Acta Poetica 26 (1-2)
PRIMAVERA-OTOÑO
2005

South Slavic Oral Epic and the Homeric Question

John M. Foley

Este artículo analiza algunos de los aspectos más controvertidos de la teoría "oral formulaica" desarrollada por Parry y Lord a partir de la consideración del carácter oral del verso homérico y de la comparación de éste con la épica viva en la tradición oral de la ex-Yugoslavia. El autor propone y explica, para detallar y hacer más exactas y útiles las analogías de la teoría original, tres máximas que contienen ideas fundamentales sobre la tradición oral: "la comparación siempre debe estar matizada por el contraste"; "la tradición oral funciona como el lenguaje, pero va más allá"; "el término 'poesía oral' es un sustantivo plural".

This paper reviews some of the most controversial aspects of the Oral-Formulaic Theory developed by Parry and Lord, considering the traditional nature of Homeric verse and comparing it with the living oral epic from the former Yugoslavia. The author proposes three maxims encapsulating fundamental issues concerning oral tradition: "Comparison must always be tempered by contrast"; "Oral traditions work like language, only more so"; and "Oral-poetry is a very plural noun".

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South Slavic oral epic has long played a significant and controversial role in Homeric studies. Milman Parry's epochal studies of the *traditional* nature of Homeric verse in the 1920's led him to consider the analogy of living oral epic from the former Yugoslavia to explain what he contended was also, and necessarily, an *oral* tradition in ancient Greece. To ground the analogy in firsthand observation, Parry and Lord then traveled to what is present-day Bosnia to collect and record performances by twentieth-century Balkan bards, seeking to discover evidence of what they had theorized by conducting a series of experiments in the living laboratory of the South Slavic *guslari*. That fieldwork, most of which was accomplished between 1933 and 1935, gave way to Lord's extremely influential manifesto, *The Singer of Tales* (1960), which extended the so-called Oral-Formulaic Theory to medieval French, Old English, and Byzantine Greek poetry. From these roots a large multidisciplinary field of investigation has bloomed, with the original comparison generating activity in many dozens of language areas from the ancient world to the present day.[1]

[1] For a history of the Parry-Lord initiative and related subsequent research, see Foley 1988; an annotated bibliography of relevant materials is available in

But the field has not evolved without serious questions and thoughtful criticism, as scholars have queried the suitability of the modern South Slavic epic as an analogy for ancient Greek epic. For example, are the *narodne pjesme* long enough, elaborate enough, and of high enough quality to merit comparison with the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*? With at least equal misgivings, they have inquired whether so mechanical a dynamics as Oral-Formulaic Theory seems to advocate can ever provide an explanation of Homer's universally acknowledged artistry. If all a poet is doing is fitting together prefabricated parts, so goes their argument, then how can we call his creation a great poem? These are reasonable and important questions, and they deserve substantial answers.[2]

In this essay, I will suggest some new perspectives on the original comparison between South Slavic and Homeric epic, perspectives intended to refine the analogy and make it more accurate and useful. Simply put, there are helpful connections to be made between the living, performance-driven poetry and its ancient, manuscript-prisoned counterpart, as long as we proceed judiciously and do not try to claim too much. Correspondingly, there are also ways in which the two epic traditions simply do not compare, and we need to be just as forthright about the discrepancies as the parallels.

In order to outline my remarks as economically as possible, I will frame the discussion as a series of homemade, non-ge-

Foley 1985 with updates in the journal *Oral Tradition* (the collated bibliography can be accessed electronically at www.oraltradition.org). Special mention should be made of Parry 1971; Lord [1960] 2000, 1991, 1995; and the publication series *SCHS* [Serbo-croatian Heroic Songs].

[2] The issue of length and complexity —namely, the question whether epics as extensive and intricate as the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* can derive from an oral tradition— is answered unequivocally not only by Avdo Medjedović's performances of *The Wedding of Smailagić Meho* (12,311 lines; published in *SCHS* 3-4) and *Osmanbeg Delibegović and Pavičević Luka* (13,326 lines; published in *SCHS* 6), but also by oral epics from central Asia and Africa, in comparison to which the Homeric poems are really quite short. On this and related issues, see Foley 1999, 40-45.

nuine proverbs, a group of maxims that encapsulate fundamental ideas about oral traditions. Examples will be drawn from Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey* and from the South Slavic epics collected by Parry and Lord, specifically performances by Halil Bajgorić, Ibro Bašić, Mujo Kukuruzović, and Salko Morić from the central Hercegovinian region of Stolac.[3]

Proverb 1: Comparison must always be tempered by contrast

In the enthusiasm over the similarities between the oral epics sung by South Slavic *guslari* and the Homeric poems that have reached us from ancient Greece, some scholars overlooked the inevitable formal differences between these two traditions. As a matter of principle, comparison without contrast must necessarily obscure any situation, and juxtaposition of these two witnesses without sufficient attention to incongruities is no exception.

It should therefore be emphasized that Parry and Lord carefully selected one particular subgenre of epic —Moslem songs or *muslimanske pjesme*— for their comparative research. Their focus thus eliminated not only the panoply of non-epic forms but also the well-populated subgenre of Christian epic, collected and published most famously by Vuk Stefanović Karadžić in the mid-nineteenth century.[4] These labels are im-

[3] These are the acoustic recordings and oral-dictated texts with which I have been working for a number of years (they serve as the basis of the South Slavic sections of Foley 1990, 1991, 1995, 1999, and 2002), and which Albert Lord assigned to me to bring to eventual publication in *SCHS*. Let me take this opportunity to express my gratitude to Stephen A. Mitchell, Curator of the Milman Parry Collection of Oral Literature, for permission to consult and quote from these materials, as well as to Matthew Kay and David Elmer, research assistants at the Collection, for their assistance in generating acoustic and textual copies.

[4] On non-epic forms of South Slavic oral poetry, see Foley 2002, Eighth Word. On the Christian epic, more commonly studied by native scholars than by their North American or European counterparts, see espec. Karadžić 1841-62, as well as the excellent English translation of selections by Holton and Mihailovich (1997), and interpretive studies by Koljević (1980) and Foley (1991, 96-134).

portant not because they identify the religious affiliation of the *guslar* (they are more accurately a reflection of ethnicity), but because they distinguish the longer, more elaborate, and more Homeric Moslem variety from the shorter, more focused, less Homeric type. Parry and Lord's concentration on Moslem epic was wholly intentional, to be sure: they were seeking an analogue that would match the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* as closely as possible. But with that focus came liabilities, the most serious of which was the fact that it was this narrowly restricted model that became the sole analogy —not just for Homer but for all oral poetry treated by the Oral-Formulaic Theory. Not only Homeric epic but all oral and oral-derived poetry had to conform to this single, idiosyncratic model.

To combat such overgeneralization I have advocated distinctions as well as analogies at every level of comparative investigation.[5] We ought first to distinguish poetries by individual poetic traditions and then by genres and subgenres. It would seem highly unlikely that all oral poetries, or even the most limited sample of all long oral epic poetries, would follow the same compositional rules, and evidence from fieldwork emphasizes that diversity. Second, we should be prepared for variations among the characteristic units of utterance identified by Parry and Lord. Not all *formulas* will answer the same definition; different *themes*, or *typical scenes*, will vary in structure and realization from one tradition to the next (or even within the same song); and *story-patterns*, while similar, will not be simply superimposable. Third, the South Slavic epic analogy teaches us that each individual and region sponsors its own version of the traditional poetic language: within the pan-traditional language we find clear evidence of both di-

[5] See espec. Foley 1990, which examines Homeric, South Slavic, and Old English epic poetry according to the criteria of tradition-dependence, genre-dependence, and other comparative dimensions. For a focused summary of similarities and differences in the Homeric and South Slavic epic languages, see Foley 1999, 65-88.

alects and idiolects, the versions used in certain regions and by different singers. We can see a similar phenomenon reflected in the relatively minute differences between the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, and more graphically in the larger discrepancies between the epic and the Homeric Hymns or the poems of Hesiod. To speak of "the traditional language" as a monolith —with no regard for the language, the subgenre, the unit of utterance, or the speaker— will not suffice. We need more attention to differences if our comparisons are to have true meaning.

Proverb 2: Oral traditions work like language, only more so

Because the Oral-Formulaic Theory concentrated so intensely on the structural units of Homeric and South Slavic epic, it seldom if ever asked what they mean or, more precisely, how they mean. For Parry and Lord, recurrent noun-epithet *formulas* like "swift-footed Achilles" or the *guslar*'s "Mustajbey of the Lika" reduced simply to "Achilles" and "Mustajbey". Such traditional phrases were explained as offering the singer who was "composing in performance" a metrical solution to an ongoing challenge. By combining and recombining noun-epithet formulas for heroes and gods with predicates like "And then answered him/her/them", the poet could tell his tale without interruption, drawing on a ready-made inventory of items. The problem, of course, is that Homeric poetry —and South Slavic epic as well— are much more than well constructed collections of items. It is not enough to describe the structure and morphology of these larger, composite "words" in a traditional language, especially if that description leaves us unable to explain verbal artistry. We would not be satisfied with a linguistic profile of Goethe's or Shakespeare's language as the final pronouncement on their artistic achievements.

Instead of understanding such epic traditions as great, organized warehouses of prefabricated materials, I suggest that we remember that Homer's and the *guslar*'s ways of speaking are first and foremost *languages*. As such, their expressive force cannot be captured by parsing them, but only through analysis of their idiomatic usage. Recent research has begun to unearth the idiomatic implications of, for example, "green fear" (*chlôron deos*), a phrase that goes well beyond its lexical sense to indicate a fear that derives from some supernatural source.[6] There is, of course, nothing in its etymology or non-Homeric usage to suggest the value-added, traditional meaning, but collation of the various instances proves that the implication is in play. Another such more —than— literal phrase is "sweet sleep" (*glukus hupnos et al*.), which Homer uses to signal a narrative crossroads without divulging which of two paths the story will follow.[7] This small byte of diction creates a moment of traditional, idiomatically generated suspense by forecasting either the restorative renewal of sleep or some mortal danger, but without predicting which path the narrative will actually take.

The South Slavic *guslar* also depends upon phrases that bear idiomatic implications, that "work like language, only more so". For instance, when a poet refers to a "black cuckoo" (*kukavica crna*), he is speaking of a woman who has been or is about to be widowed.[8] Correspondingly, when he uses the formula "truelove" (*vjerna ljuba* or *vjerenica ljuba*, depending on the metrical context), a singer is naming not simply a woman who remains faithful to her fiancé or husband but rather that particular figure within a Return Song pattern who stays behind when her husband goes off to war.[9] Very importantly, "truelove" names that character whether or not she remains faithful

[6] For a full explanation, see Foley 1999, 216-18.
[7] See further Foley 1999, 229-37.
[8] See further Foley 1999, 102-4.
[9] See further Foley 1999, 107-8.

to her mate. Even the simple decasyllabic phrase "He/she jumped from the ground to his/her feet" carries with it a substantial traditional meaning. Beyond the physical action portrayed, which is nominal in itself, this line signifies "an honorable response to an unexpected or threatening turn of events that demands the principal's immediate attention" (Foley 1999, 108). While we can make our way through South Slavic poetry without being aware of such idiomatic meanings, our experience of the *guslar*'s art is deepened considerably if we appreciate that formulaic structure is an expressive as well as a mechanically compositional tool.

At the level of narrative pattern, consider the ubiquitous feast scene that occurs so often in the *Odyssey*.[10] Instead of seeing it as a convenient compositional template, we will do better to inquire into the "more so" of proverb 2: "Oral traditions work like language, only more so". By collating the 35 instances of this scene over the two epics, we can grasp its larger implications, the most important of which is a culminating mediation that always follows the feast. Thus in *Odyssey* 1 Telemachos' meager entertaining of the disguised Athena leads to his initial stand against the suitors and to his voyage of maturation that constitutes Books 2-4. Kalypso's two feasts in Book 5 result in her accepting Hermes' message from Zeus and her actual release of the long-captive Odysseus. Even the modest bread-breaking between Odysseus and his father Laertes in Book 24 follows the pattern and prescribes mediation, this time in the form of the imposed peace of Athena. These and other instances show a great deal of flexibility: the identities of host and guest(s), the circumstances of the feast (from the opulence of Menelaos' splendid home to Laertes' humble farm), and many other factors are variable because situation-specific. What the traditional pattern contributes is a frame within which these differences play out, a counter-

[10] See further Foley 1999, 171-87.

balance to their diversity that both unites the instances at a basic level and provides for emphasis of their uniqueness. Each feast is different in some ways and much the same in other ways; idiom and idiosyncrasy merge in traditional art.

We can observe much the same dynamic in South Slavic epic. The typical scene of arming the hero, which occurs widely in the performances recorded from the Stolac *guslari*, clearly illustrates pliability as well as consistent structure; taken together, its instances show the trademark variation within limits that one finds in so much traditional language.[11] From the point of view of mechanics, the arming theme provides the poets with a ready-made way to dress a hero for battle, and they adapt it to a wide variety of individuals —not only male stalwarts like Mujagin Halil and Djerdjelez Alija but, with some adjustments, the substitute heroine Fata. But there is more to the process than simple mechanical utility. In every case a set of traditional implications accompanies the typical scene of arming, enriching the presentation by creating a generic expectation. No matter who the hero(ine) or what the situation, the act of arming the hero directly implies that he or she will ride not into immediate battle but to a distant, foreign locale where he or she will undertake a dangerous mission involving a duplicitous character. There is nothing in the literal content of the arming theme itself to indicate this implication, but its recurrence after each instance of the theme argues its idiomatic force. Once again, we see how "oral traditions work like language, only more so".

As a final illustration of our second proverb, I turn to the largest-scale structure that occurs in both Homeric and South Slavic epic, the Return Song pattern that underlies both the *Odyssey* and dozens of performances from the Stolac area.[12] Of course, this pattern is found much more widely as well, not

[11] See further Foley 1999, 94-98.
[12] See further Foley 1990, 359-87; 1995, 175-80; 1999, 115-68.

only in the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter* and throughout the South Slavic epic tradition but also in multiple other Indo-European traditions from medieval England to India. Perhaps the most economical way to explain its pertinence is to tell the South Slavic story in a generic form, indicating in the process some of the structure and flexibility that it provides as a narrative vehicle. Following that brief *résumé,* I will offer a few comparative observations on its idiomatic force.

The story characteristically opens only after a considerable part of the action has already happened, much of which is later recounted in the flashback that necessarily occurs as part of the story-structure. Before we join the narrative, a hero has been called away on the eve of his betrothal, marriage, or the birth of a child in order to participate in a composite force undertaking a grand battle that is not of his own making. As a result of that battle he is detained, usually through imprisonment; in fact, we meet him in his place of detainment at the song's opening. At this point a powerful female intervenes to engineer his liberation, and he begins a perilous trek home. *En route* the hero has to risk his life, and sometimes the lives of companions, in order to accomplish his journey before eventually arriving at his home city in the impenetrable disguise of a long-time prisoner or beggar. What he encounters there is usurpation of his place and authority, with a group of suitors having taken over his household and launched a competition for his fiancée/wife's hand. The hero then undertakes either an athletic competition against the suitors (a ritual combat at which he succeeds against all odds) or an actual revenge battle in which he kills the leader or the entire group. During this process he has been covertly testing the loyalty of his family members and servants, last of all his fiancée/wife, who thereby shows herself to be either faithful or unfaithful. If she proves Penelope-like, the song ends with their reunion and a restoration of peace; if she reveals herself to be a South Slavic

Clytemnestra, on the other hand, the story continues into a sequel Rescue pattern.

The status of the Return Song as an Indo-European story-pattern sheds light on three major problems in *Odyssey* studies. First is the non-chronological sequence of the epic, which the comparison shows to be an idiomatic feature of this tale-type: the *Odyssey* doesn't "begin in the middle," as scholarship has often claimed, but precisely at the proper place for this *subgenre* of epic. Moreover, the flashback in Books 9-12, wherein Odysseus accounts his prior adventures for the Phaeacians, is an expectable traditional and idiomatic feature of this pattern. Second, the binary tension in Penelope's character can similarly be understood as a characteristic feature of the Return Song. All such heroines behave in this fashion, maintaining their mystery and refusing to believe the proofs that are presented until they pose a riddle that they know only the real husband or fiancé can solve. In the South Slavic songs this is often a particular style of playing the *tambura*, for instance. Third, attention to the international story-pattern can lay to rest the longstanding confusion over what the ancients prescribed as the *telos* of the *Odyssey* (Book 23, line 296) versus its actual end at the close of Book 24. All Return Songs reach their critical juncture with the heroine's identification of the returning hero, but this climactic moment is never the terminus of the poem. Even if she proves faithful, a "continuation" is needed to sort out the details of this particular tale (as opposed to the generic story-form). That "added" section of the poem is just as traditional in its structure —if not in its content— as the rest of the narrative.

Whether at the level of formulaic phraseology, typical scenes, or story-pattern, then, the watchword is idiomatic meaning. As our second proverb puts it, "Oral traditions work like language, only more so". Beyond the establishment of traditional structure lies what is ultimately a more important

responsibility for Homeric scholarship: the understanding of traditional referentiality. We can aspire to learn this special language —at least to the degree that our extant manuscripts or recorded performances permit— by collating the various recurrences of a traditional unit and inquiring whether they collectively reveal any idiomatic implication beyond their literal significance. In some cases we will be able to determine the unit's traditional referentiality (as with the examples given above).[13] In other cases we will be unable to do so because of the paucity of evidence. Even with numerous instances to collate and analyze, we will find that some traditional units simply harbor no specialized signification; as with any language, certain expressions are more resonant than others. Furthermore, and here we revisit proverb 1 concerning similarities and differences, we must expect that the traditional units of Homeric and South Slavic epic, which are partially congruent and partially disparate in their structure, will also "mean" differently. Although the principle of traditional referentiality is manifestly operative in both poetries, we must be careful to proceed with respect for the individual philological and expressive profile of each traditional language on its own terms.

Proverb 3: Oral-poetry is a very plural noun

To emphasize that difference and to highlight diversity as an important general principle in comparative studies, let me close this contribution with some suggestions toward a new taxonomy of oral poetry.[14] As a guideline, I propose to broaden the concept of oral poetry while specifying more meaningfully the various forms it can take, to open up the "plurality"

[13] For many more examples at every level of the *Odyssey* and *Iliad*, see Foley 1999, especially chapters 5-8.

[14] For a full discussion of these four categories with examples, see Foley 2002.

of the collective noun "oral-poetry". Crucial in this revision of the overall concept is the reality that oral traditions can —and fieldwork proves that they in fact do— interact in interesting ways with writing and texts. To restrict oral poetry to situations in which neither the poet nor the audience has any recourse to literate media is no more than reductionism. In order to appreciate the entire spectrum of verbal art, and not incidentally to "read" it in the depth it deserves, we must expand our vision. For these reasons I propose the following four categories:

1. *Oral performance*
2. *Voiced texts*
3. *Voices from the past*
4. *Written oral poetry*

Let me stress immediately that none of these categories is inflexible or airtight; each of them harbors a stunning diversity of forms, and some instances of oral poetry exist on the cusp between two of them. Moreover, they do not represent any sort of progression or cultural history, evolutionary or otherwise. They are simply a collection of descriptive groupings that can help us to make sense of oral poetry in all its human complexity by inquiring into their most basic attributes —their composition, performance, and reception. I will comment very briefly on each type and offer a few examples.

By *Oral performance* I mean to indicate such forms as the South Slavic epic that Parry and Lord collected from nonliterate *guslari*, or the variety of orally performed genres in which the Tulu myth of Siri is expressed.[15] In all of these cases and many others, the composition, performance, and reception of the work are accomplished without recourse to written me-

[15] I refer to the Siri myth, whose *Iliad*-length oral epic form was collected by a Finnish-Tulu research team in December, 1990 (see Honko *et al.* 1998 for the text and an English translation; Honko 1998 for commentary and context), but which also finds expression in numerous other genres involving many other kinds of performers.

dia. Although such media may of course be employed later to record and study *Oral performance*, they do not participate in its creation or original transmission and reception. This type of poetry differs from the second category, *Voiced texts*, in that the latter is composed in writing before the event of oral performance and reception. An interesting new example of *Voiced texts* is the North American and European phenomenon of "slam poetry", a medium for social criticism that is gaining in popularity in urban centers and in local and national competitions. Here the (very literate) poets compose on paper or a laptop, but with no intention of publishing their work in print outlets. Their poems are written solely for memorization and then live performance before an audience and a panel of judges who, in a ritual not unlike some ancient and medieval contest-poetry, evaluate the "oral publications" and decide on a winner.

Our third category, *Voices from the past*, stipulates both what we can responsibly claim to know and what we cannot know with any certainty. For this category of oral poetry, the three dimensions of composition, performance, and reception may all have involved writing, but oral tradition has also played a significant and fundamental role. Importantly, the dimension of traditional referentiality —and the possibility of idiomatic meanings such as those discussed above— remains a crucial feature of *Voices from the past*, which include such poems as the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, *Beowulf*, the Old French *chansons de geste*, the Persian *Shahnama*, the Mayan *Popol Vuh*, and many other works.[16] Finally, the apparently oxymoronic designation of *Written oral poetry* covers those cases in

[16] Let me add that *Voices from the Past* is emphatically not a compromise designation, since I see "oral versus written" as an outmoded binary whose usefulness fieldwork has decisively disproven. Rather it attempts a finer distinction, allowing for the possible contribution of writing and texts to a referential system that operates in accord with the principles of oral tradition. For further discussion, see Foley 2002.

which a writing author uses the oral traditional language to compose a poem meant solely for readers rather than hearers. Nineteenth-century South Slavic poems by Bishop Njegoš and Andrija Kačić—Miošić, highly literate authors who internalized the rules for composing traditional verse, fall into this expansive category. So also do more recognizable creations, such as Elias Lönnrot's *Kalevala* and James Macpherson's Ossianic verse, both of which combine "real", field-collected materials with their authors' personal but tradition-derived contributions.

Conclusion

In summary, then, the archetypal comparison of the Homeric *Iliad* and *Odyssey* with South Slavic oral epic has certainly taught us a great deal. At the same time, it has prompted questions that must lead to realistic revision of the original analogy. As proverb 1 indicates, *Comparison must always be tempered by contrast.* That is, an exclusive focus on congruency is reductive without attention to incongruencies: alongside parallels between the traditional languages of *aoidos* and *guslar*, we must be prepared to pay close attention to salient structural differences. Proverb 2 teaches that *Oral traditions work like language, only more so*, in other words that structural analysis is the necessary initial step that by itself will remain insufficient. In order to escape a mechanistic conception of oral traditional language, we must inquire into the idiomatic implications of the registers involved. Beyond philological description, in other words, lies traditional referentiality. Finally, proverb 3 observes that *Oral-poetry is a very plural noun*, that we need to become aware of its entire spectrum rather than attempting a false, unrealistic reduction to some primal concept that field research does not support. In a sense, comparative work on South Slavic and Homeric epic —and on the world's oral poetries— is only beginning.

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