

THE TRADITIONAL ORAL AUDIENCE

The primary purpose of the present study¹ is to question the assumptions made in using "audience" as a term to designate those present at the performance of a traditional oral singer². The basic distortion which "audience" preserves is the conventional contemporary separation of the poet and his listeners. I wish to substitute the word "group" to avoid that implied separation and thereby to connote a gathering in which all participate. Though a single individual may serve as the instrument or vessel of celebration, each member contributes actively to the collective function of a traditional performance. The argument will proceed in two stages. First, I shall examine a contemporary Serbian oral performance in which I participated. Secondly, moving by analogy from one known to two hypothetically oral situations, I shall consider pertinent passages from the Homeric Greek and Anglo-Saxon poetries.

On November 16, 1973, I attended a festival commemorating the birthday of the Serbian linguist, Vuk Karadžić. Thousands of people, from all parts of eastern and western Europe, had gathered at Tršić, the village of his youth. To this event came the *guslar* ("one who plays the *gusle*", or "singer")³

1. An earlier version of the first part of this paper was read before the Connecticut Valley Folklore Society in Amherst, Massachusetts on April 7, 1974. I wish to thank all those who have read and commented upon the present study in its various forms: Professors Robert P. Creed, Barbara K. and Joel M. Halpern, and Richard W. Noland of the University of Massachusetts/Amherst; and Professor Donald K. Fry of the State University of New York/Stony Brook. A travel stipend from the Medjunarodni Slavistički Centar of Belgrade University made possible the original *in situ* observations.

2. I shall use "traditional" in Milman Parry's sense to denote a poetic language which "was the creation of generations of bards who regularly kept those elements of the language of their predecessors which facilitated the composition of verse and could not be replaced by other, more recent, elements" ("The Traditional Epithet in Homer", *The Making of Homeric Verse*, ed. by Adam Parry, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1971, p. 7). By "oral" I shall mean to indicate a tradition which arose without written record, which could prosper only in the absence of fixed texts, and which was in part committed to writing near the end of the oral culture's tenure. As well as the collected works of Milman Parry referenced above, Albert B. Lord's *The Singer of Tales* is indispensable for the student of traditional oral poetries. See further Edward R. Haymes, *A Bibliography of Studies Relating to Parry's and Lord's Oral Theory*, Cambridge, Harvard University Printing Office, 1973.

3. The *gusle* is a single-stringed, fiddle-shaped instrument, with a goatskin head stretched over the resonance chamber; the *guslar* frets the horsehair string with his left hand and bows it with his right (see montage).

pictured in the montage. He was not hired or even paid for his performance, but sang to celebrate the memory of a man who, in the nineteenth century, revised the entire alphabet and himself collected nine volumes of traditional songs⁴.

I have preserved the chronological sequence of the pictures in clockwise order (numbered 1-5). Even as limited a medium as still photography reveals the tremendous reactivity of the people sitting around the *guslar*. While the tourists were streaming by the performance to file through Vuk's house (in photo 1 the singer and listeners contemplate that phenomenon during a vocal pause), the native Serbs clustered around the performer.

Within the group there is evidence of ritualistic consciousness in the organization of the collective⁵. The singer is seated on the top level of a table encircling a great oak tree; at his feet sit three very old men, accorded their positions of honor by the usual social criteria of sex and age⁶. One of these, whose bald head juts into view most prominently in the lower right corner of photo 5, is hunched over and leaning on a cane; he nods and sways with the flow of the song. The other two, to the singer's right and out of view, respond similarly. The remaining people surround the four men at their center, and, while the organization relaxes as the distance from the middle increases, the men for the most part form the inner circles and the women the outer.

The montage illustrates the dynamic function of the group. As the *guslar* moves from an instrumental line with a vocal pause (photo 1) to straightforward narration (photo 2) to more emotion-filled performance (notice his increasing facial tension in photos 3, 4, and 5), the group moves with him. Consider the reactive change in expression on the part of the young man seated just to the singer's left. Though his head is often partially obscured by the stylized horse's head at the tip of the *gusle*, we can readily see the poetic process mirrored in his face. His and others' participation occasionally took the

4. Of Vuk's collection of *narodne pesme* (literally, "folk songs"), Mathias Murko, in his *La poésie populaire épique en Yougoslavie au début de XX^e siècle*, Paris, Librairie Ancienne Honoré Champion, 1929, p. 3, remarks: "Le recueil complet comporte aujourd'hui neuf forts volumes grand in-octavo, dont deux seulement, le premier et le cinquième, contiennent des chansons lyriques, tous les autres étant remplis de chants épiques, fait qui caractérise bien la grande richesse de la poésie épique populaire yougoslave".

5. For a discussion of the ritual character of oral poetry, see my dissertation, *The Ritual Nature of Traditional Oral Poetry: Metrics, Music, and Matter in the Anglo-Saxon, Homeric Greek, and Serbo-Croatian Poetries*, unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Massachusetts, 1974, especially pp. 177-231.

6. See Joel M. and Barbara K. Halpern, *A Serbian Village in Historical Perspective*, New York, Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1972, especially pp. 86-108, for an account of the Serbian patrilineal and patrilocal society.

form of interjected or added lines, which they did not refrain from calling out aloud to the singer as he made the song.

At one point during the proceedings, in the midst of a description of some of the major wars in which Serbs have participated in this century, the poet intoned a line which was particularly moving for the old man to his immediate right. As he sang, he looked toward him for approval and received affirmation in the form of a nod. As I watched and reflected on the collective nature of what was taking place, my companion leaned toward me to point out the reaction. When the old man saw our reaction, he looked up at me and proudly thrust aside his lapel to reveal a handsome collection of medals. The entire sequence of actions was symptomatic of group function, emblematic of the collective identity of *ego*.

To this situation we may usefully apply Erich Neumann's distinction between "group" and "mass association":

"The group is a living unit in which all members are connected with one another, whether the connection be a natural biological one as in the tribal group, the family, clan, and the primitive folk group, or whether it be institutional as in the totem, sect, and the religious group. But even in the institutional group the members are emotionally bound to one another through common experience, initiations, and so forth. The formation of a group is thus dependent upon the existence of *participation mystique* between its members... . Symptomatic of this situation is, for instance, the fact that the group members call themselves brothers and sisters, and so reproduce by analogy the original family group where these ties are taken for granted... .

Mass associations, on the other hand, are only nominal associations to which we cannot give the character and name of a group. In them it is always a question of what the Gestalt theory calls additive parts, i.e., an aggregation of individuals who are not bound together emotionally and between whom no unconscious projection processes occur⁷.

In other words, our contemporary notion of "audience" is really Neumann's "mass association". In purest form, however, the performer and listeners in a Serbian village comprise a "group"⁸. In order to document this distinction, let us consider the extensive kinship discrimination which Neumann identifies as a symptom of group behavior, a metaphoric way of defining *ego* in terms of *alteri*. We may describe the nature of such discrimination with the following two examples; the first concerns blood relationship. Underlying

7. Erich Neumann, *The Origins and History of Consciousness*, trans. R.F.C. Hull, 1949; rpt. Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1973, pp. 421-22.

8. The village living unit, the extended family or *zadruga* (literally, "for, in behalf of others"), provides another very basic indication of Serbian group consciousness.

the existence of the very specific designation *strina* for our periphrasis “father’s brother’s wife”^{8a} is a felt need for identification of oneself with respect to the group. Such particular terms verbally actualize the needs which mold individuals into a collective unit. Secondly, we may add to this manifestation an example of synthetic kinship⁹, a phenomenon which Neumann sees as symptomatic of the group. The example is *pobratimstvo*, or blood-brotherhood:

“Blood-brotherhood, like godfatherhood, is a means of artificially extending kin ties. A blood-brother is most often sought when a person feels himself to be seriously ill and in danger of dying. Sometimes the relation is not even between the parties directly concerned, for a mother will occasionally seek a blood-brother when her child is ill. Two people are united in blood-brotherhood in a ceremony performed by them over the grave of a close relative of the person seeking a *pobratim*... The graveyard is the site used for this ceremony to literally symbolize preventing the death of the ‘slave’, or sick person, and also so that the family ancestors can spiritually witness the act. After the ceremony the two are supposed to remain brothers for life and observe all the obligations that come with this close relationship. For example, their children are not supposed to intermarry”¹⁰.

This example of kinship extension well illustrates the sacrality of place in ritual. The ceremony is, in Neumann’s terms, “transpersonal”, in that it effects identification among all members of the group, both living and dead. And, as *pobratimstvo* actualizes a group need, so traditional songs (or *pesme*) preserve and celebrate the group values of the membership. Songs, like any ritual, are not the occasion for formation of the group, but rather manifestations of collective values:

“In the period of origination, the forms of expression and driving archetypal contents of a culture remain unconscious; but with the development and systematization of consciousness and the reinforcement of the individual ego there arises a collective consciousness, a cultural canon characteristic for each culture and culture epoch. There arises, in other words, a configuration of definite archetypes, symbols, values, and attitudes, upon which the unconscious archetypal contents are projected and which, fixated as myth and cult, becomes the dogmatic heritage of the group. No longer do unconscious and unknown powers determine the life of the group; instead, transpersonal figures and contents, known to

8a. *A Serbian Village in Historical Perspective*, p. 148.

9. Other types of synthetic kinship are discussed in detail in Eugene A. Hammel, *Alternative Social Structures and Ritual Relations in the Balkans*, Englewood Cliffs, Prentice-Hall, 1968.

10. Joel M. Halpern, *A Serbian Village*, ²1956, rpt. New York, Harper and Row, 1967, pp. 162-63.

the group, direct the life of the community as well as the conscious behavior of the individual in festival and cult, religion and usage... .

But even when the cultural canon develops, art in all its forms remains at first integrated with the whole of the group life, and when the cultural canon is observed in religious festival, all creative activity is articulated with this integral event. As expressions of archetypal reality, the art and music, dance and poetry of the cult are inner possessions of the collective"¹¹.

Does the same kind of group value system underlie the creation of the Homeric poems, and, if so, can the light of analogy in any way illuminate such Dark Age masterpieces? Consider Eric Havelock's account of the "Homeric state of mind": "In an oral culture, permanent and preserved communication is represented in the saga and its affiliates and only in them. These represent the maximum degree of sophistication. Homer, so far from being 'special', embodies the ruling state of mind... . The Homeric state of mind was therefore, it could be said, the general state of mind"¹². In their joint study, "Homeric Psychology and the Oral Epic Tradition"¹³, Joseph Russo and Bennett Simon develop similar ideas about the singer and those who listen to him:

"First of all, poetry of a traditional oral character will naturally favor traditional language and thought, and discourage ideas or phrases that are too novel or idiosyncratic to find easy expression in the existing patterns of language. The personal would at every stage tend to yield to the communal, the private view to the public view of things... . What we would like to emphasize in particular are the *means* by which the bard builds up such a close relationship to his audience, and the particular psychological nature of the resulting "group experience" known as a recitation... . It may be said that the recitation sets up a kind of common 'field' in which poet, audience, and the characters within the poems are all defined, with some blurring of the boundaries that normally separate the three (491-92)".

To what extent does this common field—or, as I would prefer, "group"—condition our interpretation of Homer? In an attempt to answer that question, let us examine the prologue to the *Odyssey* (a, 1-10):¹⁴.

Ἄνδρα μοι ἔννεπε, Μοῦσα, πολύτροπον, δς μάλα πολλὰ
πλάγχθη, ἐπεὶ Τροίης ἱερὸν πτολίεθρον ἔπερσε·

11. Erich Neumann, "Art and Time", *Art and the Creative Unconscious*, trans. Ralph Manheim, 1959, rpt. Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1972, p. 87.

12. *Preface to Plato*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1963, p. 135.

13. *Journal of the History of Ideas* 29 (1968) 483-98.

14. The *Odyssey* text is that of W.B. Stanford, ed., *The Odyssey of Homer*, vols. I-II, 1959, rpt. New York, Macmillan Company, 1967.

- πολλῶν δ' ἀνθρώπων ἴδεν ἄστεα καὶ νόον ἔγνω,
 πολλὰ δ' ὃ γ' ἐν πόντῳ πάθεν ἄλγεα δν κατὰ θυμόν,
 5 ἀρνύμενος ἦν τε ψυχὴν καὶ νόστον ἐταίρων.
 ἀλλ' οὐδ' ὧς ἐτάρους ἐρρύσατο, ἰέμενός περ'
 αὐτῶν γὰρ σφετέρῃσιν ἀτασθαλίῃσιν ὄλοντο,
 νήπιοι, οἳ κατὰ βοῦς Ὑπερίονος Ἥελίοιο
 ἥσθιον· αὐτὰρ ὁ τοῖσιν ἀφείλετο νόστιμον ἡμαρ.
 10 τῶν ἀμόθεν γε, θεά, θύγατερ Διός, εἰπέ καὶ ἡμῖν.

*Say in me, O Muse, the many-turning man, who very many times
 Was beaten back, after he sacked the sacred city of Troy.
 He saw the cities and came to know the mind of many men,
 And upon the sea he suffered many woes in his heart,
 5 Striving to win his soul and the return of his comrades.
 Nevertheless, he was not able to save his comrades, though eager to do so.
 For they perished by their own wicked actions,
 Childish ones, who the cattle of Hyperion's son Helios
 Consumed. And he took away their day of return.
 From somewhere, O Goddess, daughter of Zeus, speak of these things to us
 as well¹⁵.*

While these lines clearly describe a single poet invoking the Muse, the final emphasis is on the collective. Homer first asks for inspiration, literally for the Muse to “say in me” (μοι ἔννεπε); line 10, however, underlines the singer’s role as instrument or ritual vessel of the celebration to come. The word ἀμόθεν, “from somewhere”, seems to refer to the existence of τῶν (“these things”, i.e., ostensibly the content of lines 2-9) apart from the poet. While I wish to avoid any dispute over the “reality” of the Homeric gods and goddesses, I believe it very possible to interpret τῶν as the traditional actions of the *Odyssey*, and the address to the Muse as a cultural metaphor for ritual sacralization. In other words, when Homer calls upon the Muse to “say in me” the man we call Odysseus and to “speak of these things” we call the *Odyssey*, he is, in effect, restoring life (and therefore contemporaneity) to man and myth by re-creating them in sacred, cyclical time¹⁶.

Such a view is buttressed by the phrase καὶ ἡμῖν (“to us as well”) at the end of the line. With these words Homer acknowledges the traditional back-

15. The translations from the various languages are, unless otherwise indicated, my own. I have rendered the poetries very literally and formulaically.

16. See Foley, *op. cit.*, especially pp. 371-417, for a lengthy discussion of the process of re-creation in Homer and other oral poetries.

ground against which he and his group will practice the *Odyssey* ritual. The collective referenced by *καὶ ἡμῖν* is transpersonal; that is, the group participating in this celebration extends beyond the immediate boundaries of time and space. It includes not simply the assemblage gathered for one particular performance, but all people ever gathered anywhere for any performance of the same ritual. Stripping away the cultural metaphor of the Muse, then, we encounter a formal sacralization of what is to follow. All poets petition for all groups; in ritual repetition lies identification with the collective.

The proem to *Beowulf* (1-3) reveals the same underlying sense of the collectivity of the traditional poetic experience:

Hwæt, we Gar-Dena in geardagum,
 peodcyninga prym gefrunon,
 hu oa æpelingas ellen fremedon¹⁷.

*Lo, we have heard the glory of the Spear-Danes, in year-days,
 Of the chieftain-kings, how the noble ones performed valor.*

Immediately after the interjection *hwæt* ("lo"), very similar to the Serbo-Croatian *ej!* in its function of initializing a performance or segment of a performance¹⁸, follows the personal pronoun *we* ("we"). From the beginning, the poet (*scop*) is acknowledging his group and signaling a collective event. In the next two lines he goes on to say what *we* have heard, i.e., tales of the glory and valor of the Spear-Danes. Before he identifies anything or anybody except *we* and *Gar-Dena*; however, he inserts the much-used formula *in geardagum* (1b), a commonplace in the opening lines of Old English epic verse¹⁹. Much in the manner of *καὶ ἡμῖν* in the *Odyssey* passage examined above, the combination of *we* and *in geardagum* transpersonalizes the proceedings. There is no reason, grammatical or otherwise, to believe that the stock "in year-days" expression must modify only the supposedly historical events to

17. The *Beowulf* text is that of Fr. Klaeber, ed., *Beowulf and the Fight at Finnsburg*, 1950, rpt. Boston, D.C. Heath and Co., 1968, with the macra omitted and some first-line capitals reduced. Translation from the more highly inflected Old English to a clear modern equivalent prevented line-for-line correspondence.

18. See the *pripjev* ("proem") at the end of this paper.

19. Compare, for example, the opening lines of *Andreas* (text from Kenneth R. Brooks, ed., *Fates of the Apostles*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1961:

Hwæt, we gefrunan on fyrndagum
 twelfe under tunglum treadinge hæleo,
 peodnes pegnas.

*Lo, we have heard in former days
 Of twelve under the stars, glory-blessed heroes,
 The chieftain's thanes.*

which the proem refers. That the act of “learning by inquiry” or “hearing” (*gefrunon* in 2b) was performed *in geardagum* by a contemporary *we* seems chronologically impossible. But tradition, because it is ritualistic, does not recognize anachronism; indeed, anachronism does not exist in sacred time. This *we* is not simply the group present at the telling of *Beowulf* which has come down to us; it refers to all the groups who ever participated, and who ever will participate, in performance of this ritual. As in the Serbo-Croatian and Homeric Greek traditions, collectivity has no linear, historical limits.

In summary, I have argued against the contemporary distinction between poet and audience, and in favor of a concept which recognizes the ritual nature of the oral performance and the consequent active participation of all present; the word “group” names this new concept. We must continue to consider the evidence for the collective, ritualistic quality of Serbo-Croatian, Homeric Greek, and Anglo-Saxon performances, recognizing that—for the traditional group—synchronic identification with all generations and all places on the plane of sacred time is paramount²⁰:

*Ej! De sedimo da se veseljimo;
Ej! da bi nas i Bog veseljijo,
Veseljijo pa razgovorijo,
E! pa ljepšu nam sreću dijeljijo
Na ovome mestu i svakome! 5
Sad po tome, moja braćo draga,
Pa velimo da pesmu brojimo.
Ej! Davno nekad u zemanu bilo,
Davno bilo, sada pominjemo
Na ovome mestu i svakome. 10*

*Here where we sit let us make merry!
May-God bring us merriment,
Merriment, and pleasant conversation,
And may he allot to us greater good fortune
In this place where we are gathered and in every other! 5
Now, my dear brothers,*

20. The following ten lines form the *pripjev* to Salih Ugljanin’s third performance of *Pjesma od Bagdata*, or *The Song of Baghdad* (*Serbo-Croatian Heroic Songs*, ed. by Albert B. Lord, vol. II, Cambridge and Belgrade, Harvard University Press and the Serbian Academy of Sciences, 1953, 8, with pitch marks omitted). I have reproduced Lord’s translation, a fine formulaic and literal rendering of the original (*Serbo-Croatian Heroic Songs*, vol. I, 68, lineation added).

1



2



5



3



4



Montage

*We say that we shall sing the measures of a song.
It happened once in time long past;
Long ago it was, and now we remember it
Even in this place where we are gathered and in every other.* 10

*Emory University
Atlanta, Georgia*