that is forgiving.

**GM:** You are a much respected man. You are a dean, a professor, and an editor. What is your message on how people and students of today should understand the stories of oral epic poetry? What is your message for those who want to learn from somebody who knows?

**DK:** Well, my field of study is the transformation of literary stories from one cultural setting to another - how we inherit a storytelling tradition. Specifically epic, that's what I wrote about. And then we inherited and yet, like anything you inherit, anything you try to translate from one place to another, you have to transform it to the needs of a new environment. It's like if you take a chair from an old house and you put it in your new house, it just doesn't look right. And since you mentioned Macedonia, the home of the man who I think most powerfully exhibited the pluses and the minuses of the heroic temperament, it was Alexander the Great. My message is to see the epic as the stage in the transformation of society that, as seductive as the oldest vision of heroism was, it no longer has the same intrinsic value. Vergil took the epic poetry and translated it into a new kind of hero. Aeneas was both modeled after Achilles and Odysseus and a criticism of Odysseus and Achilles. Aeneas ultimately said, "I can't do what I want to do. I must do what is better for the larger community." And I am interested that every succeeding stage of epic poetry has been an implied criticism of what went before." So, Aeneas becomes the hero who harmonizes and subsumes his desire for fame to the desire for larger good. And I think that would be my message. We need to change our stories. And the story must be the absorption of my desire for fame and to the desire for a more productive and powerful world for the people for whom I say I am acting.