

A Response to Zdeslav Dukat

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I am grateful for the opportunity to respond to Professor Dukat's thoughtful comments on my article that appeared two years ago in *TAPA*. Before I continue, I hasten to state that it was never my intention to slight the work of Professor Lord or that of Professor Parry. It is unfortunate that in the humanities the re-examination of theoretical work by other scholars is often taken as questioning its validity and conclusions—perhaps due to the fact that we have so few theories in our field. In the sciences, the approach is different. Darwin's work, and even more so Mendel's, made modern genetics possible: should scientists have then stopped investigating so as not to upset these scholars' friends? Of course not—and every modern geneticist wakes up every morning grateful that those two scientists did the really difficult work of changing the earlier paradigm. I view my own study in a similar—if less grandiose—vein: Parry and Lord did the hard work, and my goal has been to propose some refinements. It is the continued reference to Yugoslavia as a laboratory that brought this comparison to mind, since science also teaches us that, if certain results cannot be replicated in another laboratory, we need to run the experiments again.

Rather than responding to Professor Dukat's points one by one, I wish to comment on two issues that crop up again and again, not only in my own research, but also in the research of all who work with the Oral Theory and comparative studies. They are aesthetics and literacy. Both are highly charged and closely related topics that continue to cloud discussion due to their emotional connotations. Their capability to confuse the issues follows from the manner in which the division between oral culture and written culture was set up when the Oral Theory was first formulated. A brief outline of the Oral Theory's basic tenets, or founding statements, will clarify my meaning.

In 1960 Lord gave shape to ideas already present in the work of Parry, namely that a culture separate from the familiar literary one had survived in the geographically remote areas of Yugoslavia. He described a Europe of two

concurrent literary traditions: one prestigious,¹ inherited from the Romans; the other one “oral” and, until then, invisible, inaudible, and unrecognized. The second genre had survived in this remote “laboratory,” as it had in many other areas, and perpetuated old patterns. But much of its function, role and prestige in society had been taken over by the (written) interloper. The two traditions deliver entirely different products: one, of Roman descent, we have learned to prize and use as our standard; the other one, the “oral” tradition, was new to us and required assessment.

The new “oral literature” was analyzed and dissected: it was formulaic, it used meter, it used economy, themes, etc. The explanation for these (to us) unusual features was that they could help the performer compose rapidly in front of audiences. The new-found oral literature turned out to have so many characteristics in common with the Homeric poems that, based on these commonalities, an analogy was proposed. Note that *only* form and manner of presentation, i.e., performance, were used to achieve the analogy. To confirm the perfect fit, it was hypothesized that there was no writing at the time of Homer either to influence the shape of the poems or to use as a medium for composition and also that the Homeric poems as we have them represented a fair record of a performance. So, in a sense, the Homeric poems were “pure”: free from literary influence on both accounts. They were henceforth acknowledged to have been produced in a similar manner as the oral Yugoslav poems recorded by Parry and Lord.

So far the Oral Theory seems to be on solid ground. But serious students of the Homeric texts, for perverse reasons of their own, continue to raise objections: the quality of the Greek product—in modern parlance, a “value-judgment”—is so much higher. This imbalance in the output of the same, or a similar, process needs much redressing. Strict Oralists can respond in two standard ways.

First, Oral Theory specialists can grant that there are qualitative differences in the end-products, which, they say, are due to the fact that epic poetry in pre-literate Greece carried the cultural burdens supported in our times by the literary tradition—a reference to the concept of the oral poet as storehouse of all cultural knowledge. Why encyclopedicity would make poetry more beautiful instead of more boring is mysterious. It seems as if there is only so much beauty to go around, and once the literary tradition took its share, there

¹Lord 1960: 138: “Beginning with the Romans, the peoples of Europe have borrowed a literary tradition and made it their own.”

was very little left for the oral tradition. This view presumes that the literary tradition stole from the oral tradition.

There is a second response to the observation of the difference in quality (note that in my work I do not use “quality” as a yardstick but rather prefer complexity, use of *Kunstsprache*, circumstances for performance, etc.). Strict Oralists remind us that we need to develop a different aesthetics, one that shows cultural awareness and does not judge alien cultures by our own standards. But a new aesthetics, whether designed for the oral or the literate world, would still be subjective and culture-bound and would not help us advance the discussion. Although I can agree with the demand for a different aesthetics, aesthetics is not acceptable as an explanation for the production of different results through the same process.

Discussion could and should stop here. But the temptation to respond is often too strong, and has forced the Strict Oralists into the odd dilemma of either having to downgrade the aesthetic achievement of the Greeks (an impossible task), or to upgrade the achievements of the Yugoslavs (a no less impossible task). Where the Slavic poems are concerned, a certain sensitivity on the part of Professor Dukat (and of Professor Lord, who, we are told, “reacted furiously”) to attacks that continue, even forty years after the appearance of the *Singer of Tales*, is therefore completely understandable. Thus, when in all innocence, quoting Lord and agreeing with him, I argued that the Yugoslav oral poetry had been “...moved to the back country...”, meaning that geographic isolation had allowed oral poetry to survive separately from the literary tradition, Professor Dukat reacted by implying that I (in the good company of other scholars) lack “...respect and admiration for the culture of the South Slavs.” (Note that I wrote “back country,” not “back water”).

So Strict Oralists want it both ways in order to save the Homer/Yugoslav analogy: each time the issue is raised that the Homeric poems are very different (note: not “better”) from the poems produced by the Yugoslav oral performers, we are told either that the latter were a survival from times past, much weakened by the presence of a literary tradition (so that it is not fair to hold high expectations of them), or, alternatively, that high-quality poetry *does* exist in the Yugoslav tradition. Almost fifty years later, however, we have not been shown any specimens, and the world still awaits their revelation. Professor Dukat’s examples, cited in his second section, illustrate this anomaly.

The second emotionally charged and ambiguous issue is literacy, which in our culture has high prestige (just as our aesthetics described above has high prestige since it is based on literacy, our mode of artistic production *par*

excellence). By definition, in Parry and Lord's view, oral literature was created without the benefit of writing. This was admirable in Homer, who cannot be blamed for not using something that had not yet been invented. However, in the case of the Yugoslav performers, surrounded by literacy for centuries, lack of writing suggested backwardness to many Homer scholars.² Reference to the illiteracy of the performers smacks of another attack on the Yugoslav paradigm, so, not surprisingly, those who wish to defend it must play up the continued role of oral literature in Yugoslavia *even though* literacy and literary poems were already present. The demonstration of the continued existence and importance of oral poetry *must* show that it held equal prestige. Here Professor Dukat supplies us with ample evidence that literate poets, composing in writing, consulted the oral tradition over the past few centuries, collecting and imitating the works of oral singers. In this, however, those authors were not original, but rather moved in lock-step with the rest of literary and literate Western Europe. Since the mid-eighteenth century the Rousseauan theme of "the corruptive nature of contemporary culture,"³ a reaction against the *belles-lettres* and the *philosophes*, translated into the writing down in oral style of many oral stories and songs: representative are the brothers Grimm in Germany, Perrault in France, and the most famous impostor of all, MacPherson in England, who took a short-cut and published pseudo-oral poetry in 1760 purportedly composed by an imitation-Homer, Ossian, with great international success and influence. In Finland Lönnrot, working in the mid-nineteenth century, is a late example. The return to the *Volk* roots fitted the rise of nationalism of the eighteenth and nineteenth (and in some cases, late-twentieth) centuries.

We can see that each time the Yugoslav paradigm is used to explain the causes for the differences in end products noted for the Greek and the Yugoslav laboratories, the answers given are based not on facts but on faith. Scholars of the Oral Theory ask us to have greater understanding for (purely hypothetical) differing circumstances, such as the contrast between a pure oral culture and a watered-down one, or the need for cultural sensitivity; or they attempt to show that the circumstances themselves were not so different, that there were higher levels of literacy either in Greece or in Yugoslavia or both; or that Yugoslavia produced more beautiful—but not yet published—texts. All these answers

²This is a direct result of the claim that the alphabet was so easy to learn that eighth-century B.C. E. Greeks had no problems with it. They received it, added vowels—a decisive step, or so it is argued—and, within fifty years, were using it to write down and preserve lengthy epic poems. Yet twentieth-century Yugoslavs, surrounded by a literate culture, with easy access to pen and paper, had great difficulty mastering it. The alphabet is either easy to learn or it is not. But it cannot be both at different times in its history!

³Darnton 1985: 229.

cannot be right at the same time, and they reveal the ambiguity built into the Yugoslav model. Note that I am not arguing that oral composition in performance does not take place in the way proposed by the Yugoslav model: the technical data have been confirmed over and over by contemporary research into oral traditions elsewhere. Moreover, the products of these present-day societies are very similar in form to the Yugoslav ones.

The difficulties arise, as I suggested above, not from a wrong interpretation of the Yugoslav data concerning improvisation in performance, but from transposing onto ancient society, along with the technique of oral verse-making, this analysis of two Yugoslav cultures, the oral and the written. Parry and Lord observed again and again how performers who became literate would, in their own lifetime, adopt the culture of the writing side of society. The performers' compositions/poems would incorporate the conventions of the other medium. From this observation Parry and Lord deduced that this modification is automatic and triggered by the acquisition of literacy. Thus, in his 1995 publication, Lord describes the genesis of what he calls "transitional" texts: texts produced by an author who literally hovers between the two worlds for a short period of time.⁴ But by definition this second literary world, into which a performer could move, was non-existent in ancient Greece. This does not present a problem for the Oralists: we must just allow the process of literacy a little more time to generate its new aesthetic and rules spontaneously, but generate them it will.

What my 1996 essay questioned is exactly the hypothesis of spontaneous generation of the laws of literacy. I showed, based on the Balinese paradigm, how literacy—a mode of communication—was used to support an oral performative tradition. Literacy allows the oral user to store information and to preserve it (e.g., in a *Kunstsprache*); but these processes do not automatically

⁴Lord's acceptance of the existence of "transitional texts" (1995) follows directly from his earlier (1960) work, which is why I did not give it special consideration in my article. Although transitional texts may exist in Yugoslavia, their identification seems to depend on the highly sophisticated knowledge of the investigator: "The proof of its [transitional text] existence, however, has depended on an intimate acquaintance with the underlying oral tradition and likewise upon familiarity with the possible learned influences at play in each instance. To judge the bounds of the transitional stage one must have a firm foothold in both the oral and the learned literary traditions" (Lord 1995: 236). This passage is followed directly by: "There is one field, I think, to which the foregoing remarks about transitional texts have less relevance than to others. That is the Homeric poems; for it is clear, I believe, that they are not transitional texts but the work of an oral traditional singer." Lord's capacity to move from the highly specific (Yugoslavia) to the sweepingly general has been remarked upon by other authors, of course, especially anthropologists; in Classics, however, it seems to have gone mostly unnoticed.

lead to the preservation and fixation of entire texts, in the way that has been seen to occur in the West after the third and second centuries B.C.E. In other words, the Balinese paradigm illustrates a different use of writing, not as the means to fill a filing cabinet with unchanging texts, but as material support to oral composition in performance. I coined the term **transitioning texts**, to underscore their mobile nature: from written to oral, from oral to written. These texts are always up-to-date, or close to it. They are venerable and ancient at the same time as they allow the expression of contemporary concerns. The literary texts are not museum pieces, not to be touched; on the contrary, they are there to be handled by all, to be modified, to be recombined, to be adapted and performed in a new shape, to be enjoyed. Although written and oral poems do exist in Bali as different entities, they do not represent two different worlds. They are two sides of the same coin.

In my article I argued that the rift between literacy and orality into separate means of production had not occurred in Bali—and that in the Homeric texts we have similar examples of Greek literature before the split. The acceptance of the results from the living Balinese laboratory does not mean that we have to throw out the results obtained from the declining Yugoslav one: the combination of sources of information (Bali, Yugoslavia) and the necessary adjustment in the light of new data are always to be preferred over the rejection of new evidence, as any research scientist will readily agree.

The advantages of this new paradigm are obvious. We no longer need to claim exceptional status for the Greek poems, nor do we need to juggle aesthetics and levels of literacy. The removal of these emotionally charged (and ultimately unresolvable) issues from the paradigm will assure that future debate can proceed based on new data, not on claims of adherence or non-adherence to the existing model.

Works Cited

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