

2003-11-07

ELECTRONIC EDITIONS OF ORAL POETRY

for the session on *The Future of Oral Improvisation*

John Miles Foley

Center for Studies in Oral Tradition
University of Missouri-Columbia, USA

(FoleyJ@missouri.edu)

Website: www.oraltradition.org

This contribution to “The Future of Oral Improvisation” will concentrate on strategies for using the new electronic media to more faithfully represent the process and dynamics of oral poetry. Whereas in the past we have been forced to reduce the reality of performance to an item or fossil for publication in printed books, the internet and electronic facilities of all sorts now offer new and exciting possibilities. Instead of merely transcribing the live improvisation for the printed page, we can include a video or audio file of the performance as part of an edition. Readers of a text can thus become latter-day participants in the performance. Furthermore, we can also provide the reader with linked files and pop-up explanations that include information about historical and cultural backgrounds, the poet’s life and times, linguistic information about the specialized language in which he or she is composing, and a “dictionary” of the idiomatic meanings of phrases, scenes, and whole stories. All this can be done easily and in a user-friendly manner – without resorting to the awkwardness of appendices, footnotes, separate volumes of commentary, and other book-specific strategies. Such features can help to turn a merely textual representation into a living and many-faceted re-creation of the performance arena. We can, in other words, become a better audience for oral poetry by using the new media to fill in many aspects of the performance’s original context.

In what follows, I will discuss some of these innovations as they relate to South Slavic oral epic poetry, which has been so important to the international study of oral traditions. Toward the end of my presentation I will illustrate the first stages of an electronic edition, now available at www.oraltradition.org/performances/zbm.

Background

In the mid-1930s Milman Parry journeyed to the former Yugoslavia to test his hypothesis that Homer was a traditional oral poet, and that the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* that have reached us bear the unmistakable signs of an oral traditional heritage. Together with Albert Lord and their native assistant Nikola Vujnović, he recorded hundreds of epic narratives from South Slavic *guslari*, or oral poets, and samples of these performances from the regions of Novi Pazar and Bijelo Polje have been transcribed, edited, and translated in the series *Serbo-Croatian Heroic Songs*. It is chiefly on this evidence – most of which remains unpublished in the Milman Parry Collection of Oral Literature at Harvard University – that Lord based his epochal book, *The Singer of Tales*, and from which the comparative field of studies in oral tradition has since taken root. To say that the South Slavic oral epic tradition was instrumental in rediscovering ancient Greek orality is thus a vast understatement; from a historical perspective the *guslar*’s performances were from the beginning a crucially important witness.¹

The project on which I am reporting today has four linked aims. First and most generally, I aspire to increase the limited number of translations of non-canonical works of verbal art. The available selection has of course long been dominated by Western works accepted as “part of the heritage,” silencing many other voices – especially the voices of oral traditions – in the process. In an era of rapidly evolving globalization, these other voices need and deserve to be heard, by both scholars and students.²

Second and more specifically, I want particularly to add to the available sample of editions and translations of South Slavic oral epic. It is a continuing irony that, since the work of Milman Parry and Albert Lord in the 1930s, so much has been based upon the epic tradition of the *guslari* when so little of its riches have stood open to anyone but specialists.

Third, and relatedly, the present project responds to a need to bolster existing *theory* by a fresh emphasis on *practice*, an emphasis that the present international conference has clearly taken to heart. That is, instead of beginning with scholarly perspectives, it will return to the performances themselves in order to avoid the automatic, “default” assumptions we too often make about works of verbal art we encounter only as texts.

Fourth, and potentially most significantly, this project will engage what must amount to the core challenge in any such endeavor: to *translate the implications*. Here, a great many problems present themselves. Most generally, the same questions emerge as with any work of verbal art, oral or written, performed or inscribed – the many dimensions of its idiomatic character. How does one convey even a partial sense of cultural context, historical framework, relationship to other works, and so forth? Some of these concerns can be addressed via conventional strategies, including an introduction and running notes to the text. But for South Slavic oral epic the implications do not end here, since any edition and translation that aspire to faithful representation must also confront the traditional poetics that informs both the composition and the reception of the given performance or text. Not only are the units of meaning – the formulaic phraseology, the typical scenes, the story-patterns – fundamentally different from the words, sentences, paragraphs, chapters, and books of written literature. Beyond what these units literally mean lies the further challenge of what they imply. Because “oral traditions work like languages, only more so,” they possess what I have elsewhere called *traditional referentiality*, the value-added layer of idiomatic meaning indexed or cued by their units.³ To handle such dimensions, we must devise a new kind of presentation, one that uses the resonance of the tradition to bring the individual performance or text back to life.

Let me stipulate before proceeding farther that the focus of this essay and the project as a whole will be on South Slavic Moslem epic from the Milman Parry Collection.⁴ That is, we will be concerned with the same subgenre of epic that served as the sole comparand for the foundation of the Oral-Formulaic Theory. Notwithstanding this constraint, I offer South Slavic Moslem epic both as a suitable text case, hopefully generalizable (with adjustments) to other oral traditions, and as an end in itself. We need to know more about this fascinating mode of verbal art – as a window on oral traditions worldwide and as what the medieval English poets called a “word-ward” in its own right.

From performance to page

Scholarship has established the importance of what is lost in the trajectory from the experience of a live performance – in this case by a South Slavic *guslar* – to the silent

codification of a printed edition.⁵ In the present state of knowledge, no one seriously contests the cost of this primary stage of translation; the only question is how to minimize its effect or compensate for at least part of the inevitable loss.

For my edition of South Slavic epic from the Stolac region, I have created a resource to do exactly that: to assist the reader in re-creating something of the original context, in co-creating what I have called the “performance arena.”⁶ The performance in question is Halil Bajgorić’s *The Wedding of Mustajbey’s Son Bećirbey* (*ženidba Bećirbega Mustajbegova*), sung to the instrumental accompaniment of the *gusle* on June 13, 1935. It consists of 1030 decasyllabic verses and recounts a typical wedding song, a genre that calls for a massive army to gather and then to rescue a kidnapped fiancée after a prolonged battle against the Christian enemy. Bajgorić came from a small village named Dabrica in the region of Stolac in central Hercegovina, and was 37 years old (unusually young for an accomplished epic bard) at the time that he performed this song for Parry, Lord, and Vujnović. The printed edition and translation houses a portrait of the singer, a transcription and English translation, a performance-based apparatus, and other features, some of which will eventually be transferred to the internet site (or E-companion).

Readers of the printed book will be invited to visit the E-companion at www.oraltradition.org, the website for our Center for Studies in Oral Tradition. That site includes an E-companion to my 2002 book, *How to Read an Oral Poem*,⁷ and to Mark Bender’s study of Chinese storytelling, *Plum and Bamboo*, published in the series *Voices in Performance and Text*.⁸ At the present time that site also contains a complete transcription and translation, configured in Acrobat Reader (pdf) format to avoid problems with character translation, and a streaming sound-file of the entire 1030-line performance in RealPlayer. What the reader can do, then, is to scroll down through the transcription/translation text as the sound-file plays, listening to as well as silently reading Bajgorić’s performance. We need not formulate theories about how the performance sounded; visitors to the site can actually hear a digitally clarified version of exactly what he sang as they scroll through the original-language and translated texts. This part of the E-companion is ready now, and will be illustrated this afternoon.

Future initiatives

1. Multiple versions. One of the most severe limitations that the format of the book places on the representation of oral traditions is the necessity of choosing one version of a poem or song and consigning all other versions to inferior places in the appendix, notes, or separate volumes. The development of hypertext media permits us to go beyond such limitations. Instead of being constrained by the spatialized format of the conventional book, where one version must be epitomized and other versions relegated to secondary status in notes or an appendix, an electronic edition can present multiple performances concurrently. Within a conventional printed volume, we are limited to visually signalled cross-references and other cues. Within a hypertext “volume,” however, we can imitate the original dynamics of oral tradition by networking all available performances together, thus restoring their parallel status and collective context. Instead of an artifact, we can re-create the reality of a performance within a larger poetic tradition.

2. Links and pop-ups. Pathways to contextual information, such as the singer’s background and perspective, the history of the tradition, and so forth, can be made an easily

accessible part of the presentation by installing them as links and pop-ups on the performance web “pages.” Hand in hand with electronic recensions of hypertext media will go the installation of such pathways. To my mind, it is no accident that the Internet and hypertext hold enormous promise for new levels of fidelity in representing oral traditions: the pathways that constitute the web closely resemble the *oimai* that Homer describes as the singer’s compositional avenues of structure and function. Both kinds of pathways facilitate process and provide access; likewise, the product (or individual performance-text), so highly valued in late twentieth-century textual culture, is revealed as merely the one-time outcome of following the given route.⁹ Such strategies will help to expose the twin illusions of object and fixity that force impertinent methods on the reader of South Slavic oral traditional performances and other oral traditions. They will move us back toward the reality of experience and process.

3. Traditional implications. In addition to performance and process, a edition-translation of South Slavic oral epic must pay due attention to the dimension of traditional implications. The core challenge here is to ask not only *what* the poems mean but also, and more fundamentally, *how* they mean. Because the singers’ own cognitive units of utterance, the “words” of their storytelling language, constitute a specialized code, we need to be aware of their structure and their idiomatic meanings.¹⁰

But to become aware of this expressive organization is one thing; to ask what difference it makes to our understanding of performances and texts is quite another question, one that has been only relatively recently addressed in any thoroughgoing way. Even after scholars had identified at least the outlines of these units of utterance, research was bogged down in fruitless argument over the ‘limitations’ of stereotyped diction and narrative structure. Now scholarship is starting to move beyond this naive view of oral traditions in general, and of South Slavic epic in particular, and to ask more interesting and incisive questions. If heroes are named repeatedly with the same noun-epithet formulas, what do these phrases index? How does the traditional framework of a shared typical scene interact with details used by only one singer or within only one tale? What do the largest-scale structures offer an epic performance other than a blueprint for sequencing the hero’s adventures?¹¹

Some examples of the idiomatic implications of traditional language in South Slavic epic will help us appreciate the natural resonance of this dedicated medium, as well as the challenge of representing that resonance in an edition and translation. At the uppermost level, the story-pattern that underlies the narrative shape of an epic performance contributes a great deal to its impact as verbal art. Far from merely limiting the poet’s options, story-patterns provide frames of reference, “maps” that establish horizons of expectation. Thus, if a given performance identifies itself as a Wedding Song, or the Siege of a City, or the Return of a Hero, something important happens: the listener or reader begins to expect the story to follow a familiar pathway. There may be many twists and turns, not to mention alternate destinations, along the well-worn route, and there may be characters, situations, and events that the listener or reader has not met before. But behind this surface of individualistic, sometimes unprecedented details lies the unifying, idiomatic force of the story-pattern – setting certain aspects into relief even as it explains certain other aspects by traditional reference. Simply put, a story-pattern is a constitutive part of the communicative process.

Just as the audience comes to expect an overall sequence of events, so each event itself tends toward a traditional, idiomatic, and therefore expectable shape. When the captive hero begins to shout in prison in the South Slavic Return Song, for instance, we may be sure of a couple of things. First, his captor, the enemy Christian ban, will personally or vicariously refuse to release him. Second, the captor's wife, the banica, will then take her husband's place and succeed in negotiating a bargain that silences the prisoner's intolerable noise and frees him to return to his homeland. Details may change from one realization to the next – the ban may threaten the captive's immediate or longer-term demise, the banica may taunt her husband, the prisoner may gain only a conditional release – but the overall pattern of the scene varies only within limits, retaining enough of its recognizable shape to bear the burden of traditional referentiality. Its characteristic and idiomatic variability thus mirrors that of language itself. Whatever the names of the characters, the location of the jail, the specific verbal commerce between ban and banica, or the prisoner's particular promises, the ultimate meaning of this "word" is clear: from the time the captive hero starts to shout, his eventual freedom and return home are assured.¹² Traditional implication guarantees it.

In addition to story-patterns and typical scenes, simple phrases may bear idiomatic implications that cannot be accounted for by combining the literal meanings of their components.¹³ For example, when a South Slavic epic poet says "But you should have seen [Character X]," he is ending one narrative increment and bridging the gap to the next, which will feature Character X. Should the *guslar* portray one person saying to another "San usnila, pa se prepanula" ("You've dreamed a dream, so you're frightened"), he is creating a recognizable scenario in which an older male speaker berates a young woman whose report of an impending crisis he does not believe. Furthermore, and ironically, the report will prove true and many lives will be lost. As a third example, the returning hero will always address the woman from whom he has been long separated by calling her "true love"; whether she proves faithful or not, this is the reverberative, emblematic term that identifies the most pivotal of all characters in the Return Song epic.¹⁴ Such value-added meanings are part of the South Slavic epic idiom; without a sense of their contribution, the listener or reader remains unaware of the full richness of the performance in its traditional context.

All three levels of "words" carry implied meanings that play a large part in the *guslar's* artistry, in his meshing of traditional and individual. To put it another way, as in the homemade proverb cited above, "oral traditions work like languages, only more so." Of course, we should be quick to acknowledge that all verbal art depends upon idiomatic meaning to a degree. But oral traditions make especially heavy and particularly frequent reference to more-than-literal signification; it is the method by which they engage the poetic tradition, which both dwarfs and enormously expands any one of its performed instances. Because of the resonance of the bards' specialized register, we must understand that "composition and reception are two sides of the same coin." Both singer and audience/reader must play by the same rules. To enable readers of editions and translations to join the exchange, to converse in the same idiom, we need to devise strategies that allow them to "hear" at least some of these traditional implications.

I plan two sets of strategies to meet this challenge. The first, already mentioned above, will include providing the reader alternate versions of a given song by the same and

different *guslari*. The same initiative will also open pathways to other songs with the same or related characters, situations, and events, thus exposing some of the traditional network of referentiality on which they all depend.

Second and perhaps more importantly, I will provide not a critical apparatus, which illuminates one text by comparison to other texts, but an *apparatus fabulosus*, or story-based apparatus. It will be the function of this part of the E-companion to expand the “words” of any given performance from inadequate, literal meanings to traditional, idiomatic meanings. Thus the *apparatus fabulosus* will open up formulaic phraseology, typical scenes, and story-patterns, explaining their non-literal signification by referral to the poetic tradition. These value-added meanings will be recovered by collating multiple instances of such “words” in different narrative settings, and then by inquiring what more-than-literal force they contribute to the mesh of traditional and individual. Through this second strategy – implemented by placing links and pop-ups in hypertext – the reader of South Slavic oral epic will be able to move beyond phrases and scenes and story-patterns to their indexed connotations, simply by moving the mouse or clicking on a highlighted link. In short, that reader will be able to understand how “oral traditions work like language, only more so.”

Sample Text

Instrumental introduction (29 secs.)

1/0:00

wOj! Rano rani Djerdelez Alija,		0:30	Oj! Djerdelez Alija arose early,
vEj! Alija, careva gazija,		Ej! Alija, the tsar's hero,	
Na Visoko više Sarajeva,		Near Visoko above Sarajevo,	
Prije zore vi bijela dana --		Before dawn and the white day --	
Još do zore dva puna savata,	5	Even two full hours before dawn,	
Dok se svane vi sunce vograne		When day breaks and the sun rises	
hI danica da pomoli lice.		And the morning star shows its face.	
Kad je momak dobro vuranijo,		When the young man got himself up,	
vU vodčaku vatru naločijo		He kindled a fire in the hearth	
vA vuz vatru dčevzu pristavijo;	10	And on the fire he put his coffeepot;	
Dok je momak kavu zgotovijo,		After Alija brewed the coffee,	
hI jednu, dvije sebi nato™ ijo --		One, then two cups he poured himself --	
hI jednu, dvije, tu ĩejifa nije,		One, then two, he felt no spark,	
Tri,™ etiri, ĩejif ugrabijo,		Three, then four, the spark seized him,	
Sedam, osam, dok mu dosta bilo.	15	Seven, then eight, until he had	
enough.			

¹ On the history of the Oral-Formulaic Theory, see J.M. Foley, *The Theory of Oral Composition: History and Methodology* (Bloomington, 1988, repr. 1992); for bibliography, J.M. Foley, *Oral-Formulaic Theory and Research: An Introduction and Annotated Bibliography* (New York, 1988), with updates in *Oral Tradition* 1 (1986), 767-808, 3 (1988), 191-228, and 12 (1997), 366-484 – also available online at www.oraltradition.org/bibliography/. Publications of the Parry-Lord materials to date include six volumes edited and translated by M. Parry, A.B. Lord, and D.E. Bynum of the series *Serbo-Croatian Heroic Songs* 1-2, 3-4, 6, 14 (Belgrade and Cambridge,

Mass., 1953). The English-language volumes are 1: *Novi Pazar: English Translations*, and 3: *The Wedding of Smailagi Meho* by Avdo Medjedović.

² See especially L. Haring, “What Would a True Comparative Literature Look Like?”, in J.M. Foley (ed.), *Teaching Oral Traditions* (New York, 1998), 34-45, as well as the entire collection *Teaching Oral Traditions*, which offers introductions to dozens of oral traditions, living and textualized, as well as methodological essays.

³ For a comparative view of ancient Greek, South Slavic, and Anglo-Saxon epic, see J.M. Foley, *Traditional Oral Epic: The Odyssey, Beowulf, and the Serbo-Croatian Return Song* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1990; rpt. 1993); on traditional referentiality, see Foley, *Immanent Art: From Structure to Meaning in Traditional Oral Epic* (Bloomington, 1991), especially 6-8, and *The Singer of Tales in Performance* (Bloomington, 1995). This homemade proverb – “oral traditions work like languages, only more so” – is one of ten such nuggets of pseudo-folk wisdom that were formulated to emphasize various aspects of traditional poetics; see further Foley, *How to Read an Oral Poem* (Urbana, 2002), especially 125-45.

⁴ For a sense of the immense archival holdings of the Parry Collection in South Slavic epic, see M. Kay, *The Index of the Milman Parry Collection 1933-35: Heroic Songs, Conversations, and Stories* (New York, 1995).

⁵ On the history of editing folklore performances to texts, see E.C. Fine, *The Folklore Text: From Performance to Print* (Bloomington, 1994) and “Leading Proteus Captive: Editing and Translating Oral Tradition,” in J.M. Foley (ed.), *Teaching Oral Traditions* (New York, 1998), 59-71, and Foley, “Folk Literature,” in D.C. Greetham (ed.), *Scholarly Editing: A Guide to Research* (New York, 1995), 600-26. For a magisterial account of textualizing oral epic in many different traditions all over the world, see L. Honko, *Textualising the Siri Epic* (Helsinki, 1998), especially 169-217.

⁶ Foley, ed. and trans., *The Wedding of Mustajbey's Son Becirbey, as Sung by Halil Bajgoric*, Folklore Fellows Communications. Helsinki, forthcoming; E-companion at www.oraltradition.org/performances/zbm. For a full discussion of the term and concept of “performance arena,” see Foley, *Singer*, 47-49.

⁷ Visit www.oraltradition.org/hrop/.

⁸ Visit www.oraltradition.org/books/bamboo/.

⁹ For a comparison of oral tradition and the Internet as against the Alexandrian Library, see J.M. Foley, “The Impossibility of Canon,” in J.M. Foley (ed.), *Teaching Oral Traditions* (New York, 1998), 13-33.

¹⁰ On register, performance arena, and communicative economy, see Foley, *Singer*, especially 47-56; also *How to Read an Oral Poem*.

¹¹ For full-length answers to these kinds of questions, see J.M. Foley, *Homer's Traditional Art* (University Park, Pa., 1999), chapter 4 (for South Slavic epic) and chapters 5-7 (for Homeric epic).

¹² Even within the typical scene of Arming the Hero, which always forecasts an immediate journey as well as rehearses a familiar inventory of clothes and weapons, traditional form allows for – and deeply contextualizes – wide variation. The many instances of women assuming the hero's role, and therefore undergoing a modified Arming the Hero type-scene, are evidence of both the structural flexibility and the traditional implications of this multiform.

¹³ On these and additional examples, see Foley, *Homer's Traditional Art*, chapter 4.

¹⁴ A survey of the traditional morphology of the Return Song pattern in the South Slavic epic tradition (and more widely in Indo-European narrative) highlights the absolute centrality of the woman's role; everything, including the hero's reassumption of his place in society, is directly dependent upon her actions. See further Foley, *Homer's Traditional Art*, chapter 5.