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More on Yugoslavia as an "Oral Epic Laboratory": A Response to Thérèse de Vet

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In the hope that other students of the Homeric problem, and *TAPA*'s readers in general, will welcome further comments on this topic, I would like to discuss what are, in my opinion, a few erratic points in Thérèse de Vet's otherwise very interesting and valuable essay.[1] To save space, I intend to restrict my attention at present to three items, postponing a more thorough airing of my convictions for a separate occasion. These items are: 1) A. B. Lord's views as represented in de Vet's study; 2) the actual cultural situation regarding the role of oral poetry in the former Yugoslavia; and 3) the general validity of comparative study and criticism of Homer.

The Opinions of A. B. Lord

As much as I expressly disagreed with the late Professor Lord on various topics, I should like to make it clear that, in spite of several reservations about various tenets of the so-called theory of oral composition (the "Parry-Lord theory"), I have no doubt that the work of Parry and Lord was a major step forward in the study of Homeric poetry and oral poetry in general and made a substantial contribution to its understanding. Therefore I find it particularly unwelcome if Lord's views are not presented correctly, which is, I am afraid, the case in several passages of de Vet's paper. For example, though it is true that, writing in 1960, Lord in *The Singer of Tales* "disputed the existence of such [transitional] texts" (69 n. 42), it is well known that he later modified his opinions substantially, due partly to sharp criticisms from many other Homeric scholars including myself. See, e.g., chapter 10 of his posthumously published book, a chapter which bears the meaningful title "The Transitional Text" and in which he himself cites his many previous discussions of that topic.[2]

[1] T. de Vet, "The Joint Role of Orality and Literacy in the Composition, Transmission, and Performance of the Homeric Texts: A Comparative View," *TAPA* 126 (1996): 43–76.

[2] A. B. Lord, *The Singer Resumes the Tale*, ed. M. L. Lord (Ithaca and London 1995).

It is even worse when Lord is forthrightly misquoted, as when he is portrayed (72) as a supporter of the view that

> [i]n Yugoslavia poetry [i.e., *oral* poetry] played a minor role in the society and belonged to only a part of the people. It was a poetry that did not interact with the literary centers of its country and culture. As Lord (1960: 138) confirmed, it had literally been removed 'into the background...into the back country.'

From my experience as an admirer and connoisseur of Lord's work and, moreover, as his personal friend, I am well aware that he, who always cherished deep respect and admiration for the culture of the South Slavs, would never have subscribed to a statement like that. It would suffice to peruse, e.g., his essay "Homer as Oral Poet"[3] to see how furiously he reacted when he felt that even the greatest scholars sinned against that light. After a brief glance at *The Singer of Tales* for the context from which de Vet's quotation was taken, everything becomes clearer. "There is nothing peculiarly Yugoslavian in this picture except that among the Yugoslavs oral tradition has lasted until the present time and was flourishing only yesterday" is the introductory sentence of Lord's passage, which ends as follows: "Oral tradition did not become transferred or transmuted into a literary tradition of epic, but was only moved further and further into the background, literally into the back country, until it disappeared." This is something very different from de Vet's intended sense. Personally I disagree with several implications of this last quotation from *The Singer of Tales*, as I am sure Lord in his more advanced years would do, too.

The Role of Oral Poetry in the Former Yugoslavia

This brings me to my second point. I find it rather disturbing that, in spite of the efforts of Lord and others, the tendency of some scholars to pass rash judgments on the cultural situation and traditions of the South Slavs without competent awareness of the barest facts doesn't seem to have died out. For example, I would deny de Vet's claim that in Yugoslavia one finds "a division between two ways of making poems: either oral and fluid, or written and fixed" (43–44). It is not true that "in Yugoslavia the recording of the poems by dictation did not lead to the fixation of these poems (in written or in oral form)" (52). In fact, many popular song-books compiled by collectors of "folklore," the product of recording from dictation, were in circulation starting from the middle of the

[3]*HSCP* 72 (1968): 1–46.

nineteenth century. For what is worth, "The Wedding of Smailagić Meho" was learnt by Avdo Medjedović when somebody read it to him from just such a popular booklet. It is incorrect to say that the Yugoslav singers were unwilling to learn and then repeat one and the same poem (67); *The Singer of Tales* is full of examples to the contrary. It is a gross understatement to write that "some songs were first collected in the nineteenth century by the collector Vuk Karadžić" (67 n. 39). Contrary to de Vet (70), a Yugoslav analogy to the distinction between the *aoidoi* and the *rhapsodoi* has never existed. There are rich mutual influences between the literary culture, both in Croatian and in Latin, of the south Dalmatian free city of Dubrovnik or Ragusa, known as the "Balkan Athens," and the contemporary center of oral epic song flourishing on the nearby island of Šipan. The great Dalmatian poet Petar Hektorović of Hvar collected oral epic poems. Other literary men wrote verse imitating folk poems—for example, works in a collection strongly influenced by Petrarch that was compiled in the sixteenth century by Dinko Ranjina of Dubrovnik.[4] Yet others, like Djuro Ferić of Dubrovnik in the eighteenth century, translated popular songs into Latin.

This fruitful cohabitation lasted for several centuries. We possess some ten collections of oral songs from that region of Croatia, recorded, in large part, by Catholic parish priests; it may be of interest that in the Dubrovnik area female singers were the main producers and transmitters of oral tradition.[5] The majority of these collections are still unpublished. It is important to stress that the poems recorded in them during the nineteenth century resisted being impaired by the predominantly negative influence of modern mass media—newspapers, books, radio, and later television—which cannot be said of the songs in the Parry Memorial Collection. The ebbing of interest in oral poetry in the first half of the present century explains the rather low aesthetic value of Parry's poems, including those by Medjedović, a point of continuing dispute between Lord and some South Slavic scholars.

What makes de Vet believe that "the situation in Greece was very different from the one in [the former] Yugoslavia" (72)? I readily admit that "[t]he pervasiveness of the Homeric poems in Greek culture is a commonplace," but so was the pervasiveness of oral heroic poetry in the culture of the countries

[4]Erroneously identified as "Vinko" Ranjina by Lord (1995: 230).

[5]Just recently the collection of Andrija Murat, priest of the parish of Šipan near Dubrovnik, was published for the first time from his manuscript, which had been kept for more than one hundred years in the archives of the Institute of Ethnology and Folk Art of Zagreb. The main singer in Murat's collection was his mother Kata, a talented but unlettered old woman.

inhabited by South Slavs during the last century. Presumably literacy flourished in the cities of ancient Greece: of the names de Vet mentions—Heraclitus, Xenophanes, Herodotus—none lived outside major urban centers. It is doubtful that the percentage of literate people was very high in the Greek villages and in the back country. The same conditions would apply to the territory of the South Slavs. In the fully Romanized towns of the Dalmatian coast, literacy generally prevailed, while the peasant folk was probably predominantly illiterate. Both populations lived side by side for many centuries.

The Validity of Comparative Criticism

As long ago as 1977, at a congress of the classicists of the former Yugoslavia in Skopje, I presented a paper on "The Validity of the Comparative Method in Homeric Studies."[6] There I pointed out that, first, it *was* absolutely legitimate to use a living oral tradition for analogies to the Homeric method of verse-making in drawing comparative conclusions about the elementary techniques of oral composition; second, however, it was a completely different matter to approach in the same way as literature (that is, as works of art, as aesthetic objects) oral poems deriving from different traditions. Therefore modern Yugoslav parallels are as good as any other (Balinese, Dyak, Ainu, Kirghiz) if we wish to study the oral technique in operation; but we should definitely stop considering the various Medjedovićes, Kukuruzovićes, and Bajgorićes as valid poetic counterparts to Homer.

Speaking of the Yugoslav material, it is also necessary to point out that there are real masterpieces of oral epic poetry in the collections of Karadžić, Marjanović, Hörmann, Murat, and others, recorded in the nineteenth century when South Slavic oral singing was still in full vigor. For example, the ballad about "The Noble Wife of Hasan-aga"[7] or the heroic poem "Banović Strahinja" sung by Old Man Milija from Kolašin for Vuk Karadžić[8] could compete in poetic perfection with the best products of any oral epic tradition, including that of ancient Greece. But such an estimation couldn't possibly apply to "The Wedding

[6]Published under the same title in *Živa antika-Antiquité vivante* (Skopje) 28 (1978): 171–77 (in Croatian with an English resumé).

[7]Collected and published by the Italian abbot Alberto Fortis and greatly admired by Goethe and Herder, among others.

[8]Considered as perhaps the best epic poem of the South Slavs by John S. Miletich: see his "Oral and Written Aesthetics: The South Slavic Case and the *Poema del Mio Cid*" in *Hispanic Studies in Honor of Alan D. Deyermond* (Madison 1986): 183–204.

of Smailagić Meho," as shown perceptively and persuasively by Dorothea Wender rather long ago.[9]

Therefore, the answer to de Vet's concluding rhetorical question—"when we chose Yugoslavia as our present-day example of times past, did we choose the right place?"—cannot be a simple "yes" or "no." If we wish to study the way epic formulae or themes function, or determine the percentage of enjambment in oral poems, works from the Parry collection would do no worse than the Balinese examples or any other ones. When, however, we are interested in the literary value of oral epic poetry, real masterpieces can be found among the products of some south Slavic singers, but not of those performers who sang for Parry and Lord. When a comparison between older and modern versions of the same song is possible, the result is never favorable for the latter. In 1986 I examined[10] an older version of Medjedović's "The Wedding of Smailagić Meho," dictated by a certain Abdullah Šemić to the Viennese scholar Dr. Friedrich Krauss, who published it at Dubrovnik in 1882. Though six times shorter than the version of Medjedović—some 2100 verses— to my taste it is a much better poem, showing, among other things, even some fine touches of humor. As for the "epics" by Medjedović, though they are admittedly the best part of Parry's collection, I find them a great feast of memory, but as literature dull and boring.

[9]"Homer, Avdo Medjedović, and the Elephant's Child," *AJP* 98 (1977): 327–47.

[10]"Smailagić Meho and Peleiades Akhilleus," *Literary Review* (Zagreb)18 (1986): 19–24 (in Croatian). With some elaboration, the paper was read in English during a 1987 meeting of Slavic scholars at the Center for Oral Studies of the University of Missouri in Columbia, Missouri; as far as I know, this version has not been published.