

V.—Composition by Theme in Homer and Southslavic Epos

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In a recent article entitled "The Spoken and the Written Word" Professor William Chase Greene of Harvard University has indicated that the way in which Homer ordered his material should be further studied in the light of the oral composition of the poems.¹ The aim of the present paper is to suggest the manner in which this might be done and to make a preliminary hypothesis of what the results might be. My remarks are based on the experience of more than fifteen years of close acquaintance with living oral tradition; I have known and talked with hundreds of epic singers in Yugoslavia and Albania, read hundreds of texts, and translated over fifty thousand lines of Serbo-Croatian oral epic.

To most of us oral composition of epic poetry is associated primarily with the use of formulas and with poetic diction and language as investigated by Milman Parry in the late twenties and early thirties of this century. The definition of the formula which he has given us has become a classic: "a group of words which is regularly employed under the same metrical conditions to express a given essential idea."² C. M. Bowra in an article entitled "The Comparative Study of Homer," written in 1948, distinguished three kinds of formulas: "the noun-adjective combinations, the repeated lines, and the repeated themes — as in the arming of heroes, the preparing of ships and chariots, the offering of sacrifices etc."³ While the first two kinds, namely, the noun-adjective combinations and the repeated lines, are formulas (although not the only kinds) according to the definition set down by Parry, the third, the repeated themes, conforms only occasionally to that definition and I believe that Bowra has confused the two terms. The formula requires exact word-for-word, metrical-pattern-for-metrical-pattern repetition.

Formulas seldom go beyond the single line in the oral poetry of which I have any knowledge, although there are occasions when

¹ *HSCP* 60 (1951) 28.

² *HSCP* 41 (1930) 80.

³ *AJA* 54 (1950) 186.

they are longer. For example, the following six lines in the description of a comic hero in the Southslavic Moslem tradition could be called a formula because they are found at least twice in word-for-word exactness in two different songs by the same singer:

Na kulaša sedla ni samara,
Sem na kula drvenica gola.
S jedne strane topuz od čelika;
On ga tiče, on mu se spotiče.
A na Tale od jarca čakšire,
Dlake s polja; sva koljena gola.⁴

On the mouse-gray horse was neither
saddle nor pack carrier,
But only a bare wooden frame.
From one side hung a steel mace;
It touched the horse and he stumbled.
Tale was wearing goatskin trousers,
The hairy side out; his whole knee was bare.

In such a case formula and theme, or part of a theme, coincide.

On the other hand, there are instances enough in the Homeric poems in which formula and theme do not coincide. The feasting theme as it appears in the following passages from the *Odyssey* could not be considered as a formula, since the repetition is not exact:

τοῖσι δὲ κήρυκες μὲν ὕδωρ ἐπὶ χεῖρας ἔχευαν,
σίτον δὲ δμῳαὶ παρενήνεον ἐν κανέοισι,
κούροι δὲ κρητῆρας ἐπεστέψαντο ποτοῖο.
οἱ δ' ἐπ' ὀνείαθ' ἐτοῖμα προκείμενα χεῖρας ἱαλλον.
αὐτὰρ ἐπεὶ πόσιος καὶ ἐδητύος ἐξ ἔρον ἔντο
μνηστῆρες, κτλ. (1.146–151)

τοῖσι δὲ κήρυκες μὲν ὕδωρ ἐπὶ χεῖρας ἔχευαν,
κούροι δὲ κρητῆρας ἐπεστέψαντο ποτοῖο,
νώμησαν δ' ἄρα πᾶσιν ἐπαρξάμενοι δεπάεσσι·
γλώσσας δ' ἐν πυρὶ βάλλον, ἀνιστάμενοι δ' ἐπέλειβον.
αὐτὰρ ἐπεὶ σπεῖσάν τ' ἐπιόν θ' ὅσον ἤθελε θυμός, κτλ. (3.338–342)

⁴ Parry Collection, Text 668 ("The Song of Bagdad") 627–632, and Text 654 ("The Wedding of Čejvanović Meho") 485–490. The singer is Salih Ugljanin in Novi Pazar. These are Nos. 1 and 12, respectively, in Volume One of the Collection, to be published soon by the Harvard University Press and the Serbian Academy of Sciences.

τοῖσι δὲ κήρυκες μὲν ὕδωρ ἐπὶ χεῖρας ἔχευαν,
 κούροι δὲ κρητῆρας ἐπεστέψαντο ποτοῖο,
 νώμησαν δ' ἄρα πᾶσιν ἐπαρξάμενοι δεπάεσσιν.
 οἱ δ' ἐπεὶ οὖν σπείσαν τ' ἐπίον θ' ὅσον ἤθελε θυμός, κτλ. (21.270-273)

Yet the theme is the same in all three instances, although the formulaic content of the theme is in each case somewhat different. It is clear, then, that the theme and the formula are distinct units, even if at times they coincide.

The theme can be defined as a recurrent element of narration or description in traditional oral poetry. It is not restricted, as is the formula, by metrical considerations; hence, it should not be limited to exact word-for-word repetition. It is approximately what Arend has called "die typischen Scenen"⁵ in his work on Homer, and what Gesemann in the case of the Southslavic poetry has called "Kompositions-Schemata."⁶ Regular use, or repetition, is as much a part of the definition of the theme as it is of the definition of the formula, but the repetition need not be exact. Strictly speaking, we cannot call an action or situation or description in the poetry a theme unless we can find it used at least twice.

It is not difficult to see that the formulas have been built up to make it possible to express the themes of the poetry. In the early stages of learning the young singer learns both themes and formulas, but his attention is fixed chiefly on the latter. He must have the formulas in order to sing anything at all, regardless of the quality of the song or of the performance. But, even as his knowledge of formulas, which is vague in the period of absorption which precedes his first taking the accompanying instrument in his hand and opening his mouth to sing, is sharpened to precision by the act of singing his first song, so his idea of themes is given shape as he learns new songs and perhaps ultimately creates songs of his own. The real function of the theme is to be found in that phase of transmission which covers the learning of a song by a singer in the later stages of his training or by an accomplished singer and in the creation of a new song. Once a singer has a command of the common themes of the tradition, he has merely to hear a song

⁵ Walter Arend, *Die typischen Scenen bei Homer*, Berlin, 1933. See also Parry's review in *CP* 31 (1936) 357-360.

⁶ Gerhard Gesemann, *Studien zur südslavisches Volksepik*, Reichenberg, 1926, No. 5, "Kompositionsschema und heroisch-epische Stilisierung," pp. 65-96.

which is new to him only once to be able to perform it himself.⁷ A Yugoslav singer told me last year that when he learned a new song he made no attempt at word-for-word memorization but learned only the "plan" of the song, which he explained as "the arrangement of the events." This plan he then proceeded to fill in with the themes which he already knew. Were these themes not familiar to him, learning a song which he had not heard before would be a difficult, if not impossible, task, and the processes of transmission within the tradition would be slowed down, perhaps to a stop. Hence the themes are as important to the life of a tradition of oral composition and transmission as are the formulas, and thematic analysis should yield principles of structure as characteristic of oral composition as the principles of the formulaic technique.

Among the terms which the Yugoslav singers use when speaking about their art of telling tales in song is the expression "to ornament" (kititi) a song. By this they mean to tell the story fully with much description of heroes, places, armor, activity, and so forth. They consider this ornamentation as good and admirable, but they also recognize certain limits to its appropriateness. I have heard singers criticize one another for putting into a song so much ornamentation that the story has been obscured, and, more commonly, I have heard singers say that too much ornamentation is not good because it represents additions to the song which cannot be true since they were not in the story as it was learned by the singer. The first objection is from the point of view of artistic story-telling, the second from that of historicity, because the singers look upon their songs as historical and true. When the singer thus differentiates between essential fact and ornamentation, he is making a distinction between what we may term essential and ornamental themes. By analysing a portion of one of the longest songs in Harvard University's Milman Parry Collection of South-slavic Texts we can illustrate both the technique of thematic analysis and also the distinction between essential and ornamental themes.⁸

⁷ A fuller study of the processes of learning, composition, and transmission will be found in my *The Singer of Tales* to be published by the Harvard University Press in the series *Harvard Studies in Comparative Literature*.

⁸ Text 6840. The singer is Avdo Mededović in Bijelo Polje, Montenegro. The text contains 12,312 lines.

The song "The Wedding of Meho, Son of Smailaga"⁹ begins with one of the commonest themes in Southslavic epic poetry — one of the commonest themes, in fact, in all epic poetry — an assembly. The lords of the border are gathered together, drinking and boasting of their deeds. This introductory theme is followed by a second, the theme of the unhappy exception. All are merry and loquacious save one, even young Meho, who is sad and silent. In the third theme of the song Meho's uncle asks him what troubles him; Meho's reply that he is disconsolate because he is not allowed by his father to participate in raids and thus to have something of which to boast constitutes a fourth theme. The pattern of themes with which this song begins is a very common one. It frequently takes the form of the lords in assembly, one of them begins to weep, another asks him why he weeps, and his reply sets the story in motion. One is reminded of the scene in Alcinous' palace in Book Eight of the *Odyssey*.

The themes just given from the Yugoslav song are all essential to the tale. In the version which our singer first heard they covered approximately sixty lines;¹⁰ in Međedović's version they take up about six hundred and fifty lines. Međedović has thus ornamented the story, and one can see from the very beginning that his tale will be a long one from the tempo which he has established. Within the framework of the essential themes he has placed many ornamental themes. The lords in the gathering are described, their boasts are enumerated, the youthful hero is pictured in detail. Not all the ornamentation, however, is purely descriptive. In the third theme, that of the uncle questioning his unhappy nephew, the early version states simply that the uncle, Cifrić Hasanaga, asked Meho why he was unhappy. Međedović has ornamented this theme with another theme of action. The head of the gathering, Hasan paša Tiro, first notices Meho's sadness and disturbed though he is by it he does not wish to say anything to the young man in the presence of the others. He therefore arises, calls Meho's uncle aside, and whispers to him that he should inquire as

⁹ This song was first published by its collector, Friedrich Krauss, *Smailagic Meho*, Dubrovnik, 1886. This edition contained 2130 lines. In 1925 a cheap paper edition of the song was published by M. B. Kalajdžić in Mostar. This edition introduced a few minor changes in lines, the total here being 2165, and also changed the dialect. Međedović learned the song from this second edition. His version will be published in Volume Two of the Parry Collection.

¹⁰ Mostar edition of 1925 (see the preceding note) lines 1–58.

to why his nephew is sad — not immediately, however, lest the boy think that it was he who had suggested it. This is ornamentation of the finest kind, with a genuine Homeric touch.

The story of Meho continues with the theme of the decision by the council of lords to send Meho to Buda to be installed as the leader of the border by the vizier; the theme of the preparation of the hero for the journey; the theme of the departure; and finally that of the journey itself. At every point essential themes are embellished by themes of ornamentation, and the tale is told with great fulness.

Can we analyse the Homeric poems in the same manner? I believe that we not only can but must do so. The *Odyssey* begins with the theme of the wanderer detained from returning home, in this case by a divine force, Calypso and Poseidon. This theme is followed by that of the assembly of the gods during Poseidon's absence. Athena brings Odysseus' plight to the attention of Zeus, a third theme; and a plan of action is determined upon, the fourth theme. The fifth is that of Athena's journey to Ithaca. These five themes cover only a little more than one hundred lines, and they are essential to the story. Is there any ornamentation of these essential themes? Yes, but not a great deal and what there is, is of a different calibre or quality, but it is ornamentation nonetheless. Zeus' famous speech which begins, in Palmer's translation, "Lo, how men blame the gods!"¹¹ is ornamentation. We do not care to think of the tale without this fine speech, which is so highly significant in our interpretation of Homeric thought and religion, but it is not essential to the story. It is one of the best of ornamental themes. Other ornamentation in the first hundred lines of the *Odyssey* is of the brief descriptive variety, added details about Atlas, Poseidon, and Polyphemus, a description of Athena's accoutrement for her journey. Because of the lack of lengthy ornamentation one cannot tell from the beginning of the song that it will be a long one; the tempo is rapid.

With the arrival of Athena in Ithaca, however, the tempo changes and thematic embellishment increases. The telling of the story from this point on is leisurely and full. A final example from the *Odyssey* will illustrate Homer's longer ornamental themes and afford an opportunity to compare similar thematic development in the Yugoslav epic of Međedović already referred to.

¹¹ Lines 32 ff.

On his journey to consult with Menelaus concerning Odysseus' fate Telemachus makes two overnight stops, one with Nestor at Pylos and the other at the house of Diocles in Pherae. On the first leg of the trip he is accompanied by Athena in the form of Mentor, and on the second by Peisistratus, son of Nestor. The stay with Nestor is described with great fulness and the departure of Telemachus and Peisistratus is told in this wise (the translation is that of E. V. Rieu):

"After they had satisfied their appetite and thirst, the Gerenian charioteer Nestor announced his wishes: 'Up with you now, my lads! Fetch Telemachus a pair of long-maned horses and harness them to a chariot so that he can be getting on his way.' They obeyed him promptly and soon had a pair of fast horses harnessed to a car, in which the housekeeper packed bread and wine together with dainties of the kind that royal princes eat. Telemachus took his place in the handsome chariot and Nestor's son, the captain Peisistratus, got in beside him, took the reins in his hands and flicked the horses with the whip to start them. The willing pair flew off towards the plains, putting the high citadel of Pylos behind them, and all day long they swayed the yoke up and down on their necks. By sundown, when the roads grew dark, they had reached Pherae, where they drove up to the house of Diocles, son of Ortilochus, whose father was Alpheius."

The second stop is not described in full by Homer, but continues in this way:

"There they put up for the night and received the gifts that hospitality dictates. But tender dawn had hardly touched the East with red when they were harnessing their horses once again and mounting the gaily-coloured chariot. Out past the sounding portico and through the gates they drove. A flick of the whip to make the horses go, and the pair flew on with a will. In due course they came to the wheat plains and attacked the last stage of their journey; such excellent going had their thoroughbreds made. And now the sun sank once more and darkness swallowed all the tracks. And so they came to the rolling lands of Lacedaemon, deep in the hills, and drove up to the palace of the illustrious Menelaus."¹²

The theme of the overnight stop on a journey is the same in both cases: one is more important and involves an illustrious hero, Nestor, and is told in full; the other is given in brief. We have here a long and a short treatment of the same theme, the one with

¹² *Od.* 3.473-497 and 4.1-2.

many ornamental themes, the other with very few and those of the briefest variety.

In the Yugoslav epic "The Wedding of Meho" the youthful Meho makes a journey to Buda in the company of a retainer and friend named Osman. Even as did Telemachus, Meho makes two overnight stops on the way. Neither of these stops is of importance in the story, but both are themselves ornamental themes, like the stop at Pherae in the *Odyssey*. Both, however, are told in full with many details and speeches. The first ends as follows:

"Then Vukašin arose and called the young slaves: 'Take the shining coverings from the steeds and put on the golden saddles and trappings. Quickly harness the horses!' Three of Vukašin's servants arose and prepared the two winged steeds. In the time it would take a mother to suckle her son the two dragons were ready. Then came Vukašin's wife. She took the saddle bags from the horses, wrapped fried things and other food, lamb and chicken, in a silk kerchief and put it in the shining bags, which she then placed on the steeds. The servants drew tight the saddle girths. The youths put on their long socks and boots and girded on their sharp swords. Down the stairs of Vukašin's dwelling they went, preceded by the Prince Vukašin, who accompanied these two dragons of the sultan. His wife carried their spears in her own hands. When they came to the courtyard, the servants brought the horses to the mounting stone and the heroes mounted. They shook hands with Vukašin and Vukašin's wife gave them their shining spears and they fixed them on the saddle horn.

"Then you should have seen Smail's son! Mehmed, the Pilgrim's son put his hand into his pocket and gave the lady twenty ducats. 'Give these twenty ducats to your two daughters, Lady Vukašin! Let them prepare the better for their weddings!' But Lady Vukašin was wise; she swore by both her eyes: 'O golden dragon! Mehmed, the Pilgrim's son! By my life and by my eyes, I do not desire your shining gold-pieces. Why do you wish to pay for lodgings in my dwelling as if you had been in a tavern or an inn? Why do you wish to pay for lodging and service? I would rather that my eyes be gouged out, either mine or those of someone dear to me. I cannot accept this!' Then Mehmed said to Lady Vukašin: 'O Lady Vukašin, be not foolish! I am not paying for lodging or service. Last night's entertainment was not for gold but for love and kinship, that remembrance might last forever and never be lost or forgotten. It is for that that I bestow this gift upon your daughters. They are as dear to me as my own sisters.' With tears in her eyes the lady received the ducats and kissed the horse's eyes. 'O chestnut steed, golden are thy wings! The master whom you carry is pure gold! May he live many years! May all the good things which his mother and father have planned for him come true, and when he marries, may you be the maiden's horse!' 'Many thanks to you, Lady

Vukašin, even as to an elder sister! May you also receive your heart's desire and marry off your daughters, later finding pleasure in the knowledge of their peace and happiness!"

"Then Meho pulled the reins and raised the fork. The chestnut horse understood, took to his hoofs and raised his haunches. He would not go through the iron gateway but cleared the wall and was off through the brush. He cantered playfully across the green plain, behind him Osman on his spotted white steed. They flew over the plain even as stars across the skies. They passed villages and crossed mountains. A whole day they rode until dark night came; they had covered as much of Bosnia as they had said that they would before nightfall; for they had come to the castle of Prince Vujadin."¹³

The description of the second departure, that from Vujadin's castle, is told more briefly:

"When dawn broke, Osman called Meho: 'We have overslept, Meho!' Vujadin and his two sons tried as best they could to make their guests stay; it was of no avail. The prince's sons went and prepared the horses. Meantime the youths were ready and descended to the courtyard. The maidens brought the young men's spears, the sons led forth their horses, and the youths mounted. They had passed a good night. Now the day-star shone and dawn unfolded its wings. Mehmed put his hand into his pocket and gave each of the maidens five golden coins. The prince's children swore that they would not accept them. 'No, Mehmed, you shall not pay for your lodging. This is not an inn or a tavern but a house for fine people.' But Mehmed would not listen. 'This is not pay, o children of the prince, but a gift of love. Let the girls buy combs and powder!' Then Mehmed rode to the courtyard gate, Osman behind him on his white stallion, even as a star across a clear sky. Then dawn spread its wings and soon the two youths were riding by the cool Klim near Buda, four hours away."¹⁴

In the parallel passages just quoted one can see both Homer and the Yugoslav singer Međedović using the same technique of composition by theme, in this case the technique of the ornamental theme. Both poets have a short and a long way of expressing the same fundamental theme by employing varying degrees of ornamentation. Homer's skill in using this type of theme in proper perspective and with telling effect is no small part of his peculiar genius.

In the article to which I have already referred Professor Greene has suggested that Homer must have made a limited use of writing

¹³ Lines 2589-2679.

¹⁴ Lines 2863-2899.

in the composition of his poems. The organization and structure of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, he feels, demand such a use. Professor Greene writes:

"I can hardly suppose him, working with traditional materials, and with some eye to his audience, not to have made a limited use of writing, at least as notes (*hypomnemata*) to record the outlines and the structure of the poems as he had previously sung them. There would be time, over the years, for rehandling and adaptation, for addition or omission, till the poems approximated his matured intention. Without some such written records I cannot imagine him to have held in his memory the complex structure and the unified outlook that he achieved. . . ."¹⁵

I find it, on the contrary, most difficult to suppose among singers of oral epic a tradition of note-taking as an aid in composition. There is no evidence from any living culture for such a tradition. I believe that we shall be able to see that the complex structure and the unified outlook of the Homeric poems are indeed possible without written records, when we fully understand the process of composition by theme among oral poets and have analyzed the Homeric technique on that basis. By comprehending thematic structure we shall attain to that "broader conception of the role of 'memory,' 'originality' and 'ideas' "¹⁶ which Professor Greene so very rightly seeks. We shall realize that the singer's themes aid his "memory" and, what is just as important, leave him free to concentrate on the general complex structure of his story. We tend to forget, although there is abundant material available to prove the point, that the good oral poet, like every other good poet, devotes much leisure time to thinking of his songs and to practicing them. The art of composition by formula and theme, a highly developed and complex art, came into being for the very reason that there was no system of note-taking and yet there was a need for a technique of story-telling which allowed scope for the artistic imagination. It is this development which made possible a Homer who was not a scribbler of what his natural unaided memory could not retain, but a master in conveying to his audience the wealth of things which his mind and heart knew with unerring certainty.

¹⁵ *Op. cit.*, 30-31.

¹⁶ *Op. cit.*, 28.