

Albert B. Lord, *The Singer of Tales* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard U.P., 1960)

These notes are included here, because although they relate to the great heroic ballad tradition of the Balkans, rather than to tales and tale telling, they vividly capture compositional and transmission methods in an old predominantly oral culture, similar to the ones the Grimms found in north Hesse, and Propp in early twentieth century Russia

The story of *The Singer of Tales* is a rich and interesting one. Suggestions had been circulating for some time in the scholarly world during the early years of the twentieth century, about an archaic performance tradition featuring long heroic songs in the Balkans, which took as their topic the wars of the Christians and the Turks. These used a method of composition-in-performance, a method, apparently improvised, that enabled the production of lengthy sung narratives of several thousands of lines of length,. There was a further, sensational, suggestion, namely that these oral bards were using the same methods that Homer had, nearly two thousand years previously. The phenomenon prompted a number of intriguing questions: what were the mechanisms of transmission here? When these performers sat down cross legged with their one-string *gusles* and entertained their audiences in taverns and coffee-houses, were they performing from memory or was some other mechanism in play. Harvard scholars Milman Parry and Albert Lord went to the area to explore this, and made an epic sequence of field-recordings on aluminium disc, capturing several thousand hours of performance. The results, enshrined in Albert Lord's wonderful book, *The Singer of Tales*, were to transform our understanding of oral tradition and the processes of transmission in oral or predominantly oral societies.

Lord says "The singer of tales is at once the tradition and an individual creator. His manner of composition differs from that used by a writer in that the oral poet makes no conscious effort to break the traditional phrases and incidents; he is forced by the rapidity of composition in performance to use these traditional elements." p.4  
"With oral poetry we are dealing with a particular and distinctive process in which oral learning, oral composition, and oral transmission almost merge; they seem to be different facets of the same process." p.5  
"Although it may be true that this kind of poetry has survived longest among peasant populations, it has done so not because it is essentially 'peasant' poetry, but rather because the peasant society

has remained illiterate longer than urban society." p.6

There are three ways of looking at the Homeric corpus: one, that it was written, and by a single author, Homer, back in the ninth century BC. But writing in ancient Greece could not be traced so far back.

A second theory had Homer as the last brilliant representative of a series of "redactors" who had gathered oral fragments together and gradually cobbled them together to form huge written epic structures. The third approach, and the one which Parry and Lord set themselves to document, was that Homer was an oral bard, a wandering poet-singer who moved around the aristocratic courts of ancient Greece with his lyre, performing episodes from the epics that were later gathered together under his name. This raised fascinating questions about his compositional method, and the means by which his songs were transmitted orally for nearly three centuries, before being codified in written form at the orders of Pisistratus, tyrant of Athens in the 6<sup>th</sup> century BC.

Lord says "These scholars who made the third choice were moving in the right direction, namely towards oral tradition, but in putting the poet of our Homeric texts before the period of writing, they were unwittingly creating more problems than they were as yet equipped to handle. Their choice was a compromise. Oral tradition was a fickle mistress with whom to flirt. But scholars could call in to their help the 'fantastic memories' so 'well attested' of illiterate people. They felt that a text could remain from one generation to another unaltered, or altered only by inconsequential lapses of memory. This myth has remained strong even to the present day. The main points of confusion in the theory of those scholars who made the third choice arose from the belief that in oral tradition there is a fixed text which is transmitted unchanged from one generation to another." pp.7-10.

This idea was first propounded by James Macpherson, the editor of *Ossian* in eighteenth century Scotland, who posited various mechanisms in traditional societies which could ensure that oral material was transmitted coherently over long periods of time.

Lord continues, "The theories of multiple authorship can be divided into two general classes. The first, and the earliest, saw the Homeric poems as compilations of shorter songs, stitched together by their compiler. D'Aubignac presented this in his *Conjectures* in

1715, but it was Lachmann and his followers in the nineteenth century who made serious attempts to dissect the poems according to his *lieder* theories. The attempts were unsuccessful and unconvincing; for the dissectors could not agree on where to use the scalpel. The theory was discredited [...] The work of the first group of dissectors led to several valuable compilations. [Elias] Lonnrot [1802-1884] put together the Finnish *Kalevala*, the Estonians entered the competition with the *Kalevipoeg*, and the Serbs attempted a number of “national” epics on the Kosovo theme. But nothing comparable to the Homeric poems was produced. The problem of the way in which the Homeric poems had attained their length, if they were not literary productions of a single author, remained unsolved." pp.10-11.

"They knew and spoke often of folk ballad and epic, they were aware of variants in these genres, yet they could see only two ways in which those variants could come into being: by lapse of memory or by wilful change. This seemed so obvious, so much an unquestioned basic assumption, that they never thought to investigate exactly how a traditional poetry operated.

They always thought in terms of a fixed text or a fixed group of texts to which a poet did something for a reason within his own artistic or intellectual self. They could not conceive of a poet composing a line in a certain way because of necessity or because of the demands of his traditional art." p.11

Comparing their recordings, Parry and Lord felt able to say: "Our singer of tales is a composer of tales. Singer, performer, composer, and poet are one under different aspects but at the same time. Singing, performing, composing are facets of the same act.

It is sometimes difficult for us to realize that the man who is sitting before us singing an epic song is not a mere carrier of the tradition but a creative artist making the tradition." p.13

This was a sensational finding. But it was complicated by the fact that the south Slavs had had a written tradition for a thousand years when Parry and Lord began their work, and it was true that many of the traditional singers who seemed to perform in the true authentic manner were in fact performing memorised written material which had been circulating for some time. But there was a deeper strand, a still lingering technique that had survived the onset of literacy and still preserved the compositional methods of an almost unimaginable antiquity.

"The majority of such 'folk' singers are not oral poets. The collector even in a country such as Yugoslavia, where published collections have been given much attention for over a century, some of which have become almost sacrosanct, must be wary; for he will find

singers who have memorized songs from these collections.

In spite of authentic manner of presentation, in spite of the fact that the songs themselves are often oral poems, we cannot consider such singers as oral poets. They are mere performers. Such experiences have deceived us and have robbed the real oral poet of credit as a creative composer; indeed to some extent they have taken from epic performance an element of vital interest." p.14

Lord begins, intriguingly, by looking not at the singer, but at the audience, because, he argues, their situation, horizons of expectation, and attention span have a direct shaping influence on the singer's approach to his material.

"If we are fully aware that the singer is composing as he sings, the most striking element in the performance itself is the speed with which he proceeds. It is not unusual for a Yugoslav bard to sing at the rate of from ten to twenty ten-syllable lines a minute.

Since...he has not memorized his song, we must conclude either that he is a phenomenal virtuoso or that he has a special technique of composition outside our field of experience. We must rule out the first of these alternatives because there are too many singers; so many geniuses simply cannot appear in a single generation or continue to appear inexorably from one age to another. The answer, of course, lies in the second alternative, namely, a special technique of composition." p.17

Lord sees the existence of literacy and written/printed texts as deadly--not to the songs themselves, but to the method of composition by which they are realised [which in the end amounts to the same thing]--schools, cities, and literacy eventually put paid to it in urban areas. p.20

"We must remember that the oral poet has no idea of a fixed model text to serve as his guide. He has models enough but they are not fixed and he has no idea of memorizing them in a fixed form. Every time he hears a song sung, it is different." p.22

"Sometimes there are published versions of songs in the background. [Named Informant] in Bihac told us that he did not learn to sing until he was about twenty-eight (he was forty-five in 1935), and that he had learned his songs from the song books, the Matica Hrvatska collection in particular. Although he could not read, somebody had read them to him. He had also heard the older singers in his district. The entrance of these song books into the tradition is a very interesting phenomenon, and one that is open to gross misinterpretation. Yet as long as the singer himself remains unlettered and does not attempt to reproduce the songs word for word, these books have no other effect on him than that of hearing the song." p.23

"It may truthfully be said that the singer imitates the techniques of composition of his master or masters rather than particular songs. For that reason the singer is not very clear about the details of how he learned his art, and his explanations are frequently in very general terms. He will say that he was interested in the old songs, had a passion for them, listened to singers, and then, 'work, work, work' and little by little he learned to sing. He had no definite program of study, of course, no sense of learning this or that formula or set of formulas. It is a process of imitation and of assimilation through listening and much practice on one's own." p.24

The beginner, "has very likely not learned much about 'ornamenting' a song to make it full and broad in its narrative style. That will depend somewhat on his model. If the singer from whom he has learned it is one who uses much 'ornamentation,' he has probably picked up a certain amount of that ornamentation too. Whether his first song is fully developed or not, it is complete in its story from beginning to end and will tend to follow the story as he heard it from his master. If, however, and this is important, he has not learned it from one singer in particular, and if the stories of that song differ in the various versions which he has heard, he may make a composite of them. He may, on the other hand, follow one of them for the most part, taking something from the others too. Either way is consistent with the traditional process. One can thus see that although this process should not be described as haphazard, which it is not, it does not fit our own conceptions of learning a fixed text of a fixed song." p.24

"Our proper understanding of these procedures is hindered by our lack of a suitable vocabulary for defining the steps of the process. The singers themselves cannot help us in this regard because they do not think in terms of form as we think of it; their descriptions are too vague at least for academic preciseness. [The learner/performer] without writing thinks in terms of sound groups and not in words, and the two do not necessarily coincide. When asked what a word is, he will reply that he does not know, or he will give a sound group which may vary in length from what we call a word to an entire line of poetry or even an entire song. The word for 'word' means an 'utterance.' When the singer is pressed then to say what a line is, he, whose chief claim to fame is that he traffics in lines of poetry, will be entirely baffled by the question; or he will say that since he has been dictating and has seen his utterances being written down, he has discovered what a line is, although he did not know it as such before, because he had never gone to school." p.25

Of one particular singer who said he had given a particular version

“word for word and line for line”, Lord remarks that what he meant was that it was “like” the version in question; obviously, since the speaker did not know what a word or a line was.

“...the picture that emerges is not really one of conflict between preserver of tradition and creative artist; it is rather one of the preservation of tradition by the constant re-creation of it.” p.29

“Memorization is a conscious act of making one's own, and repeating, something that one regards as fixed and not one's own. The learning of an oral poetic language follows the same principles as the learning of language itself, not by the conscious schematization of elementary grammars but by the natural method.” p.36

“The theme [he means the various episodes out of which these tales are built], even though it be verbal, is not any fixed set of words, but a grouping of ideas.” p.69

“A general principle is here involved that is of significance when we are dealing with a tradition being invaded by printed song books: namely, that if the printed text is read to an already accomplished oral poet, its effect is the same as if the poet were listening to another singer. The song books spoil the oral character of the tradition only when the singer believes that they are *the* way in which the song should be presented. The song books may spread a song to regions where the song has not hitherto been sung; in this respect they are like a migrant singer. But they can spoil a tradition only when the singers themselves have already been spoiled by a concept of a fixed text.” p.79

Versions may change as a singer grows and matures; after maturity is reached, about 50, “From the time that maturity is reached and the singer has established the general outlines of a theme, evidence seems to indicate that he changes it little if at all.” p.94.

“When the singer of tales, equipped with a store of formulas and themes and a technique of composition, takes his place before an audience and tells his story, he follows the play which he has learned along with the other elements of his profession. Whereas the singer thinks of his song in terms of a flexible plan of themes, some of which are essential and some of which are not, we think of it as a given text which undergoes change from one singing to another. We are more aware of change than the singer is, because we have a concept of the fixity of a performance or of its recording on wire or tape or plastic or in writing. We think of change in content and in wording; for, to us, at some moment both wording and content have been established. To the singer the song, which cannot be changed (since to change it would, in his mind, be to tell an untrue story or to

falsify history), is the essence of the story itself. His idea of stability, to which he is deeply devoted, does not include the wording, which to him has never been fixed, nor the unessential parts of the story. He builds his performance, or song in our sense, on the stable skeleton of narrative, which is the song in his sense." p.99

"We are occasionally fortunate enough to be present at a first singing, and we are then disappointed, because the singer has not perfected the song with much practice and by the text of repeated performance. Even after he has--and it may change much as he works it over--it must be accepted and sung by other singers in order to become a part of the tradition, and in their hands it will go through other changes, and so the process continues from generation to generation. We cannot retrace these steps in any particular song. There was an original, of course, but we must be content with the texts that we have and not endeavour to 'correct' or 'perfect' them in accordance with a purely arbitrary guess at what the original might have been.

Indeed, we should be fully aware that even had we this 'original,' let us say, of the wedding of Smailagic Meho, we would not have the original of the basic story, that is the song of the young man who goes forth into the world to win his spurs. We would have only the application of this story to the hero Meho. Each performance is the specific song, and at the same time it is the generic song. The song we are listening to is 'the song'; for each performance is more than a performance; it is a re-creation. Following this line of thinking, we might term a singer's first singing of a song as a creation of the song in his experience. Both synchronically and historically there would be numerous creations and re-creations of the song. This concept of the relationship between 'songs' (performances of the same specific or generic song) is closer to the truth than the concept of an 'original' and 'variants'. In a sense each performance is 'an' original, if not 'the' original.

The truth of the matter is that our concept of 'the original,' of 'the song,' simply makes no sense in oral tradition. To us it seems so basic, so logical, since we are brought up in a society in which writing has fixed the norm of a stable first creation in art, that we feel there must be an 'original' for everything. The first singing in oral tradition does not coincide with this concept of the 'original.' We might as well be prepared to face the fact that we are in a different world of thought, the patterns of which do not always fit our cherished terms. In oral tradition the idea of an original is illogical.

It follows, then, that we cannot correctly speak of a 'variant',

since there is not 'original' to be varied!" pp.100-101

"...'oral transmission', 'oral composition,' 'oral creation,' and 'oral performance' are all one and the same thing. Our greatest error is to attempt to make 'scientifically' rigid a phenomenon that is fluid." p.101

"It seems to be highly significant that the words 'author' and 'original' have either no meaning at all in oral tradition or a meaning quite different from the one usually assigned to them." p.101

"In the Parry Collection there are songs from singers who learned them from printed texts. Their songs, however, are very close to the printed versions, and one realizes that the singer was attempting consciously to memorize or at least to follow closely what was printed. Singers like [a true traditional master] Avdo...make no attempt to memorize...even when a song is read to them, but singers imbued with the idea that the written text is the proper one strive to keep to it even verbally if possible. With them the tradition is dead or dying. It could be truly said, I believe that the only way in which they can compensate for their lack of awareness of the tradition, that awareness that we are beginning to see as deeply conservative, religiously maintaining the meaning of a song, is to memorize or attempt to memorize." p.109

A section follows dealing with the fact that songs vary from fathers to sons, and why."...one cannot write song. One cannot lead Proteus captive; to bind him is to destroy him.

But writing, with all its mystery, came to the singers' people, and eventually someone approached the singer and asked him to tell the song so that he could write down the words. In a way this was just one more performance for the singer, one more in a long series. Yet it was the strangest performance he had ever given. There was no music and no song, nothing to keep him to the regular beat except the echo of previous singings and the habit they had formed in his mind. Without these accompaniments it was not easy to put the words together as he usually did. The tempo of composing the song was different, too. Ordinarily the singer could move forward rapidly from idea to idea, from these to theme. But now he had to stop very often for the scribe to write down what he was saying, after every line or even after part of a line. This was difficult, because his mind was far ahead. But he accustomed himself to this new process at last, and finally the song was finished.

A written text was thus made of the words of song. It was a record of a special performance, a command performance under unusual circumstances. Such has been the experience of many singers in many lands, from the first recorded text, I believe, to present times. And what has been said of other performances can be said of it; for though it is

written, it is oral. The singer who dictated it was its ‘author,’ and it reflected a single moment in the tradition. It was unique.

Yet, unwittingly perhaps, a fixed text was established. Proteus was photographed, and no matter under what other forms he might appear in the future, this would become the shape that was changed; this would be the ‘original’. Of course, the singer was not affected at all. He continued as did his confreres, to compose and sing as he always had and as they always had. The tradition went on. Nor was his audience affected. They thought in his terms, in the terms of multiformity. But there was another world, of those who could read and write, of those who came to think of the written text not as the recording of a moment of the tradition but as *the* song. This was to become the difference between the oral way of thought and the written way.” pp.124-125.

He speaks of the kinds of things that happen to a text when the singer is asked to dictate it without singing and pausing after each verse, and there are two effects both with obvious potential relevance to Fairy Tales, one is that performers can’t do it outside their usual setting and at a totally different speed from what they’re used to, and the resulting text is inferior to their normal standard, verse frequently being interspersed with explanatory prose and so on. The other effect, and you get this with the most able singers, is a very superior text, of conspicuous length and richness of ornament, precisely because the singer has more time to think, and his talent makes him less context bound. This latter is what Lord thinks happened in the case of Homer, as he explains in the second, Homeric, section of his book. pp.126-7

“The use of writing in setting down oral texts does not *per se* have any effect on oral tradition. It is a means of recording. The texts thus obtained are in a sense special; they are not those of normal performance, yet they are purely oral, and at their best they are finer than those of normal performance. They are *not* ‘transitional,’ but are in a class by themselves.

It is necessary for us to face squarely the problem of ‘transitional’ texts. Is there in reality such a phenomenon as a text which is transitional between oral and written literary tradition?” p.128 An important point this in traditional Homeric studies. Lord thinks not: “...this process is not a transition from an oral to a literary technique of composition. It is a transition from oral composition to simple performance of a fixed text, from composition to reproduction. This is one of the most common ways in which an oral tradition may die; not when writing is introduced, but when published song texts are spread among singers. But our singer does not necessarily blossom forth as a literary poet. He usually becomes--- nothing at all.” p.130

“One of the difficulties in comprehending the change from oral to written style lies in the fact that we think of the written always in terms of quality, and that of the highest. We assume without thinking that written style is always superior to oral style, *even from the very beginning*. Actually this is an error in simple observation of experience, perpetrated alas by scholars who have shunned experience for the theoretical. A superior written style is the development of generations. When a tradition or an individual goes from oral to written, he, or it, goes from an adult, mature style of one kind to a faltering and embryonic style of another sort...

While the presence of writing in a society *can* have an effect on oral tradition, it does not *necessarily* have an effect at all. The fact of writing does not inevitably involve a tradition of written literature; even if it did, a tradition of written literature does not inevitably influence an oral tradition. The Southern Slavs had a tradition of written literature since the end of the ninth century; indeed they invented the alphabets used by the Slavs. Yet this written tradition had no influence on the form of the oral tradition until the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The two existed side by side, not, of course, within the same group, but certainly within the same district. In mediaeval times, writing and written literature, first on foreign models but soon developing along its own lines, were cultivated in the monasteries, as in the rest of Europe. The carriers of oral tradition were the unlettered people outside the monasteries. Beginning in the fifteenth century on the Adriatic coast and on some of the islands, particularly in the cities of Split, Zadar, and Dubrovnik, again under foreign influence and with foreign models at first, a rich literary tradition arose not only among the clergy, but more especially among the wealthy merchant aristocracy. In the villages surrounding these cities and among the other classes of the population in the cities, that is, among those who were not of patrician families and not educated in the schools abroad, or later at home, oral tradition continued to flourish among the unlettered. In both these instances the literary tradition was not a development from the oral tradition. It was stimulated from outside, from Byzantium or from Italy.” pp.134-135

What has been the effect of the collections on the tradition itself? The larger, more expensive editions did not reach the communities in which the singing was cultivated, nor did they have any effect in places where there was no person who could read. But during the nineteenth century schools began to spread slowly, and after World War 1 schools were to be found in most communities. Since the establishment of the Communist regime a concentrated battle against illiteracy has been going on, and now

in Yugoslavia only a comparatively small number of the older people are still unable to read and write. Common fare in all school books have been the songs from Vuk's collection or, to a lesser extent, from Njegos's work [...]

The effect on the younger generation which could read was that the young people began to memorize songs from the books. They still learned the art from their elders and could sing songs picked up from oral tradition, but they were moving away from that tradition by memorizing some of their repertory from the song books. The memorization from a fixed text influenced their other songs as well, because they now felt they should memorize even the oral versions. The set, 'correct' text had arrived, and the death knell of the oral process had been sounded. There are very few younger singers, particularly among the Christian population, who have not been infected by this disease. This is somewhat less true among the Moslems, because none of their collections has been given the almost sacred authority of Vuk's or Njegos's." pp.136-7.

"The singers who accept the idea of a fixed text are lost to oral traditional processes. This means death to oral tradition and the rise of a generation of 'singers' who are reproducers rather than re-creators. Such are the men who appear in costume at folk festivals and sing the songs they have memorized from Vuk's collection. You or I could do the same with a certain amount of training and with a costume. These 'singers' are really counterfeits masquerading as epic bards! They borrow the songs of real singers complete from first word to last; one can follow the text in the book. They are a menace to the collector. The idea of the fixed text has been established in them, but they are not by this token literary poets, even though they are now members of the community of those with written 'mentality', in spite of the fact that some of them are still unlettered.

The change has been from stability of essential story, which is the goal of oral tradition, to stability of text, or the exact words of the story. The spread of the concept of fixity among the carriers of oral traditional epic is only one aspect of the transition from an oral society to a written society. Ironically enough, it was the collector and even more those who used his collection for educational, nationalistic, political, or religious propaganda who presented the oral society with a fixed form of its own materials...Today in Yugoslavia the transition under this aspect is nearly complete. The oral process is now nearly dead." p.138

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