

ORAL POETICS AND ORAL EPIC RESEARCH IN CONTEXT

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The history of poetics in the European languages is a long and rich one. The traditional point of departure has always been Aristotle's *Poetics*, although there are significant precursors in earlier Greek philosophy as well as evidence internal to archaic Greek poetry itself. The assignment of an origin for poetological research thus remains arbitrary since one could easily take Plato's criticisms of Homer, or Xenophanes' or Heracleitus' among others, as genuine moments in the development of the tradition, just as scholars have found evidence for implicit poetic theories in Homer, Hesiod, Sappho, Theognis. However interesting, all such research into this early period remains largely speculative, and, as a result of the fragmentary nature of the evidence, marked by a fundamental ambiguity. Aristotle's *Poetics* itself canonizes the ambiguity: there are references to music, meter, representation, narrative structure, genre, and even characterization, yet no analysis devoted solely to singers' techniques. In short, the proper composition of stories and their modes of presentation received Aristotle's attention, not the techniques of singing, oral composition, or oral transmission.

The importance of this ambiguity for any research into "oral poetics" is that we inherit a massive philosophic and philological tradition in literary poetics which, although rich and provocative, unfortunately failed ever to isolate the idea (much less function or context) of a tradition of poetry existing and transmitted wholly or partially in song. This might be in large part the result of a dialogue attributed to Plato, known as the *Ion*, which immortalized a devastating portrait of the Homeric "rhapsode" as 1) stupid 2) without technique 3) unable to perform unless divinely inspired or manically possessed. Plato's dialogue was celebrated by the Renaissance because it suggested that poetic composition is something akin to madness, divine inspiration, poetic fury. But for the contemporary folklorist or anthropologist wishing to find in the tradition of poetics evidence useful for analyses of oral transmission, the effect of Plato's portrait has been such that information concerning folk singers, rhapsodes, and other oral performers is sparse, since from Greek antiquity forward these performers have been presented as unwise, unskilled, unoriginal.

Sparse, that is, until the problem of the origin of the Homeric poems began to generate interest in the folk singers and performers of other nations (Simonsuuri, 1979). It is something of a truism that debates concerning the origin and quality of Homeric poetry, along with the researches of the Grimm brothers in Germany and the philosophy of Herder (among other persons and factors), each in their own way generated profound interest in the folklore and folk singers of many European nations. The history of these developments is a long and complex one and certainly deserves closer scrutiny, especially in relation to emerging doctrines of myth, history, and aesthetics at the time, and these in relation to emerging ideas of nationhood, and the effects, then, of the entire movement on editorial methods and practices for the redaction of oral poetry. In this respect, Hungarian folklorist Vilmois Voigt's (1990) survey of nineteenth century collectors, editors, and editions of oral poetry is an excellent place to begin. Whatever the details may be, there can be little doubt that the dispute concerning the origin of the Homeric poems, together with the diverse folk materials collected in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, gave rise to a seachange in the study of oral traditions, narrative song, and oral poetics - a result which is still very much in development today.

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In 1933, Milman Parry, a young Homeric scholar who had completed two doctoral theses at the University of Paris by the age of 27 and shortly thereafter published a number of studies on Homeric diction in America, undertook to record singers throughout Yugoslavia and did so in such detail and scope that the collection soon became one of the most important collections of oral literature in the world. Parry's reasons for recording came directly from his own work on Homeric language, which had led him to realize that he required comparative material from a living epic tradition in order to carry his philological work forward.¹ In his studies of Homeric diction, Parry had demonstrated

that the language of the poems could not have been created by one individual poet but must have come from a centuries old tradition; the noun-epithet formulae, the metrical structure and occasional irregularities, the admixture of dialects and archaic forms, the repeated themes and episodes, all must have belonged to the traditional language which the poet had inherited and used. This was Parry's argument. In his writings prior to 1933, Parry had demonstrated these points at length and indeed, Parry is now widely regarded as having proved that the language of the Homeric poems was traditional and ultimately oral in origin. And while it might be said that interest in Parry's studies of Homeric diction remains squarely on the side of philology and Greek epic studies, there can be little doubt that his methods, goals, and achievements in the collection of Serbo-Croatian oral poetry remain of utmost importance to researchers worldwide, including linguists, anthropologists, and folklorists.

Between the years 1933 and 1935, Parry collected material in Bosnia and Hercegovina, Macedonia, Montenegro, and Serbia. He used the best available technology, followed a robust research plan, documented the results in a meticulous manner, and managed to cover a wide geographic area in a short amount of time. He died only months after returning from his last expedition to Yugoslavia, on December 3, 1935, at the age of 33 years old. The results of Parry's collecting in Yugoslavia now exist as the Milman Parry Collection of Oral Literature at Harvard University and contain over 3,580 phonograph records and a total of 12,544 texts, including songs, conversations, and stories (in dictated and recorded form).² Let us look more closely at the reasons for his success.

After a preparatory visit in 1933, Parry returned one year later, bringing his family, automobile, and research assistant (Albert Lord) to Dubrovnik, where he established a residence. Parry had built a special phonograph machine by the Sound Specialities Company in Waterbury, Connecticut (later modified by Bell Laboratories in Zagreb) in order to make possible continuous recording with two turntables, and with clearly audible results. He hired a native singer, Nikola Vujnovic, to serve as assistant and interviewer (although there were others); he proceeded methodically to find and record singers who belonged to a genuine tradition of oral transmission, and he eliminated singers of poor quality as well as those who had only memorized published poems from printed songbooks; he recorded epic songs, folk songs (many of which were sung by women, particularly in the Gačko region³), conversations with singers, prose stories, alternate openings to songs, multiple versions of songs by the same and different singers, and conducted other similar experiments aimed at securing a thorough collection of his material. The full range of problems that Parry, Lord, and Vujnović pursued in interviews, recording, and collection is revealed by Lord's published list of the "questions we asked ourselves"; it deserves quotation in full, because in it the a valuable methodology is revealed:

The questions which we asked ourselves were: what happens to a song in the hands of a singer from one performance to another? What happens to it when months elapse? What happens to it when it passes from one singer to another? Does it deteriorate when it goes from a good singer to a less skilled one? Is it improved when it goes from a less to a more skillful singer? What changes are there and how do these changes arise? Are composition and transmission really the same process? What are the standards by which singers judge one another? Are they critical of the songs, or do they merely repeat what they have heard without questioning inconsistencies? Are there differences between versions taken down by dictation and versions which are sung? Are these difference on the formulaic or on the thematic level or both? What causes these differences? What is the relationship of one song in a singer's repertory to the other's? If the events in one song contradict events in another, does the singer make any attempt to justify or correct such contradictions? Does the singer have any concept of a cycle of songs? How does a singer learn his art? From whom does he learn? What is his status in society? Are there professional singers?⁴

In short, the materials generated by these questions, as well as preliminary answers in various forms, now constitute the Milman Parry Collection of Oral Literature. Perhaps the best way to appreciate the scope and success of the collection is to read Roman Jakobson's assessment of it, which was written for the preface to the first edition of the songs collected by Parry and published in Belgrade, Yugoslavia, and Cambridge, Massachusetts, in 1954. In the preface Jakobson writes:

His enterprising spirit was admirable, his recording equipment excellent. The harvest from this fieldwork is unique, not only in the history of Serbocroatian and of other Slavic epic studies, but also, without overstatement, in the whole world history of inquiry into the epic heritage. It is unique, not only in the number of verses and of songs collected and in the length of some of the songs, but also, primarily, in the diversity of the investigation and in the accuracy and refinement of the methods used. (1954:xi)

In world-historical terms, however, the value of this collection for comparative analysis did not appear to a wider readership until Parry's assistant, Albert B. Lord, published the harvest in *The Singer of Tales* in 1960. In the intervening years Lord had continued the comparative work outlined by Parry and had contributed in a number of important ways to the study of oral epic. Not only did Lord continue to catalogue, transcribe, edit, translate, and publish material from the collection (and to collect more in 1937, 1950, and 1951, in Yugoslavia), he also wrote a number of articles that applied his comparative insights to Homer. With Bartok he edited and published an edition of (primarily) women's folk songs, *Serbo-Croatian Folk Songs* in 1951. In 1953 and 1954 the first two Lord-edited volumes of *Serbo-Croatian Heroic Songs* appeared and with them epics, interviews, and singers' biographical information kept in the collection became available in Serbo-Croatian and English.

But it was the *The Singer of Tales* that gave rise to an entirely new field of comparative study in oral traditions, including ancient, medieval, and modern living traditions. The study opens with a classic discussion of Lord's personal observations of singer's techniques and provides a vivid description of the way in which oral traditional singers learn their art, from the days of apprenticeship to the later performances in coffee houses as mature, cherished, singers in the community (this chapter, like the book as a whole, is an instant classic). In the next chapter Lord adopts Parry's definition of the "formula" ("a group of words which is regularly employed under the same metrical conditions to express a given essential idea"⁵) and explains its function and modifications in the Serbo-Croatian context. He then discusses "theme," defined as "the groups of ideas regularly used in telling a tale in the formulaic style of traditional song,"⁶ and analyzes it in a similar fashion. For example, Lord shows how repeated "themes," scenes, or episodes, such as the arming of a warrior or the assembly of heroes for battle, have a semi-independent life of their own (what would later be called "multiforms") in the tradition and are shared by different singers for various purposes.

In the remaining chapters, Lord applies his methodology to analyses of examples taken from Ancient Greek, Serbo-Croatian, Old English, Medieval French, and Modern Greek traditions. Throughout the study Lord defines, demonstrates, and analyzes various levels of poetic structure, repetition, and variation characteristic of so many oral traditions, and he finds oral traditional structures throughout each of the texts that he presents. Perhaps Lord's greatest contribution was to describe this mode of singing as "composition in performance," which is to say, he demonstrated that oral composition is neither purely improvised nor entirely memorized performance, but a style of composition and recomposition which generates traditional, but always slightly different, versions of the old, well-known songs. Lord's insights and approach were quickly adopted by many, misunderstood by others, and, as with any provocative new analytical approach, gave rise to a whole host of works written for and against; the approach soon became as "oral-formulaic" analysis and its history can be read in John Miles Foley's *Theory of Oral Composition* (1988).

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Important developments in anthropology, ethnography, folkloristics, and linguistics in America in the 1960s made a significant impact upon oral epic research. As will be seen from what follows, these developments have made possible the critique of traditional notions of origin, translation, and tradition, and have made possible new analyses of temporal, spatial, linguistic, and textual categories *constitutive* of the structure and transmission of traditional epics, structures which may not have received extensive scrutiny previously. Alan Dundes' highly influential article on folkloristic methodology entitled "Text, Texture, and Context," published in 1964, offers one place to begin. Through the definitions provided in this article it will be easier to understand how later developments in American folklore research have impacted oral epic research on an international scale.

"Text, Texture, and Context" is first and foremost a contribution to studies in genre definition, but its influence has extended beyond genre studies; one might say that the article offered sweeping insight to a generation of researchers in America. In the article Dundes begins by defining "texture" as the specific "phonemes and morphemes" employed in the language of the folklore item, but adds "rhyme, alliteration, stress, pitch, juncture, tone, and onomatopoeia" as other textural examples (1980[1964]:22). According to Dundes, the study of "texture" is basically the study of "language," which is to say, the study of the language of the folklore item (although he suggests that "textural" features can be found in folkdance and folk art as well). It is for this reason, Dundes argues, that linguists rather than folklorists have paid closer attention to "texture," much to the detriment of folkloristic research in particular to the detriment of genre studies of folklore diffusion (his example is the "tongue twister," a genre wholly dependent on linguistic "texture" for its structure and therefore resistant to diffusion across languages) (1980[1964]:23). Failure to analyze the "texture" amounts to a failure to consider much less interpret or explain on of the defining features of the object, namely, its visible, audible, specific surface or texture; but at the same time, to reduce folkloristic analysis *solely* to the level of texture amounts to what he calls a "linguistic fallacy." (Dundes 1980[1964]:23)

Dundes next defines "text" as a single version, a single telling, a single item of folklore. The "text" would include a single proverb (to take but one example), independent of its moment of utterance. Understood as such, Dundes argues that "texts" may be analyzed and compared at the level of content and meaning, independent of linguistic texture, but then must be brought into relation with textural and contextual features if the analysis of genre or function is to succeed (1980[1964]:23). (From the perspective of previous folklore methodologies, Dundes' "text" would be the category on which historic-geographic studies centered, although Dundes does not make this point explicitly).

The third level is "context," which Dundes defines as "the specific social situation in which that particular item is employed." (1980[1964]:23-24) He adds that it is necessary to distinguish between "context" and "function," arguing that function is "an abstraction made on the basis of a number of contexts" and that this "function" usually amounts to an "analysts's statement of what (he thinks) the use of purpose of a given genre of folklore is." (1980[1964]:24) (And with this one could suggest a point of contact, albeit with important differences, between "function" as understood by American folkloristics and Russian folkloristics, i.e., in the Russian tradition of Bogatyrev, Cistov, Jakobson, Zemcovskij, who were writing at roughly the same time.⁷) Dundes goes on to argue, by way of example, that no rigorous analysis of folklore can afford to ignore any of the three levels since each are constitutive of the production, communication, and experience of the folklore item.

In light of this essay it is not difficult to see how folkloristic research began to bloom along similar lines of inquiry in America. (Although there certainly had been important precursors: Dell Hymes advocated an "ethnography

of speaking” as early as 1962, and one thinks of Branislav Malinowski and William Bascom earlier still [Bascom 1953, 1954; Ben-Amos 1993:209-210], both of whom emphasized “context” in their research.⁸) In his 1971 article “Toward a Definition of Folklore in Context,” Dan Ben-Amos argued that a paradigm shift had taken place in American folkloristics from an emphasis on “transmission, variation, and distribution” to a new emphasis on aesthetic organization, means of communication, and social organization (Ben-Amos 1971:13; Abrahams 1992:43). In short, Ben-Amos substituted the idea of the “communicative event,” (which includes the narrator, the story, the audience, and communal practices) for the mere “lore” and then simply redefined the field of folklore as “artistic communication in small groups” (Ben-Amos 1971:13). This re-definition allowed a generation of researchers to move beyond older, ideologically burdened and overly romantic notions of the “folk” and also stimulated new studies of communication, performance, and social organization in small groups.⁹

Important breakthroughs in Native American studies in the 1960s and 1970s in America also took place along similar lines. For anthropologists, ethnographers, and sociolinguists such as Dell Hymes, who were interested primarily in applying linguistic insights to Native American traditions, one faced an extremely difficult problem: most of the Native American texts had been taken down, prior to advances in recording technology, by dictation and then only sporadically and imperfectly; in short, the traditions were rich but the data was fragmentary.

This situation led Hymes (1962, 1975, 1981) whose studies in “the ethnography of speaking” have been highly influential, to develop what is now called “ethnopoetics,” a methodology that seeks to analyze the poetic structures and oral traditional modes of communication from the perspective of a speech community’s native, local, and internal poetic systems, which themselves are constitutive of that tradition’s verbal art (1977, 1981, 1994). With this approach Hymes discovered that structures such as phrase lengths, breath-groups, pauses, verse groupings, stanzaic structure, scenes, and story-patterns belonged to the verbal art of particular communities whose texts survived only in prose dictation and therefore had been thought to lack poetic, or ethno-poetic, systems of meaning. Hymes has been able to take many such texts (which at first glance seemed to be little more than prose documents) and find numerous poetic structures within them, thus revealing a recovered or reconstructed poetic or ethnopoetic form (Hymes 1977, 1981).

The paucity of Native American texts has motivated research in a different, albeit intimately related way. Rather than look for structures hidden within texts, Dennis Tedlock (1972, 1983, 1985, 1990) has stressed the need to record and document the gestures, pauses, intonational changes, exclamations, repetitions, and other features constitutive of performance, and then “to translate” these features into an actual text, rather than simply print a plain text without paralinguistic signals. Tedlock not only records the various features of the performance, but later transcribes them, analyzes them, and produces English translations which attempt to present the same features in print. The translations often look like:

THIS! because he wishes to demonstrate the
TEXTURE CONTEXT RHYTHM GESTURES
and other features which appear in the text. (breathing, pause)
Tedlock’s translations, — indeed —
often have this sort of appearance for . . .
PAGES and PAGES and PAGES and PAGES
FOR THE ENTIRE TRANSLATION, IN FACT!!!

With his provocative editions and translations, together with his essays and reflections on methodology, Tedlock has challenged Western models of text and text-production and has stimulated considerable debate concerning the ontology of the folklore text (Fine 1984).

Anthropologist Richard Bauman (1977, 1986) has been another important voice in the development of “contextual” anthropology and folkloristics. In relation to the theories already mentioned, Bauman has written many important studies from the perspective of what he calls the “performance-centered approach to oral literature,” the most important one being, perhaps, his *Verbal Art as Performance*, published in 1977. In this study Bauman describes and analyzes the many different “communicative means” which open the complex “patterning of performance” deployed by tale-tellers in the performance of a story or song (Bauman 1977:10, 25). He emphasizes that the language used in performance, as well as special ways of speaking and the use of paralinguistic gestures, each constitute different but essential aspects of communication in performance. As he puts it:

Performance represents a transformation of the basic referential... uses of language. In other words, in artistic performance of this kind, there is something going on in the communicative interchange which says to the auditor, “interpret what I say in some special sense; do not take it to mean what the words alone, taken literally, would convey.” (Bauman 1977:9; quoted also in Foley 1995:8)

Bauman calls the space of performance the “interpretive frame” and offers a tentative list of “keys to performance” that help him to analyze his particular storytellers; these “keys” include: special signals and codes (i.e., the specialized language of the tale), figurative language (expressions that signify differently than in ordinary speech), parallelisms, special formulae, appeals to traditional authority, disclaimers of performance (“I am not a good singer, but...”), and

special paralinguistic or nonverbal signals such as gesture, dance, music, and movement (Bauman 1977:22). In Bauman's scheme, to participate in a performance or to begin to interpret a performance faithfully, one must have fluency not only in the language of the tale but also in the special signals and keys constitutive of that performance. Without this fluency, one's comprehension of the communicated event will be necessarily limited and one's analysis of the event will be similarly incomplete. It follows *a posteriori* that interpretations of texts that do not "know" about or understand certain "signals" that have survived from oral to written text will by necessity obscure certain essential dimensions of that text.

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All of the approaches presented above have been profitably synthesized in John Miles Foley's work on oral epic in comparative context. Foley has written several volumes of comparative studies concerning Ancient Greek, Old English, and Serbo-Croatian epics, including his annotated bibliography of comparative research published in 1985, *Oral-Formulaic Theory and Research: An Introduction and Annotated Bibliography*,¹⁰ as well as a history of oral-formulaic studies as mentioned above (1988); he has also been an important voice in the international community of oral epic research and founded the journal, *Oral Tradition*, in 1986 in order to bring this research to a wider readership.

From early publications forward Foley has stressed the need to observe certain limitations facing the comparison of heterogenous texts, genres, and traditions, or what he calls "text-dependence," "genre-dependence," and "tradition-dependence" (Foley 1988:109-110; 1990:5-19). This means, in brief, that any comparative study of an oral traditional work must rigorously analyze the form and condition of 1) the texts under analysis 2) the genres to which they belong 3) the specific traditions from which they originated. For example, any comparison of South Slavic epics from Christian and Muslim traditions would have to consider their different textual or recorded forms (a text written down by Vuk Karadžić as opposed to a song transcribed from a record in the Parry collection, for example, are two very different kinds of "texts"), their different generic rules (the story patterns in the Moslem epic accommodate a much longer poem), and their different performance contexts (again, the Christian tradition's epics are much shorter than the Muslim tradition's since both Turkish courts and Ramadan customs offered contexts in which epics could be performed at greater length). According to Foley, any comparison of the minimally-edited texts of Vuk Karadžić with an audio recording of a Muslim epic in the Parry collection, or with the more radically altered Croatian texts edited by Luka Marjanović at the turn of the century for the Matica Hrvatska, would require a preliminary analysis of the differences in text, genre, and individual tradition.¹¹

In recent work Foley has drawn explicitly on Bauman, Hymes, and Tedlock for methodological insight. (Perhaps it would be worth mentioning that Foley spent two postdoctoral years at Harvard working with Albert Lord in the Parry Collection and thus has been able to use both published and unpublished materials from that collection: undoubtedly he is the only Homerist in America who is actively transcribing, editing, analyzing, and translating Parry Collection material in preparation for forthcoming editions.) In *The Singer of Tales In Performance* Foley transforms much of the "performance-centered" terminology mentioned above into his own. In place of Bauman's "interpretive frame" Foley uses "performance arena" to signify the space of an epic performance, whether it be an *actual* context of performance or the *virtual* space opened by the epic language whenever it is performed—in either case, a special "performance arena" is implied whenever the song begins and from that moment forward both singer and audience alike understand that they have entered the ritually sanctioned space of performance (Foley 1995:8).

Foley's develops his second insight, that of a traditional epic "register" governed by "traditional rules," under the influence of his own work on epic diction (Foley 1990:52-120) in combination with sociolinguistic studies of "register" associated with Halliday (who invented the term) and Hymes (who popularized its use in folklore circles). First, M.A.K. Halliday:

A register can be defined as the configuration of semantic resources that the member of a culture typically associates with a situation type. . . . Since these options are realized in the form of grammar and vocabulary, the register is recognizable as a particular selection of words and structures. But it is defined in terms of meanings; it is not an aggregate of conventional forms of expression superposed on some underlying content by "social factors" of one kind or another. It is the selection of meanings that constitutes the variety to which a text belongs.¹²

Dell Hymes explains the concept further: major speech styles associated with social groups can be termed *variants*, and major speech styles associated with recurrent types of situations can be termed *registers*.¹³

And Foley brings "register" within the orbit of epic studies by defining it as: an idiomatic version of the language that qualifies as a more or less self-contained system of signification specifically because it is the designated and sole vehicle for communication in the act of traditional oral performance. Any culture or social group will have a variety of registers on which its members draw as they transact the business of verbal art (as well as other, less poetic discourses) as activities situated in daily life. (Foley 1995:15-16)

Foley's further application of the concept to the language of traditional oral epic extends the analysis further:

A register may consist of a polydialectal *Kunstsprache*, an artificial form of the general language in question that contains a *mélange* of morphological and lexical variants that would in normal conversation not constitute a coherent expressive code; this is the case, for example, with the language of Homeric Greek and South Slavic Moslem epic. Or

the register may include archaic or obsolescent words or forms, as in the instance of Serbian charms, or unusual because inherently reverberative phrases, as in the Old English riddles. Such a dedicated idiom, pressed into service for a particular communicative purpose as the lingua franca of the given performance arena, may even employ words or forms that stem from or are modeled on words or forms from entirely separate languages. (Foley 1995:51)

These features will be familiar to any ethnologist who has investigated the language of orally transmitted epic; certainly, Romanian epic language exhibits similar dialectal forms, archaisms, syntactical patterns, and inflections not found in everyday speech (Beissinger 1988, 1991). Foley's point is that the traditional languages of long epic narrative, ballad, lyric, charms, and proverbs, (among numerous others), typically exhibit their own internal linguistic integrity which is, in fact, constitutive of that channel or space of meaning. To relate this to the discussion of register mentioned above, we would say that these archaisms or unusual forms of speech are constitutive of the "vehicle of communication" (Foley), that they form a "major speech style" in the traditional community (Hymes), or that they constitute a "configuration of semantic resources that the member of a culture typically associates with a situation type" (Halliday). Foley's analysis of "traditional rules" in his earlier work (1990) also plays an important role: "traditional rules" are the syntactic, semantic, metrical, morphological, and prosodological constraints that govern the traditional diction or "register" that is passed down orally for generations. Or to put it slightly differently, the "traditional rules" form the "grammar" of the singing language that has developed over time, and a singer's fluency in the specialized language means that the "grammar" has been absorbed and can be handled intuitively, effectively, and skillfully by that singer. From Foley's perspective, the "register" is passed down from singer to singer, from audience to audience, as a traditionally sanctioned space of "variation within limits" allowing "communicative economy" to function in a dense, perhaps ritually-sanctioned, communicative channel available to all who participate in the tradition (Foley 1995:1-59).

This brings us to Foley's central idea of "traditional referentiality." On his view, epic languages typically signify in a more dense, and perhaps more unique, manner than simple everyday speech. For example, in certain traditions, the mere singing of certain introductory verses will suggest to the audience that an entire story-pattern already known to them is about to unfold; the mere mention of certain heroes' names, or the appearance of certain familiar episodes, calls to the audience's minds an entire universe of mythology and traditional narrative structure. This mode of referentiality, which is wholly traditional and in no way dependent upon texts or literate instruction, typifies the traditional mode of signification which then allows—and perhaps this is the most important point—the singers and storytellers to create and share verbal art in an economical way unique to the traditional community. The singer need not explain the life of a *hajduk* because it is "implied" from the first mention of that character; a storyteller need not explain the background of his tale because it is known to all; women need not explain the function of the charm in order for the community to accept its healing power; all succeed, on Foley's view, because "traditional referentiality" offers the signifying space in which "registers," bound by "traditional rules" and traditional diction, open a unique realm or "performance arena" in which verbal art of profound meaning, linguistic compression, semantic density, and mythical gravity accomplishes its work. The "communicative economy" which traditional "registers" possess reveal a mode of signification that Foley calls "traditional referentiality."

But what does this have to do with oral poetics? First, the application of the sociolinguistic concept of "register" as a "special speech style" governed by a traditionally inherited language with internal communicative, grammatical, and idiomatic integrity, does a fine job of explaining the so-called "artificial" languages so typical of epic singers throughout the world and history, whose earliest textual witnesses include Homeric poetry and whose dialectal complexities have often been badly misinterpreted. For the purpose of adding yet another witness to the discussion, although one that has never, to our knowledge, been mentioned in this context, we would like to adduce a passage published originally in Russian in 1923, translated into Mongolian in 1966, and finally translated into English in 1984. The great Russian scholar of Mongol epic, Boris Vladimirtsov, author of the passage, lived and traveled among the "Oirat" Mongol tribes in Western Mongolia between 1911 and 1915; his portrait of the famous Mongol bard "Parchen," whom Vladimirtsov knew intimately, is a classic depiction of a singer's life, learning, and subsistence among princely courts and Buddhist monasteries, although it Vladimirtsov's discussion of the special Oirat singing language that deserves mention in this context. Vladimirtsov writes:

As regards the language of the Oirat heroic epics of N.W. Mongolia, in this respect these epics attract attention. Actually, in all regions of N.W. Mongolia, wherever knightly *byliny* [epic] are found among Oirat tribes, these heroic epics are performed not in the ordinary spoken dialect, but in a special language, in a special dialect. Listening to the singer, singing an Oirat knightly epic, it is very easy for everyone acquainted with the Oirat dialects of Western Mongolia, to observe that the singer sings it not in his native dialect, nor in any other Oirat or even Mongolian dialect, but in a kind of special language; a dialect different from the language of everyday speech, but at the same time different from the literary language, both Oirat and Mongolian. What kind of epic language is this? Among the dialects in which their carriers usually speak, there exists a special language, distinct in its grammar and vocabulary, used by them on ceremonial occasions, at the moment of affectation, when a person wishes to speak elegantly, elevatedly or movingly, when one simply wishes to find special application in the works or national literary output, in songs, tales, proverbs and sayings, it is used predominantly in heroic epics. Hence this special language may quite justifiably be called a living oral literary language. This oral literary language, distinguished by major archaisms, is neither similar

or identical to the present living dialects of the Oirats of N.W Mongolia nor their Oirat literary language and its dialectal variants. We repeat, this is a completely special language; it is preserved by tradition. . . in spite of the different Oirat dialects and speech of N.W. Mongolia, this oral literary language is almost identical on the lips of representatives of different Oirat tribes or more correctly possesses one and the same peculiarities. . . . Everything depends on the art, on the talent of the performer, on the degree to which he is imbued with this special literary language, to what degree he has mastered its turns and vocabulary. (Vladimirtsov 1984:38-39)

We know of no discussion, drawn directly from fieldwork, that better summarizes Foley's conclusions concerning epic register, traditional referentiality, and communicative economy than this one—even though it was written in Russian in 1923 and has not previously been mentioned in this context.¹⁴

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This survey of recent research on oral epic has done nothing if not show that a unified or universal "oral poetics" as such is impossible. Not only is there no tradition of oral poetics to which we might appeal in order to free the object of investigation from romantic excesses, groundless aesthetic disputes, linguistic singularities, and editorial distortions, but there turns out to be no single, unified object of investigation upon which an oral poetics would focus. For example, oral epic is nothing if not heterogenous: although similar features can be found in epics as geographically and historically distant as modern Mongolian and ancient Greek, equally conspicuous factors can be said to constitute essential differences between epics once living among neighboring Bosnia and Serbia. In short, oral poetics is not a science or even an historical discipline but instead an infinite *interpretive task* addressed to the collection, documentation, textualization, and interpretation of oral literature; if understood as such, it becomes clear that oral poetics will always need to make use of every available tool (linguistics, anthropology, folkloristics, history, comparative philology, and other approaches that we cannot foresee) in order to produce editions and studies that can endure the test of time. The failure to do so yields unpleasant results, which can best be seen in the example of the editor who consciously alters texts: poems that were once the pride of the nation (although edited and rearranged to accord with current taste) become little more than inauthentic curiosities a century later. On the other hand, the vigilant interpreter will be rewarded with the pleasure of having preserved and explained some of the most complex, ephemeral, and for that reason beautiful, phenomena still surviving in today's hostile world.

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NOTE

1. Parry's writings have been collected in one volume, which also include excerpts from his field notes and an Introduction written by his son, Adam Parry. See Parry 1972.
2. An index of the Parry Collection is now available in Kay 1995.
3. Details concerning the field work along with extensive ethnomusicological analyses of these recordings appear in Lord and Bartók 1951.
4. See *Serpsko-Hrvatske Junač[]ke Pjesme*, vol. 1 1954, 14, where a longer discussion of their field experiments can be found.
5. Lord quotes directly from Parry; see Lord 1960, 30. Parry's definition can be found in Parry 1971, 272.
6. Lord 1960, 68.
7. For an extended discussion and application of the Russian "contextualists" see Perić-Polonijo 1993, 304-316; Jakobson 1960; Ben-Amos 1993:215-218.
8. See the discussion in Ben-Amos 1993:209-218.
9. Rober Abrahams has written two useful accounts of this shift in American folkloristics; Abrahams 1992 and 1993. See Also Ben-Amos 1993.
10. This bibliography has been continually updated in various issues of the journal *Oral Tradition*. More importantly, perhaps, it is now available on the web at the following address: <http://web.missouri.edu/~csottime>
11. The problem of the editor who corrects or revises songs collected in the field is of course an enormous one. After analyzing Marjanović's manuscripts and notebooks, Lord has often criticized these editions, noting that in Marjanović's texts certain lines are "frequently...omitted" and that other "lines are reformed. . . . In short, the published texts do not reproduce what the singer said, but what the editor thought that the singer should have said" (Lord 1991:35-36). On the other hand, after studying the surviving manuscripts of Vuk Karadžić's in the Archive of the Serbian Academy of Sciences, Foley has concluded that "the changes introduced by Kadadžić seem to have been relatively slight, as far as they can be tracked, amounting chiefly to substitutions of metrical biforms and minor syntactic adjustments, with an added line or substituted hemistich every seventy-five to one hundred lines" (Foley 1991:114; see also the discussion of Vuk's editing practices in Foley 1983:192-194)
12. This quote is originally found in Halliday (1978:111), but I have taken it from Lauri Honko's discussion of "epic idiolect" and "register" (1998a:63-64). Honko's discussion of register is written, in fact, as an explicit response to Foley's use of the concept (Foley 1995) and is an important contribution.
13. The quote is from Hymes (1989:440), but can be found in Foley (1995:15) with detailed discussion.
14. In the field of Chinese prose storytelling and its immense and ancient traditions, note should be taken of Norwegian Sinologist Vibeke Břrdahl's analyses of the dialect and register of the storytelling tradition practiced in Yangzhou, China, on the Yangzi delta (Břrdahl 1996; but see also Břrdahl 1999). Břrdahl has in fact written chapters on the phonology, grammar, syntax, and style of *the storytelling dialect itself*.