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Characteristics of Orality

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In his book *Orality and Literacy* Father Ong listed a number of characteristics which are among “those which set off orally based thought and expression from chirographically and typographically based thought and expression, the characteristics, that is, which are most likely to strike those reared in writing and print cultures as surprising” (1982:36ff.). In this paper I should like to discuss several of these important characteristics in further depth in respect to their applicability to oral traditional literature, especially oral traditional poetry.

The first characteristic mentioned by Father Ong is that oral thought and expression are additive whereas the written are subordinative. His prime example is from the first chapter of Genesis, with its succession of coordinating conjunctions. “In the beginning God created. . . . And the earth was void. . . and darkness was. . . and the spirit of God. . .” and so forth. The South Slavic oral traditional epic certainly bears out this proposition. One needs only to note in any song the number of lines which begin with the conjunctions *i*, *a*, or *pa*, meaning “and” or “and then.” Here is an example from Sulejman Makić’s song “Katal ferman na Djerdjelez Aliju” (“Writ of Execution for Djerdjelez Alija”):¹

Ta’ put tatar ferman dofatijo,	Then the messenger took the firman,
Pa istera carskogo mezila,	Then he rode out the imperial post-horse,
Pa on krenu zemlji carevini.	Then he set out through the empire.
Lak’ polako Bosnu pogazijo.	Easily he crossed Bosnia.
Bosnu prodje, do Kajnidja dodje.	He passed Bosnia, he came to Kajnidja.
Pa ga vide kajnidjki muftija,	Then the mufti of Kajnidja saw him,
Pa on zovnu bajraktara svoga:	Then he called his standard-bearer:

There is also a tendency in South Slavic oral epic to a variant of the above accumulation of conjunctions, namely, the use

of asyndeton, to the listing of actions without connectives, as “he did this, he did this, he did that.” One sees an example of this in the following from Salih Ugljanin’s “The Battle of Kosovo.”² Messengers from the sultan have just arrived at the gate of Lazar’s palace at Kruševac:

Zatrupaše halkom na vratima.	They knocked on the door.
Lazar pudi popa duhovnika,	Lazar sent the priest,
Da prifati careva fermana.	To receive the imperial firman.
Side pope na gradsku kapiju.	The priest went down to the city gate.
Arapu mu pomog naturiše,	The Arabs greeted him,
Pružu popu careva fermana.	They gave the priest the imperial firman.
Kad je pope ferman ugljedao,	When the priest saw the firman,
Sedam put se zemlji preklonio,	He bowed seven times to the ground,
Osmi put je ferman prifatijo.	The eighth he took the firman.
Arapu se natrag povratio.	The Arabs returned.
Pope trči, ide uz bojeve.	The priest ran, he went up the stairs.

It should be noted that, in spite of oral traditional literature’s very real predilection for the “additive” over the “subordinative,” subordination is by no means lacking in oral traditional style. There is sometimes a rhythm discernible, a repeated pattern in the usage of some singers of South Slavic epic, in which a series of actions is interrupted by a time clause which introduces a new series of actions or a new scene. For this pattern a preceding subordinate clause is often used. The following passage, taken again from Salih Ugljanin’s version of “The Battle of Kosovo” (lines 30-39), illustrates this phenomenon. Queen Milica has just had a dream of foreboding:

Noj prolazi, sabah zora dodje.	Night passed, dawn came.
Lazar proti popa dozovnuo.	Lazar summoned the priest.
A kad dodje pope u odaju,	And when the priest came into the room,
A rastvori debela indjila,	And opened the thick gospel,
Pa pogleda knjige viječnice.	Then he looked at the gospel books.
Pa kraljica sad priča Milica,	Then Queen Milica spoke,
A sve pope gljeda po knjigama.	And the priest consulted the books.
Pa kad beše knjige pregljedao,	Then when he had looked over the books,
I Milica sve mu iskazala,	And Milica had told him everything,
Pa mu stade pope govoriti:	Then the priest began to speak:

There are other ways in which what Milman Parry called “the adding style” expresses itself. Parataxis, appositives, and

parallelisms, the latter of which Roman Jakobson indicated as the main criterion for distinguishing poetry from prose, are outstanding manifestations of the adding style. Both Hebrew and Anglo-Saxon traditional poetry are strongly marked by these devices. Many Old Testament examples come to mind. One of my favorites is Psalm 24, verses 1 and 2:

The earth is the Lord's, and the fullness thereof,
The world, and they that dwell therein;
For He hath founded it upon the seas,
And established it upon the flood.

Such parallelisms are basic to Hebrew poetry and are antiphonal in their ritual background. And consider the appositives in this passage in the Anglo-Saxon epic from Beowulf's description of his fight with sea-monsters in his contest with Breca³:

*Leoht eastan com,
beorht beacen Godes, brimu swapredon,
þæt ic sae-naessas geseon mihte,
windige weallas.*

*Light came from the east
God's bright beacon, and the seas calmed,
till I saw at last the sea-cliffs, headlands,
the windy shore.*

Father Ong's second characteristic, "aggregative rather than analytic" thinking, refers to the acceptance without questioning of what he calls "formulas" current in everyday speech. He is thinking of slogans and clichés, of course, rather than the formulas of oral traditional verse. He mentions such phrases in Soviet usage as "the Glorious Revolution of October 26," or in the United States "the Glorious Fourth of July," terms used without further analysis whenever the respective dates or events are mentioned. Here the necessities of verse composition in performance do not come into play at all, as they do with "the Homeric epithetic formulas 'wise Nestor' or 'clever Odysseus,'" with which he compares them.

Nestor's epithets in Homer are *dios* (godlike), *megathumos* (great-hearted), *agauos* (illustrious, noble), *hippota* (horseman), and *Gerenios* (Gerenian). Of these only "Gerenian horseman" is used exclusively of Nestor and is peculiarly his. It is meaningful for Nestor whatever the context, because, as we know, Nestor was brought up among the Gerenians. He was thus absent when

Heracles attacked Pylos and killed Nestor's father Neleos and all his brothers. The Pelian war was related by Homer in *Iliad* 5.690ff. The epithets are useful, but not for that reason meaningless. This is particularly true for "clever Odysseus," Father Ong's second example. That Odysseus is called *polumetis* eighty-one times proves that that epithet was useful in making lines. Odysseus was not being especially clever in every instance, of course, but whether he was being clever or not at any given moment, he was characteristically clever. Cleverness was one of his permanent attributes.

As Father Ong realizes, one must make a distinction between slogans and the formulas of oral traditional poetry. He is right in thinking that the unquestioning acceptance of such slogans or clichés forms part of the "oral residue" in speech and thought, but it seems to me that they are both qualitatively and functionally different from the formulas in oral traditional poetry. The use of the term "formula" for both popular slogans and clichés as well as for the formulas of oral traditional poetry might lead to ambiguity, because the latter are by no means bereft of meaning, and both poet and audience have some sense of that meaning, which they do not need to analyze every time they are used. Moreover, the formulas of oral traditional poetry have an important and necessary function in the composition and transmission of that poetry, a function which has no parallel in the slogans and clichés of popular usage.

The third characteristic adduced by Father Ong is redundancy as opposed to sparseness, or perhaps spareness of expression. In oral "life situations" it is necessary to repeat. Fullness, *copia*, and *amplificatio* are oral characteristics which are kept well into the written period as oral residue. Here, too, Father Ong's characteristics are more applicable to a context of general communication than to oral traditional literature. The repetitions in the latter do not, in my opinion, arise from the need to remind the audience of what has been said, but from what I would call "ritual repetition"; and I would like to suggest that the fullness, the copiousness, comes from "ritual elaboration." Only those elements are described fully which are of significance. It is not "any old sword" that is described at great length, but the hero's special sword, and it may be described either at the moment when it is specially made for the hero, as the armor of Achilles in Homer's *Iliad*, or when the hero arms himself for battle with the

dragon or his chief adversary. The fullness and repetition are there all right, as Father Ong has indeed quite rightly seen, but it appears to me that they are not there to fill up time while the singer thinks of what comes next, or for the convenience of the audience who have to be told what happened previously in the story. The repetitions have, or once had, an important role of their own, a ritual one of great antiquity. This applies as well to those repetitions of instructions given to a messenger or to the receiver of a message. There is not only a kind of verisimilitude, but also an emphasis on the ritual character of the communication. It is surely not that the audience will have forgotten what was said twenty, or forty, or however many lines earlier. Father Ong's comments are more applicable to political speech-making than to oral literary composition. The original ritual function of such repetitions may in time become lost, and the repetitions may be kept as conventions of literary style which are retained as "oral residue" in written literature. Such repetitions, by the way, are characteristic of both oral traditional verse and oral traditional prose.

Earlier in the same chapter (1982:34) Father Ong wrote:

In a primary oral culture, to solve effectively the problem of retaining and retrieving carefully articulated thought, you have to do your thinking in mnemonic patterns, shaped for ready oral recurrence. Your thought must come into being in heavily rhythmic, balanced patterns, in repetitions or antitheses, in alliterations and assonances, in epithetic and other formulaic expressions, in standard thematic settings (the assembly, the meal, the duel, the hero's 'helper,' and so on), in proverbs which are constantly heard by everyone so that they come to mind readily and which themselves are patterned for retention and ready recall, or in other mnemonic form. Serious thought is intertwined with memory systems.

It is to be noted that in this statement Father Ong has not mentioned word-for-word memorization. What he is speaking of is recall of thought rather than of words, although the configuration of the words which express the thought aids in remembering it. I personally am skeptical that the configurations came into being, were originally created, for mnemonic purposes. That they served

those purposes I have no doubt, but I would like to suggest that the configurations themselves came into being—some of them, at any rate—in response to ritual requirements.

Descriptions of caparisoning a horse, or of dressing or arming a hero, are common repeated themes in South Slavic epic, and elsewhere as well. They are included in what Father Ong called “standard thematic settings” in the passage quoted above. Their ritual function can be clearly illustrated from the following example from “The Wedding of Smailagić Meho.”⁴ In that epic song young Meho is sent by his father to Buda to receive credentials as a commander and successor to his father in the same post. When his mother has dressed him in special clothing and given him the special sword sent him long ago by the sultan for this very moment, he appears before his father for “inspection” before his journey. Here is part of the description of his being dressed and armed by his mother:

She gave him his breastplate. It was not of silver, but of pure gold and weighed full four oke. . . . She put on him silken breeches, which had been made in Damascus, all embroidered in gold, with serpents pictured upon his thighs, their golden heads meeting beneath his belt and beneath the thong by which his sword was hung. . . . She girded on him. . . his belt of arms. . . braided of golden threads and embroidered with white pearls. Therein were his two small Venetian pistols forged of pure gold; the sights were diamonds and pure pearls. . . . Upon his shoulders was a silken cloak, its two corners heavy with gold. Gilded branches were embroidered round about, and upon his shoulders were snakes whose heads met beneath his throat. Down the front hung four cords, braided of 'fined gold, all four reaching to his belt of arms and mingling with his sword-thong which held his fierce Persian blade.

She put on him his cap of fur with its twelve plumes, which no one could wear, neither vizier nor imperial field marshal nor minister nor any other pasha save only the alaybey under the sultan's firman. Upon his head waved the plumes, and the golden feathers fell over his forehead. The imperial plumes were made after two fashions, half of them were stationary and half mobile. Whenever he rode or marched, the stationary

plumes hissed like angry serpents, and the moving plumes revolved. The hero needed no watch, for the plumes revolved three or four times an hour.

At the beginning of the song Meho had been confirmed as his father's successor by the council of the nobles of Kajnidja. That was the first stage in his "ceremony of investiture." His father had not been in the council, but his uncle had reported this action to his brother Smail, Meho's father. When Smail had sent Meho to his mother to be outfitted, he had said:

"I shall not say whether I shall send you to Buda or not until you return from the women's chambers and I see you in your dress array, that I may judge whether you are worthy to be alaybey, whether your fur cap suits you, the golden cap with its twelve plumes, and the feather of the alaybey at your brow, and the Persian sword blessed at Mecca at your side. That sword is no trifle and I desire to see it by your flank to judge whether you are a hero worthy of that Persian saber. Only then shall we see, my son, whether I shall send you or not."

And here is that ritual moment, the second stage in the hero's investiture when Meho's father accepts him as his successor:

When Mehmed came before his father with his Persian blade beneath his left arm, like a light gray falcon, he approached his father's right hand and kissed it, he kissed the hem of his garment and his hand. Then he did the same to his uncle. And, retreating three or four paces, he stood at attention before his father, in his glorious array, in boots and leggings, with his fur cap and plumes; then he let his Persian blade drop at his left side, his left hand on its hilt, and his right resting on his belt of arms. He waited upon his father and uncle even as the nobles upon the sultan in Stambol.

From his cushion-seat his father watched him full quarter of an hour without a word, and Mehmed did not move; so proud and jealous of his honor was he that he would have toppled over rather than budge from that spot without permission from his dear father. He is a blessing to the father who begat him, as well as

to the Border and, indeed, to the whole empire.

Smail said no word to his son, but turned and summoned the standard-bearer Osman to give him the commission to accompany Meho to Buda and to have Meho's horse prepared for him. This horse was a gift from the sultan and had been kept for Meho unriden for seven years.

The singer Avdo Medjedović's description of the caparisoning of the horse in preparation for Meho's initiatory journey contains elements used in all his descriptions of horses in other poems in which they are appropriate. They are repetitions, not from one poem to another, for they belong in all of them; rather they are descriptions used and adapted to a number of situations. It would take too much space to quote any of these descriptions in full here, but, as with the case of the outfitting of Meho, a sample will have to suffice to illustrate the degree of elaboration which such passages may attain. After the horse has been washed and dried with a towel, the caparisoning begins:

First they took a Hungarian saddle-cloth and placed it on the chestnut steed. On this they set the coral saddle which was adorned. . . with gold. . . and decorated with Egyptian agates of various colors. . . . Over the saddle were four girths and a fifth beneath to protect the horse's flesh. . . . All four were woven of silk and the one next to the horse's body was of black marten fur. . . , the two shabracques were of gold, and down the horse's breast hung shining bosses. . . . Over his mane from ears to shoulder they cast a piece of embroidered mesh from Egypt. . . . Through it the dark mane hung, shining through the gold like the moon through the branches of a pine tree.

The stewards brought the horse into the courtyard, and when Smail and his brother saw him, "they opened the window and leaned forth their foreheads against the jamb, their beards out the window, and all four hands upon the sill." It was only then that Small spoke to his son:

"Mehmed, here is your horse all caparisoned and ready. Care well for the horse as if it were your own head. . . . Mehmed, my dear son, if fate is with us, you must not long delay, for I can hardly await your return. Proceed wisely; do not perish foolishly, for

Buda is like a whole province, my son, or like a small kingdom!"

Smail accompanied his son to the courtyard, and Meho and Osman mounted and departed. Thus ends a scene, or series of scenes, elaborate descriptions of ceremony and ritual in an evolving drama of succession and investiture interwoven a) with an initiatory journey in the company of a "sponsor," and b) a betrothal to a bride who has to be gained in combat, for on his initiatory journey to Buda Meho encounters and rescues his bride-to-be. The repetitions and elaborations are not "amplificatio" for its own sake, but embellishment of ritually significant moments in a complex story of *rites de passage*.

In fourth place in his scheme of characteristics of orality, Father Ong notes that orality is "conservative or traditionalist." This characteristic is certainly applicable to oral traditional literature on all levels, but I should like to suggest a further elucidation of the content of tradition. A tradition, as I understand it—that is to say, all the performances of all the songs and all the singers in any given culture since the beginning of the genre in question—includes a variety of songs of differing quality and also singers of great diversity. There are good singers, mediocre singers, unskilled singers, and singers of real genius. Tradition is not a mediocre mean; it does not consist merely of what is common to all songs or singers over all or even over some discrete part of the period during which the practice exists. It embraces all types of singers and all types of performances. It includes the "hapax legomena," the coinages of the moment, as well as the much-used and often much-varied formulas and themes. Of special importance in the tradition are the singers of merit and the skilled performances of carefully composed songs and stories.

The great singers of the past, such as Homer, and of the recent present, as was Avdo Medjedović, part of whose song of the investiture and wedding of Meho we cited at some length earlier, sang traditional songs, and their renderings of them, of extraordinary quality, are traditional as well. There is no need to illustrate Homer's art, for it is well known, and I have just given an example of Avdo's. Within each of the traditions which they represent, that of ancient Greece and of Serbo-Croatian epic of this century, Homer and Avdo, different as their traditions may be, were preeminent artists and storytellers, and they both belonged in

living oral traditions. The point which I wish to make is that the tradition includes the very best in quality. The singer does not need to leave the tradition to produce a poem of the highest artistic value.

It is true, however, that there are differences between the aesthetics and poetics of oral literature and those of written literature, as well as shared qualities, and these must be kept in mind in judging their excellence. The repeated noun-epithet formulas in Homer as well as in other oral traditional narrative song, including South Slavic, belong to the poetics of oral traditional poetry, but not to that of written literature which tries to avoid repetitions. Translators of the Homeric poems into English vary the epithets in translation, because present-day usage finds the degree of repetition which they represent awkward. Our poetics is different in that respect from that of the oral traditional Homer. That fact has to be taken into consideration in our assessment of quality.

Moreover, tradition is not a thing of the past but a living and dynamic process which began in the past, flourishes in the present, and looks forward into the future as well. While it does not seek novelty for its own sake, it does not avoid the new in the life around it. In the *Odyssey* Phemius sang the newest songs for the suitors in Ithaka. Oral traditional literature tends to make the songs and stories from the past serve the goals of the present for the sake of the future. It is only when a tradition is dying that it begins to lose contact with the present and becomes a preserver of its own past rather than a continuator.

One speaks of "Homer Against His Tradition," or "Tradition and Design," or "Tradition and Spontaneity"⁵ as if the singer has to fight something called tradition, or as if tradition had no design and lacked spontaneity. Put in that way, none of that is true. If tradition is conceived of as an inflexible body of thought, of formulas and themes, of songs in an established form, which is transmitted from one generation to the next, which accepts it in that form and in its turn hands it on, then those titles would have meaning. But tradition consists not only of a body of thought, formulas, and themes, but, equally importantly, tradition also embraces an *art* of composition, which has shaped the formulas and themes used to express that body of thought. It is this art which gives the traditional singer a design. He makes lines, he constructs themes, he composes songs in accordance with that design. The

tradition which he receives and in his turn transmits is a tradition of making lines, not one of merely reciting already fixed expressions, although there are some more or less stable formulas, which he makes his own by using them.

On the level of composing sentences in rapid song—in the case of singers of oral traditional epic—the art is an extension into the realm of art of the making of sentences in everyday speech. It is a tradition of constructing themes, not one of retailing memorized passages, although when the singer has formed a theme in the shape which he likes best, he tends to keep it more or less stable. One must add, however, that singers vary in the degree of variation they practice at each performance. It is, finally, a tradition of telling a story which the singer, or storyteller, has heard without a fixed text, and which he will himself reshape to his own design. The oral world is conservative and traditionalist, but its oral literary tradition includes training in the art of telling traditional stories, in learning to create an artistically structured and fittingly expressed narrative.

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What I have said about the art of composition of oral traditional narrative song seems to apply as well to traditional lyric and ritual songs. It has been thought that, because they are short, oral traditional lyric songs undergo less variation between performances than oral traditional epics. Their brevity would make them easier to memorize. But as I have analyzed both Serbo-Croatian oral traditional lyric poetry and some Latvian quatrains, I have discovered that they contain a more or less stable core of verses tied together by various kinds of what were later called rhetorical devices and surrounded by variant settings to which they are adapted. In her doctoral dissertation on Rumanian oral traditional songs, Dr. Margaret Hiebert Beissinger has pointed out a similar phenomenon in her material. It is to be noted that the “more or less” can be made specific within definable parameters if one has a sufficient body of variants. From the variants one can tell not only what variations are possible, but also exactly what variations have been used; they are, therefore, not what *could have been* used but what *have actually been* used. It is important to stress that this core does not argue the existence of a fixed text, but just as indicated, namely, “a more or less stable

core.” When we do not have a sufficient body of texts for comparison, it may seem that an oral text is repeated exactly.

It sometimes happens, however, that in spite of the existence of variants some scholars have interpreted the evidence as reflecting a fixed, memorized original. This is the case of J. D. Smith, formerly Lecturer in Sanskrit in the School of Oriental and African Studies of the University of London, now of Cambridge University. In an article in 1977 he set forth the very instructive case of the Pabuji epic in the Indian state of Rajasthan. After demonstrating that the performed text of a couplet, which he terms as its “nuclear text,” adds word fillers to it in order to adjust it to the metrical and musical frame in which it is sung, he concludes (146ff.): “It is thus, remarkably enough, the case that the linear metrical text of the epic of Pabuji is not delivered as a text, either in song or in declamatory *arthav*, rather it is the foundation for the sung and spoken forms of words, and, like all true foundations, is wholly concealed by the edifice it supports.” He continues:

Be that as it may, the text exists, and it is easy to demonstrate that it exists in what is, in essence, a single unitary form memorized by all its performers. Naturally, there is quite wide variation in detail from singer to singer—considerably more than is normal among manuscripts of the same literary text, for example—yet careful comparison reveals that the similarities are far more profound than the divergences. Extracts (8) to (11) below are translated from recordings of four different performers, none of whom had ever met any of the others. All four passages describe. . . the same event: the giving of wedding-presents to Pabuji’s niece. In order to allow easy comparison between the four, two index-letters have been assigned to each line, a capital for the giver and a lower-case letter for the gift.

8. (Aa) As she ascended into the pavilion, Buro (her father) gave her a white cow;
 (Bb) her Gahlot maternal uncle gave her (excellently-)moving elephants.
 (Cc) Members of the wedding-procession had leaf-shaped rings made for her hands;
 (Dd) Jesal had gold pendants made for her.
 (Ee) Cado had a gold bracelet made out of gold for her;
 (Ff) Dhebo promised her 1001b of pearls from the sea.
 (Gg) Harmal son of Al clad her in fine garments;

9. (Aa) As she ascended into the pavilion, her father Buro gave her a white cow;
 (Bb) her Gahlot maternal uncle gave her (excellently-)moving elephants.
 (Hh) Ghurmal. . . had a horse-necklace for horses made for her;
 (Di) Jesal had strings of bells for horses made for her.
 (Gg) Harmal son of Al clad her in garments of *dikhani* cloth;
 (Ff) Dhebo the opium-addict promised her 100lb of pearls from the sea.
10. (Aa) In the splendid pavilion her father gave her a white cow;
 (Ij) her mother gave her a necklace, a necklace of nine strings for her throat.
 (Jh) Her paternal uncle had a horse-necklace for her horses made for the girl;
 (Bb) her Gahlot maternal uncle gave the girl (excellently-)moving elephants.
 (Ee) Cado Vaghelo had a gold bracelet made out of gold for her;
 (Ff) Dhebo promised her real pearls from the sea.
 (Gg) Harmal Devasi clad her in a fine garment of *dikhani* cloth;
 (Kd) Harmal's mother Bhim had a gold pendant made out of gold for the girl.
11. (Aa) As she ascended into the pavilion, her father Buro gave her a white cow 'by way of wealth';
 (Bb) her maternal uncle gave as avuncular gifts (excellently-)moving elephants.
 (Ee) Cado had a gold bracelet made out of gold and silver for her;
 (Ff) Dhebo the opium-addict promised her 100lb of real pearls from the sea.
 (Gg) Harmal Devasi clad her in a fine garment of *dikhani* cloth;
 (Ld/j) her paternal grandmother (gave her) angular? pendants of nine strings.

Smith continues:

It need hardly be said that four narrative passages from four separate performers in which the divergences are so few and so slight cannot possibly result from improvisatory technique. . . . This degree of verbal resemblance typifies that to be found throughout the different recorded performances of the epic: substantial agreement tempered by some variation in order, in grammar, in the use of synonyms, etc. The epic text is essentially one and fixed: the singers have committed the entire tale to memory.

There is much more in the article, but the above will have to suffice. First, Smith and I have different views of what is meant by "improvisatory technique" and "memorization." Second, I do not agree with him on either the number or importance of the divergences. Third, I should like to adduce on my part some examples of similar passages from South Slavic oral traditional song, in order to demonstrate that a fixed text for memorization does not exist in such cases but only a "more or less stable core." A "more or less stable core" and a fixed memorizable text are not

the same thing.

Improvisation, in my view, is the opposite of memorization, which means a careful and conscious word-for-word recalling of a passage. I do not believe that his examples, fascinating and helpful as they are, are the result of memorization of a fixed text. It would be difficult, I believe, to say what that fixed text is. True, one could say that it would probably include (Aa) with “slight variations,” and (Bb), but one would not be certain where it would occur. (Cc) is found in only one of the four texts. Was it part of the original fixed text? It certainly was not memorized, if it was. (Ee), (Ff), and (Gg) with “slight variations” would probably be, I imagine, according to Smith, part of the original memorized text—at least until a performance is recorded which omits them. And so forth. Which text was “memorized?” Certainly not one of the four presented? No, it seems to me clear that there is no fixed original and that it was not memorized. His texts are splendid examples of a “more or less stable core” with variations such as I was speaking of a moment ago. I do not prefer to call this type of composition “improvisation,” because that term implies “being made up on the spur of the moment.” While it is true that the precise form of each performance may vary, it is not “made up” from scratch each time. There is a “more or less stable core,” as Dr. Smith has demonstrated, but certainly we should not equate a “more or less stable core,” which can be remembered, with a *fixed* text to be memorized!

Second, the divergences among the four texts are not as few as he has wanted us to believe. Leaving aside the order for the moment, we note that the maternal uncle gives the bride elephants in all four cases, but the paternal uncle appears only in one case, where he gives her a horse-necklace. In another text a horse-necklace is given her by Ghurmal. Her mother appears only in one text. Is there some significance in the fact that the mother and the paternal uncle seem to be ignored in the majority of the texts presented? The paternal grandmother occurs once, with a gift of pendants of nine strings. This gift is similar to the necklace of nine strings given the bride by her mother in text 10. How about the maternal grandmother? Why is she slighted? If this were a society in which family relationships are important and wedding gifts imply status, these divergences could indeed be significant. It could be dangerous to underestimate their possible implications for their traditional audience.

The example given by Dr. Smith is a type of catalogue or list of people, presumably relatives for the most part, and gifts. It may be useful to see a somewhat similar group of texts from South Slavic songs, in this case, lyric riddling songs.

Our example encompasses five variants of a riddling song. The stable parts consist of a series of questions and the answers to them. The settings of the questions and answers vary from song to song. Here are the questions and answers in A and B⁶:

A (lines 6-18)
 “O, Bože, moj mili Bože,
 Što li je šire od polja?
 Što li je dublje od mora?
 Što li je brže od konja?
 Što li je sv’jetlje od mača?
 Što li je milije od brata?”
 To junak slusa i gleda.
 “Djevojko, mlada, razumna!
 Sad da te vadim iz uma.
 Šire je more no polje.
 Zmaje je brži od konja.
 Sv’jetlje je sunce od mača.
 Milij’ je dragi od brata.”

B (lines 6-18)
 “Ustaj, Ano, da te nešto pitam!
 Šta je šire od sinjega mora?
 Šta je dulje od zelena polja?
 Šta je brže od sivog sokola?
 Šta je sladje od djulbe šečera?
 Šta je draže od mile matere?”
 Progovara plemenita Ana:
 “Lako ti se mogu dosetiti.
 Šire nebo od sinjega mora.
 Dulje more od zelena polja.
 Draži dragi od mile matere.
 Brže oči od siva sokola.
 Sladja draga od djulbe šečera.”

Here is a translation of the questions:

“O God, my dear God!
 What is wider than a field?
 What is deeper than the sea?
 What is swifter than a horse?
 What is brighter than a sword?
 What is dearer than a brother?”
 A hero listens and watches.
 “O maiden, young, prudent.
 Now I shall take you from your
 mind(?)”

Arise, Ana, that I ask you something!
 What is wider than the blue sea?
 What is longer than a green field?
 What is swifter than a gray falcon?
 What is sweeter than rose sugar?
 What is dearer than a dear mother?”
 Noble Ana spoke:
 “I can easily think of an answer.”

One of the differences between these two texts is that A is in octosyllables (3-2-3) and B is in decasyllables (4-6). Of the five questions asked in A, only four are answered. “Broader” (*šire*), “deeper” (*dublje*), and “swifter” (*brže*), in that order, form three of the five questions in both. “Dearer” (*milije*) in A is represented by *draže* in B and it characteristically ends the series. The fourth question is different in each—“brighter” (*sv’jetlje*) in A and “sweeter” (*sladje*) in B. Of the objects in the questions only “field” (*polje*) and “sea” (*more*) are found in both songs, but in reverse order. The object in the fifth question is always a member of the family—“brother” (*brat*) in A and “mother” (*mater*) in B.

“Swifter than a horse” (*brže od konja*) in A is matched by “swifter than a gray falcon” (*brže od siva sokola*) in B. “Brighter than a sword” (*sv’jetlje od mača*) in A and “sweeter than rose sugar” (*sladje od djulbe šečera*) in B have no counterparts in the other song. Some of these differences result from the difference of meters.

The answers vary more than the questions. In the following translations I have italicized the same or similar objects which are wider, deeper, swifter, brighter, sweeter, or dearer than another object.

A	B
The <i>sea</i> is wider than a <i>field</i> .	The sky is wider than the blue sea.
A snake is faster than a horse.	The <i>sea</i> is longer than a green <i>field</i> .
The sun is brighter than a sword.	<i>One’s beloved</i> is dearer than one’s dear mother.
<i>One’s beloved</i> is dearer than one’s brother.	The eyes are swifter than a gray falcon.
	<i>One’s beloved</i> is sweeter than sugar.

There is a feeling of “textuality” in the questions and answers sections of these two songs, that is, the singer has a sense that the song has a text. But it is clear that the text is not a fixed one. Let us look at the other three variants. First C⁷:

C (lines 19-29)	
“Seko moja, tico mekušica!	“My sister, bird of beauty!
Šta je brže od <i>konja</i> viteza?	What is swifter than a noble <i>horse</i> ?
Šta je šire od <i>mora</i> sinjega?	What is wider than the blue <i>sea</i> ?
Šta je bolje od djuli mehara?	What is better than a rose?
Šta je draže od oca i majke?”	What is dearer than father and mother?”
Njoj govori tica mekušica.	The bird of beauty answered her.
“Luda li si, seko lastavica!	“You are daft, sister swallow!
Brže <i>oči</i> od <i>konja</i> viteza.	The <i>eyes</i> are swifter than a noble <i>horse</i> .
Šire <i>nebo</i> od <i>mora</i> sinjega.	The <i>sky</i> is wider than the blue <i>sea</i> .
Bjelji snijeg od djuli mehara.	Snow is whiter than a rose.
Sladji <i>dragi</i> od oca i <i>majke</i> .”	<i>One’s beloved</i> is dearer than father and mother.”

I have italicized the elements found in the previous two variants. The order is different. The horse has an appositive/epithet. There is metathesis of noun and epithet in *mora sinjega* of this version with the more usual *sinjega mora* of the other two. The family members of the last question are “father and mother” rather than “brother” or “mother.” Only one line in the question and answer

series is different from the other two, and in the question part “better” (*bolje*) is inappropriate—a mistake, in fact—as the answer, “whiter” (*bjelje*), shows. In spite of these differences, the sense of textuality, of certain specific words, is strong in all three variants, but once again it would scarcely be possible that there exists a fixed original that the singer has memorized.

The last two variants are D and E⁸:

D (lines 3-15)

“Ah, mili Bože i dragi!
 Ima 1’ što šire od mora?
 Ima 1’ što duže od polja?
 Ima 1’ što brže od konja?
 Ima 1’ što sladje od meda?
 Ima 1’ što draže od brata?”
 Govori riba iz vode—
 “Djevojko, luda budalo!
 Šire je nebo od mora.
 Duže je more od polja.
 Brže oči od konja.
 Sladji je šećer od meda.
 Draži je dragi od brata.”

“Oh, dear and kind God!
 Is anything wider than the sea?
 Is anything longer than a field?
 Is anything swifter than a horse?
 Is anything sweeter than honey?
 Is anything dearer than a brother?”
 The fish spoke from the water—
 “O maiden, innocent fool!
 The sky is wider than the sea.
 The sea is longer than a field.
 The eyes are swifter than a horse.
 Sugar is sweeter than honey.
 One’s beloved is dearer than a brother.”

E (lines 10-20)

“Što je šire od mora sinjega?
 Što 1’ je brže od konja viteza?
 Što je milije od brata jednoga?”
 Na grančici tica delkušica.
 Te se ona mlada razgovara.
 I od derta i od muhaneta.
 Od srdaka jada velikoga—
 “Bre ne luduj, tica sevdelijo!
 Šire nebo od mora sinjega.
 Brže oči od konja viteza.
 Milij’ dragi od brata jedina.”

“What is broader than the blue sea?
 What is swifter than a noble horse?
 What is dearer than a brother?”
 On the branch the bird of beauty.
 The young one spoke
 From sorrow and sadness,
 From heart of great sorrow—
 “Do not be daft, bird of love!
 The sky is wider than the blue sea.
 The eyes are swifter than a noble horse.
 One’s beloved is dearer than an only
 brother.”

D, it is to be noted, is octosyllabic and has five questions and answers, while E is decasyllabic and has only three. In the other texts of this song in Vuk, there is only one line between the two quotations, but E is an exception with four lines. On the other hand, the comparatives and the objects in E are to be found in

the other texts, each one of which, however, has some unique element. In D that element is “honey.”

There can be no doubt about a sense of textuality in these sections of the five variants, although it is abundantly clear that there is no fixed text for memorization. What we have, indeed, is a remembering of a number of “more or less stable” lines. The texts that we have seem to be the result of remembering known and used variables rather than of memorization of a non-existent fixed text.

*

It would seem, then, that the adding style and the use of repetitions for ritual reference and elaboration as well as for composition are characteristic of oral traditional literature. Its traditionalism, another element emphasized by Father Ong, includes the highest quality of artistic form and aesthetic value, representing an art continuous from past to present and beyond, as long as the tradition lives. It is constantly creative, never merely memorizing a fixed entity, but even when one would perhaps expect otherwise, ever re-creating a new version of older forms and stories.

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Notes

¹Parry Collection Text No. 677, written down from dictation by Nikola Vujnović, November 25, 1934 in Novi Pazar, lines 170-176. Unpublished.

²Parry Collection Text No. 650, written down from dictation by Nikola Vujnović, November 14, 1934 in Novi Pazar, lines 63-73. Unpublished.

³Quoted from Chickering 1977 (lines 569-72).

⁴Parry Text No. 6840, written down from dictation by Nikola Vujnović, July 5-12, 1935 in Bijelo Polje. The text has 12,311 lines. Published as *SCHS* 3-4 (lines 1615 ff).

⁵Respectively, Russo 1968, Bowra 1930, and Nagler 1974.

⁶Examples drawn from Mladenović and Nedić 1973: nos. 143, 144.

⁷From Karadžić 1935: no. 379.

⁸From Karadžić 1932: nos. 285, 286.

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