

HOMERIC QUESTION

THE SINGER ABOVE TALES

Homer, Međedović and Traditional Epics

-Zlatan Čolaković

Sokrates (to Ion): *No one can fail to see that you speak of Homer not by any art or knowledge. If you were able to speak of him by rules of art, you would have been able to speak of all other poets, for poetry is a whole.*

PLATO: *Ion* (translated by B. Jowett)

On August 10, 1935, Milman Parry and Nikola Vujnović recorded Avdo Međedović's [\[1\]](#) re-creation of the epic poem *Bećiragić Meho*. [\[2\]](#) Earlier, in the morning of that day, Mumin Vlahovljak from Pljevlja, extraordinary 72-year old singer of tales, had finished singing his own version of this poem for them. He had learned it over fifty years earlier from Blind Huso (Ćor Huso), who was widely acknowledged as the best of all Bosnian Moslem (henceforth: Bosniac) oral traditional singers. Vlahovljak's poem was 2,294 verses long.

Parry had planned these recording sessions in advance. His experiment consisted of having Avdo Međedović listen to the Vlahovljak's performance of an epic poem unknown to him, and then of recording Međedović's re-creation of the same poem. This would provide proof that an able oral singer of tales can learn a long epic poem during only one hearing.

Međedović heard it only once, from Vlahovljak, undoubtedly for the first time. [\[3\]](#) Parry and Vujnović carefully observed his "learning process." Yet Međedović's version was nearly three times longer than Vlahovljak's (6,311 verses). Albert Bates Lord wrote about this experiment of Parry's in his book *The Singer of Tales* (1960). A. B. Lord had intended to publish both epics in a separate volume of the series *Serbo-Croatian Heroic Songs*; henceforth: *SCHS*). Unfortunately, Lord did not have time to fulfill this task.

Parry's experiment, however, did not consist solely of the recording of Međedović's version, as A. B. Lord described it. Namely, Parry requested that Vlahovljak be present during Međedović's performance and provide a critique of Međedović's creation.

Thus, on that same day, Parry and Vujnović also recorded their conversation with Mumin Vlahovljak about the difference between Blind Huso's and Međedović's technique of epic-making, since Mumin had known Huso long ago (*Parry text 12472*, Mumin Vlahovljak, *Pričanje*, records 7109-7124, August 10, 1935).^[4] I will briefly report on the most important parts of that conversation, and try to explain the cause of the difference in length and content between Vlahovljak's and Međedović's versions of the «same» individual poem.

What Is Traditional and What Is Post-Traditional

In the first part of the conversation, Vlahovljak spoke about Blind Huso. According to Vlahovljak, during the second half of the 19th century Blind Huso's performances of epic profoundly influenced two generations of singers of the Sandžak region. Blind Huso was “the professional singer” (*mahsuz pjevač*, which in literal translation means “nothing else but the singer”), who performed “all over Bosnia.” He was the finest “historian” (*istoričar*) and the supreme “Singer of Tales.” Blind Huso was “the embodiment” of the Bosniac tradition, as he knew “the best poems.” Each of them was superior to any epic poem Vlahovljak had ever heard from other singers.^[5] Vlahovljak and his father learned most of their epics from Blind Huso. Vlahovljak knew “over a hundred poems,” but he did not dictate their “titles” (plot-descriptions in a few words) to Vujnović and Parry when they recorded his repertoire. He provided for their list «only Blind Huso's poems,» taken over from Blind Huso and from his own father.

Vlahovljaks belonged to the local aristocracy, and Mumin's father was the leader of the armed guard, in charge of protecting the Bosnian frontier. As they were wealthy landowners (*aghas*), they sang heroic epics to other beys and aghas exclusively for entertainment, never for money. Actually, they paid other singers, who were in need of it. Thus, Vlahovljaks kept Blind Huso in their own *han* (hostelry or inn) to listen and learn his poems. They richly rewarded him, and the other aghas and beys in the audience did the same.^[6]

Vlahovljak portrays Blind Huso as an incredibly gifted man, a “self-taught philosopher,” “inspired by God.” His poems were “natural” and “truthful.” There was something “marvelous” about him: such were his wisdom, his knowledge and his personality.^[7] Vlahovljak tried to describe Huso's performance, but honestly admitted that he could not. The perfection of Blind Huso's technique and of his poems was “beyond words.”

Vlahovljak: When he started to play, you would say that he was joking, as a child. He would continue. When he began his singing, first slowly, one could not hear it (if sitting) near the

entrance, but then *ha-ha*, and then *ha-ha*, and ever better, and ever better. Even in this big hall, everyone could hear him. He began slowly. He did it word by word. He never piled up a hundred words for one word.

Vujnović: Were his poems good?

Vlahovljak: “Were his poems good?” He was such a singer that no other singer could measure up to him in this area, and warm the heart of a man as he could with his poem! Almost immediately as he began singing his poem, even if there were fifty, or sixty (in the audience), nearly everyone would start crying!

Vujnović: And why?

Vlahovljak: Ah, it was so sorrowful. If someone was to die somewhere, he said it with such sorrow, as though it happened right now, here, and you see it.

Vujnović: And did he use a lot of “embellishment” (*kita*) in his poems?

Vlahovljak: He did not... That (embellishment, *ZČ*) is not the truth; they use it just to lengthen their poems.

Vujnović: But why did he not use a lot of embellishment, when they (the poems, *ZČ*) are better when they are embellished?

Vlahovljak: Oh, they are better for this time, for today’s instruments, for those who walk today...

Vlahovljak continued explaining that “embellishing” a poem means not only “to lengthen it” but also “to bring lies in it.” He exclaimed, “I don’t want to lie; I will never lie, for anything!”

Vujnović and Parry wanted to find out Vlahovljak’s opinion of Međedović’s technique in comparison with his own technique and the technique of Blind Huso.

Vujnović: But you see, Avdo has good poems, and he did not learn any of them from Blind Huso?

Vlahovljak: “Avdo has good poems.” Avdo’s poems are good? Avdo embellishes, and now this poem of mine, which I know, he can embellish it even more, twice as much, and it will be even more embellished.[\[8\]](#)

Vujnović: Is it good?

Vlahovljak: To someone it is, and to someone else it is not.

...

Vujnović: I would say that a good singer is not the one who embellishes a lot, but the one who does not embellish. For example, you say that Blind Huso was a good singer.

Vlahovljak: He was such a good singer; there was none like him on the entire globe!

Vujnović: And why did he not embellish poems?

Vlahovljak: Oh, he did not embellish poems, as it is not what really happened. He did not add anything to what happened.[\[9\]](#)

Vujnović: Was he singing the truth only? Huh?

Vlahovljak: Yes! Only the truth.

Vujnović: Then, none of the embellishments in the poem is true?

Vlahovljak: Eh, indeed it is not!

Vujnović: Why do you laugh now? Tell me!

Vlahovljak: I must laugh now, when you see it yourself.

Vujnović: What do “I see”?

Vlahovljak: You understand it.

Vujnović: How?

Vlahovljak: Well.

Vujnović: By God, what do “I understand,” when I did not see anything?

Vlahovljak: By God, you understand, it seems, as well as I do! It seems that he, this mister boss (Parry),[\[10\]](#) he also understands it. Eeh!

Vujnović: Do *you* understand what “embellishment” is, the foundation of the heroic poem?

Vlahovljak: One hero, one man who is heroic man, is the poem’s foundation. And embellishment is the decoration, the clothing of the poem. To put clothes on the poem means the same as, for example, to put fine clothes on a good-looking youngster and he just appears good-

looking. This is the truth: here is this young fellow Nikola, a fine and ready and good-looking fellow, but he has no fine clothing.

Vujnović: It is the truth, by God; I do not possess good clothing!

Vujnović had noticed that just before the recording of this conversation Parry had a lively discussion with Vlahovljak.

Vujnović: What did you say to our gentleman (Parry, ZČ), when you held this pack of cigarettes? You held it like this in your hand. What did you tell him?

Vlahovljak: Ah, about that “embellishing.” He said to me, “How does Avdo sing?” I said, “He sings fine, he embellishes.” He said, “How does he embellish?” (**Vlahovljak**): Here is this pack of cigarettes. In it are “Drava” cigarettes. He said there are “Drava”, “Zeta”, “Vardar” and “Drina” cigarettes. Yet there is only one pack, and it is written on it - “Drava.” And if we shall agree that all of it may be mixed into Drava, go ahead![\[11\]](#)

Vujnović: And then, you say that Avdo (composed, ZČ) this poem in such a way?

Vlahovljak: Let those men listen to your recording, who do know what poems are! Then you will hear (the answer, ZČ).

Vujnović asks if Međedović, in addition to “improper” embellishing, made some “mistakes” within the plot of his poem. Vlahovljak refuses to answer. This part of the conversation ends with Vlahovljak’s statement that he is singing the way he has learned from Blind Huso.

Vujnović: Then, you sing the same as Blind Huso did.

Vlahovljak: I do not sing differently.

Vujnović: All of it, word for word?

Vlahovljak: All, word for word, I do not take anything out, nor do I add anything in.

Vujnović: But what does it mean, this “word for word?”

Vlahovljak: That is how I heard it, which is how I sing it.

Finally, Vujnović asks Vlahovljak what is “word.”

Vlahovljak: Word? I have heard: «Wine drank thirty men of the borderland.»

Vujnović: Yes.

Vlahovljak: I cannot say: «thirty four.»

Vujnović: Yes.

Vlahovljak: But «thirty.» And I always sing: «thirty men of the borderland...» I cannot say what I have not heard. There it is, brother![\[12\]](#)

Vujnović: And that is proper![\[13\]](#)

Vlahovljak: Eh, that's it, if you ask me to answer.

Milman Parry was acquainted with the theory that the Bosniac tradition had evolved from shorter Christian epic forms through “epicizing” (*epizacija, episierung*). The so-called epicizing occurred by means of the “embellishing style” (*kićeni stil*). This term was coined by previous collectors and scholars (L. Marjanović, M. Murko, G. Gesemann and A. Schmaus). According to their accurate observations, the embellishing style enabled Bosniac singers in Bihaćka Krajina, the northern region of Bosnia, to construct very intricate and developed plots within their lengthy epic poems.[\[14\]](#) Parry, who followed their work, assumed that oral traditional epic poems gained length with embellishments, and with its length gained its essence. (C. M. Bowra later would hold similar views). Parry thought that the foundation of the Bosniac long epic was “embellishment,” which he most likely understood, in his own terminology, as “thematic extension” within “composition by theme.” As it seemed to me that Parry may have coined the term “theme” after Gesemann’s “schemata,” I asked about it A. B. Lord. He claimed, - in his conversation with me, - that Parry’s discovery of “theme” was based on Parry’s own observations of epic creation.[\[15\]](#) Parry was looking for the singers of the longest poems, and in Bijelo Polje he finally found his “Homer.”

Parry’s “Homer” was Avdo Međedović, the singer whose song was recorded on that day in August of 1935, the phenomenal singer from the village of Obrov, near Bijelo Polje. He was capable of singing and dictating poems as long as the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. After requesting and recording for over a month from him songs of Homeric length, and of high quality, both by dictation and sung in performance (ca 80,000 verses in total!), Parry learned from Vlahovljak

that his singer of the longest poems was not a *bona fide* oral traditional singer. Međedović's poems and his epic-making technique were essentially different from the poems and the technique of Parry's other singers, who were *bona fide* "oral traditional" singers. One of the best among them was Mumin Vlahovljak, the disciple of Blind Huso whose views were outlined above. The next day, Parry and Vujnović abruptly left Bijelo Polje, although they have not completed the recording of Međedović's «longest» poem.[\[16\]](#)

Vlahovljak in his criticism claimed that Međedović, using his «embellishing» technique:

1. unnecessarily lengthened Vlahovljak's poem
2. did not follow the truthfulness of Vlahovljak's traditional poem as he learned it, but introduced lies in it
3. mixed many parts of other poems into that single poem, thus making a hybrid poem, which is forbidden in traditional oral epic-making.

As he was undoubtedly an excellent traditional oral poet, Vlahovljak's criticism must be seriously evaluated. I think that his comments are applicable not only to Međedović, but also to Homer's epic making technique. In the following text I will argue that both Međedović (in great measure) and Homer (in highest measure) were **post-traditional poets**. I suggest that there are two essentially different techniques for the making of epic, which have produced distinct forms of epic poems, both in the Bosniac and ancient Greek oral epic corpus: a traditional and post-traditional technique.[\[17\]](#)

Post-traditional epic making is oral epic poetry that essentially, on the level of ideas and in its diction, themes and technique, surpasses the limits and norms of oral traditional mythic-historic epic making. The resulting products cannot be learned, transmitted and re-created by means of conservative traditional epic making craft. Post-traditional epics are products of art, and hybrids of tradition and innovation. While their diction, style and overall design surpass traditional oral epic making, they lack deep traditional meaning, as they destroy the mythic-historic component of the inherited traditional tale. In order to compensate for this lack, the post-traditional poems contain many parts of other traditional poems and oral traditional forms (i.e. story-telling, ballads and lyrics). Post-traditional singers, who resemble poets-artists, strive to encompass within a single poem the whole tradition. They develop new modes of performance and creation, highly improvisational; they are able to create dramatic presentations (mimesis) of characters' words and deeds (with a prevalence of direct speech) and to develop new plot-designs. The plot and diction in the poems of post-traditional singers are not stable, and change substantially in each subsequent performance.

I define traditional oral epic poetry as the corpus of mythic-historic poems which are closely interconnected; they are produced by traditional singers in a distinct region according to the conservative traditional patterns of a mythic-historic epic-making craft (with diction, ethic and esthetic features developed in that region). Its products are created orally and transmitted by the singers of tales, who do not resemble poets-artists, but “artisans who re-create.” The traditional singers, who resemble recreative musicians, do not improvise. They intimately know many poems, and possess “knowledge of the past.” They are able “to enliven” truthful events depicted in the traditional poems, by closely following the plot as learned from the older singers. Their craft resides in the creation of “mythic structures” through their own “compositional schemes.” Each individual traditional singer is an “embodiment of the tradition,” within the frames of his own knowledge of the traditional poems and his own re-creative capabilities. Traditional singer’s plots and diction in poems remain stable throughout his singing career.

Below I will outline what I see as the significant differences between traditional and post-traditional performers and poets, with examples to illustrate my points taken from my own analysis and the literature about Homer and about the Bosniac performer/poets.

1. In Homer’s epics there are many references to other traditional poems and stories. There are also Homer’s references on the level of thematic and formulaic expression. Such references are also present in Bosniac epics. They can be discovered through careful study of multiple poems created by a good single singer (and, afterward, through the study of other epic poems from his region).[\[18\]](#)

References to other poems and stories are both **rare and avoided** in the poems of Bosniac **traditional** singers of tales. In his book *The Singer of Tales*, p. 159, A. B. Lord explicitly states that he did not notice Homeric referentiality in the Bosniac oral tradition. On the other hand, references are **abundant and stressed** in the epic poems of Avdo Međedović. Milman Parry was the first and, to the best of my knowledge, the *only* American scholar who noticed Homeric referentiality in Međedović’s poems (in his yet unpublished manuscript containing questions for Međedović, titled *Pitanja u Bijelom Polju*).[\[19\]](#) This crucial analogy between Međedović and Homer, and other analogies summarized below,[\[20\]](#) lead me to conclude that Homer and Međedović were not traditional oral, but post-traditional oral poets.

2. Međedović considerably lengthens his poems in relation to the traditional poems of the singers from his area, as Homer most likely did.[\[21\]](#) Homer’s epics were, as we learn from ancient Greek sources, at least two or three times longer than those of the Epic Cycle. (I presume that those of the Epic Cycle derived from earlier ancient Greek oral traditional epics).[\[22\]](#) The length of Međedović’s epics in relation to the Bosniac traditional epics is analogous. However, it

is not only the exceptional length of poems that makes Homer and Međedović post-traditional oral poets, but their own artistic way of oral epic making.

3. Međedović structures his plots, dialogs, characters, themes and scenes in a masterful way, sometimes reminiscent of Homer's virtuosity.^[23] He introduces many parts of other individual poems into a single individual poem.^[24] This is not permissible in the true Bosniac oral tradition (Vlahovljak's example of the "pack of cigarettes"). Neo-analysts (Kakridis, Pestalozzi, Schadewaldt, Kullman and others) have shown that Homer did the same.

Međedović's plots became not only more intricate than the plots of traditional singers, but also more dramatic, and sometimes tragic.^[25] The mode of direct speech became dominant in his epics. There is ca 40-60% of direct speech in the poems of Bosniac traditional singers of tales, and ca 65% in the poems of the best among them. However, in some of Međedović's poems, the overall percentage of direct speech is over 75%, and it stretches for hundreds of verses at 100%, when the character digresses or gives his detailed report, as Odysseus does in Homer's *Odyssey*. In his longest poems, Međedović uses direct speech in a percentage roughly equivalent to Homer. Both Plato in his *Republic* and Aristotle in *Poetics* noticed the prevalence of "mimetic" direct speech in Homer (the poet "speaking through the mouth" of his characters), as *differentia specifica* in relation to the "less mimetic" narration in other epic poems.

4. Both Međedović and Homer in structuring their poems use flashbacks, episodes, retardation, digression, duplication, parallelisms, long descriptions and catalogs, teichoskopia, and ekphrasis,^[26] as well as anticipations of future events and elaborate plot endings. They rationalize the inherited plots and they create superb "novels" in verse.

Homer was the Cervantes of ancient Greece. Cervantes ridiculed the popular heroic and pastoral novels. It resulted in the creation of a modern novel. Within his monumental Epic, Homer created a new *Weltanschauung*. He exposed the shortfalls of the traditional heroic point of view and its conception of honor, as expressed in traditional epics, thus paving the way for tragedy. In a similar manner, in his paradigmatically post-traditional epic *The Death of Mustajbey of the Lika*, Međedović depicts the unjust treatment of women in heroic society, and he describes his main character, one of the most glorified heroes of Bosniac traditional epics, as an immoral villain. It is tragic, Međedović claims, that this hero is "our own image and mirror." The main Bosniac's hero's hubris causes the defeat of the Bosniac army, and the leader, who used to be "the best of the Bosniacs," before becoming maddened with love and sexual lust, justly loses his head in a heroic duel. The plot is structured, as in ancient Greek tragedy, on the gradual "fulfillment of a prophecy" and the "just punishment of hubris."

Further support for my point is provided by Don Quixote, who refers to the first book of his wanderings in the second part of the novel, criticizing its author and its content; by Odysseus who refers to *the Iliad* and to the aftermath of the *Sack of Troy* in *the Odyssey*; and by Međedović's heroes, who do the same in the second part of the monumental epic just mentioned. Some of the main characters in the first part of all these works play significant roles in the second complementary part. The main heroes are obsessed in all these works, and the artists depict their passionate madness.

5. Post-traditional singers develop their own technique of creation-in-performance, which differs considerably from the typical oral tradition's technique. We can only guess if this was the case with Homer, but it is probable. That is to say, the singer necessarily inherits the modes and circumstances of the usual performance. If his creation in performance requires more time, as his tale is lengthier, his performing technique must be different. Either the new performance circumstances allow for it, or his technique has to be adjusted to the usual circumstances.

Međedović developed his own **recitation technique, or mostly declamation**, instead of singing. I suggest that Homer used a similar technique. Međedović transformed the music, the rhythm and the melody of traditional sung verse into recited verse. In his recitation technique that music, rhythm and melody inhabited his rapidly spoken verse. It is clearly visible in the written transcription of the verses of traditional and post-traditional singers. While the sung verses appear to the reader "less poetically attractive," when unaccompanied by music and out of their performance context, such is not the case with the recited verse, which gains more "literary" and poetic value. Whoever had the fortune to see both performance modes, [\[27\]](#) will agree with me that the performance of a good traditional singer of tales is more interesting to watch and feels more authentic than the performance of a post-traditional singer. The post-traditional singer's performance is more interesting to hear and read as it possesses much richer and finer diction. [\[28\]](#)

A. B. Lord in his already cited text "Avdo Međedović" accurately described Međedović's performance: «His singing ran ahead of his fingers on the instrument; thoughts and words rushed to his mind for expression, and there were times when he simply ran the bow slowly back and forth over the strings while he poured forth the tale in what seemed to be prose of lightning-like rapidity but was actually verse. He was not a musician, but a poet and singer of tales.» I submit that Lord indeed described the technique of a post-traditional poet. The traditional singer of tales resembles reproductive musician, not a poet.

In the old Bosniac tradition, the greatest number of singers was able to complete a single poem during one night of singing. However, the best singers, like Međedović, “left” their poem unfinished after an entire night’s singing, and completed their creation the following night.[29] Međedović, moreover, in some of his poems re-ordered events in two corresponding parts and in one case “invented” a division of a single traditional poem into two poems![30]

6. In the Bosniac tradition, Međedović’s performance of a single epic lasted considerably longer than the performance of other singers. He created nearly twice as many verses as other singers in the same time-period. Other singers took longer breaks and sang at a more leisurely pace. The pace of verse-creation varies from singer to singer, but one can safely estimate that the traditional singers in Međedović’s region created ca 12-17 verses per minute, and Međedović ca 20-25.

Međedović accomplished this feat by developing his own declamatory technique, instead of *singing* his verses.[31] Using this technique, he was able to sustain his rapid pace of verse making longer than any other singer. While the greatest number of traditional epics lasted for 1-6 hours of singing, and each epic was usually 1,000-3,000 verses long, Međedović’s longest poems could stretch over two days, and he was accustomed to compose ca 4,000-5,000 lines daily. His longest poems in performance comprised ca 6,000-8,000 verses.

7. Occasions of performance are crucial for the development of post-traditional singers, who are professional or semi-professional. We know with certainty that the new fashion of public singing in coffeehouses during the thirty nights of Ramadan had been introduced in the beginning of the 20th century in Međedović’s region. The singer could earn quite a considerable sum if he was good enough to be hired by the coffeehouse owner, and able to entertain guests night after night for the whole month.

When Parry met Međedović during the 1930s, he had been such a semi-professional singer for at least five years, and the tradition of singing in coffee houses itself was not very old then. It is probable that during the month of Ramadan he was creating 90,000-130,000 verses or ca 4,000 verses each night! It is safe to say that he sang nearly every day during the rest of the year. His singing career lasted over sixty years.

8. We do not know on which occasions Homer could have performed his long tales. It is possible that Homer never performed them in their entirety and in the form and length as we know his poems. The assumption that the Panhellenic festivals provided such an occasion for the first time may be correct. It seems a reasonable assumption to me that it took three days to

perform the *Iliad*, and only two days to perform *the Odyssey*. However, the rhythm of performance of *the Odyssey* may have been slower, and the rhythm of performing *the Iliad* much quicker. The analogy with Međedović's and Kurtagić's rapid performance in descriptions of fights and duels, and their creation of catalogs and heroic races, suggests that such parts of the Homeric poems might have been performed with incredible speed (sometimes ca 25-30 decasyllable verses per minute, as in Međedović's performance).

9. Post-traditional singers introduce new themes, new motifs and new diction into their poems, not learned, nor ever heard, from other singers, but "from my own head," "from my own heart," "from within of myself" (Međedović). This also seems to be the case with Homer (in higher measure in his *Odyssey* than in the *Iliad*).

In the Bosniac tradition there is a special case of adding the plot of a story, which served as a «comment to the epic poem,» into the epic poem. That is, the plot of some epics consisted not only of «epic content» which had to be sung in performance, but also of some parts that were not sung. After the singing of such an epic, the singer used to add, in story-telling mode (*pričanje*), his «comments» on the poem and the continuation and background of its plot (*tumačenje*). When I asked my singer Murat Kurtagić about such a poem, that might need the singer's comment in story-telling mode, he answered: «It is usually commented (*To se tumači*), but I am able to create it in singing. I can enclose it in verse.» (Conversation recorded in Zagreb, on September 8, 1989). I audio-recorded that poem (*Derdelez Alija i Vuk Jajčanik*), and «the comment,» sung in excellent verses, indeed became an integral part of the epic. This indicates, in my opinion, how the contents of traditional stories, originally separated from epics, became introduced into epic poems. It seems to me that Homer used a similar technique, especially in the *Odyssey*. The account of the hero's travels may have belonged to the realm of story-telling, (and some parts of it to *the Argonauts*), and Homer introduced it into his epic simply by turning it into hexameters and into the form of «the hero's report» digression. Blind Huso, Avdo Međedović, Murat Kurtagić and other great Bosniac epic singers excelled also as story-tellers.

Međedović's diction in comparison to the diction of traditional singers is much more rich and poetic. He also enlivens the worn-out "ossified" traditional themes, usually occurring repeated nearly word-for-word fixed within the poems of traditional singers (for example in the description of battles and duels). Homer seems to have done the same, especially in the *Iliad*. (This "enlivening" often causes some important traditional themes in post-traditional poems to lose their deep traditional meaning).

Međedović deliberately and innovatively used traditional devices (thematic duplication and parallelism, retardation, digression, repetition), traditional diction and traditional themes in

unexpected places within his plot, where **they do not belong traditionally**. Thus, he gives them new meaning, rather surprising and non-traditional.[\[32\]](#) It seems to me that Homer devised the analogical post-traditional technique. The Sirens used the verses from the *Iliad* to lure Odysseus, verses that had occurred in a different context in the *Iliad*, as Robert Fitzgerald noticed.[\[33\]](#) Odysseus meets his own mother, already dead, in the Underworld, although traditionally the mother of a hero dies when she recognizes her son, returning from the realm of the dead. Thus, “the hero’s meeting with his mother” is traditional, but the context in which this theme is used is non-traditional and inverted. The hero often talks to his horse, and this is traditional in both ancient Greek and Bosniac epics, but when the horse talks to Achilles, it is non-traditional and reversed. Thetis laments over Patroclus’ dead body, although traditionally Achilles’ mother lamented over her own son’s dead body (in the *Aethiopsis*).

10. Međedović approaches his tradition with irony. Sometimes, unlike oral traditional singers, he laughs at his tradition. Often, he disagrees with the tradition’s conservatively established meaning and demonstrates that he does not subscribe to its simplicity. I believe that this is the essence of Homer’s matchless approach to his tradition’s naïveté. Both Međedović and Homer avoid miracles and the super-natural. They both mock some of the essential, even sacred traditional motifs and themes (for example, Homer in the theme of *Theomachia*, and in his handling of the motif “the death of the double”, and Međedović in treating the theme of “a brother about to kill his own brother” and the motif “absence of a sacred hero”).[\[34\]](#)

11. Both Međedović and Homer characterize their heroes by “following” the traditional ways of depicting them, but doing it to the extreme. Using their technique of post-traditional “over-characterization,” they create unique and lively characters, whose traditional virtues sometimes turn into their vices (for example, “too enraged” Achilles, “excessively talkative” Nestor, and “overly doubtful” Penelope). However, their talent and humanity is so immense, that some characters speak “their own language” (Adam Parry) and even act “on their own.” The characters sometimes develop their personality within the course of the epic. The elaborate characterization, especially realistic characterization, is a post-traditional phenomenon.

In concordance with “over-characterization”, Homer and Međedović also “overdo” or magnify the events within the traditionally inherited plot to the extreme. While doing it, they feel free to absorb many other individual poems, or at least many of their themes, into the hybrid poem that they create, thus diminishing the tradition’s variety of poems.[\[35\]](#)

Međedović’s main hero Smailagić Meho became the leader of the Bosniac army (*alajbeg*), although within Bosniac tradition he was only the leader of one hundred Bosniac warriors (*buljukbaša*). Young Meho gets the attributes traditionally given only to the sacred hero.

Međedović brings into the army all the heroes “who lived at that period of history,” but many of them in the published sources, from which Međedović learned this poem, did not take part in that particular war.[36] While it is not easy to prove this point on the example of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, it seems very likely to me.[37] Both the *Iliad and Odyssey* have taken “cosmic” proportions in Homer’s elaboration. Within Bosniac tradition, the returning husband usually kills one suitor who came to his court with the wedding guests. The well-known theme of over one hundred suitors of “the most beautiful woman” (i.e., Helen) is traditional, and it appears in Bosniac tradition as well, but it belonged to *the Cypria* and not to the traditional form of the *Odyssey*. Moreover, the slaughter of all of the suitors, including the killing of all the unfaithful servants, does not seem traditional to me.

12. Post-traditional singers have mastered the technique of epic-creating and of diction far beyond the powers of traditional singers of tales. They were fully aware of it, to the point of a hubristic mastering of tradition itself. They felt that only a good singer could make a good epic, and that a bad singer would make a poor epic poem even from the finest epic poem, learned from the best singer.[38] Although this seems obvious to us, it runs counter to the conservative logic of tradition, as it situates the singer above the tales. The post-traditional singer’s tale is not traditional, but the hybrid of tradition and innovation; as a result, such a singer himself cannot be traditional. That is why the Bosniac traditional singers felt enmity against Međedović.

13. These and many other facts contribute to my conclusion that a single, superb, post-traditional singer composed the *Iliad and Odyssey*. Thus, **Homer was not a traditional oral singer of tales, nor are his epics traditional, as is widely accepted in contemporary scholarship.** The comparison of the Bosniac oral tradition with Međedović and with Homer, and the analogy of Međedović and Homer, point toward the impossibility that Homer was a traditional oral singer.

I am well aware that my thesis will be countered with the opposite view, namely of Homer *as* the tradition. According to Gregory Nagy, Homer’s art is traditional in its diction and in its themes; moreover, Homer’s thinking is regulated by tradition, and he has no intention of saying anything non-traditional.[39] But this view, most strongly defended by Nagy, does not apply to Međedović and some other Bosniac singers, and does not apply to Homer, as I have indicated.

14. These considerations raise the question of Homer’s relation to his tradition, and prompt us to think about the origins of his texts. The post-traditional singers in the Bosniac tradition emerged at a time of crisis, when published oral epics entered into their community. It is significant that the post-traditional singers appear when the poems of their fellow singers are being collected, written down, improperly edited, published, and thus become accessible to them in written form. Consequently, it was not literacy that destroyed the tradition (it lived for centuries among

singers, literate as well as non-literate, in many communities that knew writing, and lives even today in Montenegro), but the non-traditional learning of poems from written sources.

Homer's texts seem to have originated in somewhat similar circumstances. Their hybrid nature and incredible excellence seem to have extinguished, or rather transformed, the ancient Greek tradition of oral epic singing so thoroughly that Plato and Aristotle had no idea of Homer's roots in traditional oral epic singing. Aristotle could not conceive that the Homeric verses, recited by the performer-actor of his own time, were originally sung and accompanied by an instrument.

15. Međedović's longest poems were the ones he learned from the published sources. He stated that he never heard them in performance from other singers. Parry understood how important this was for his research of the *Homeric Question*, and he found the young boy who read those texts to Međedović. The boy explained that he read the text of *The Wedding of Smailagić Meho* to Međedović for three full days. I found this statement revealing, because if we were to read this same work, we would read it aloud in about three to four hours. Nevertheless, the boy could read it only very slowly, as reading was "tiring his brain." It seemed to Međedović that this poem was exceptionally long, although its length was approximately the same size as the poems of his fellow traditional singers. When Vujnović asked Međedović to approximate how much longer his own version of the poem was than the one from the songbook, Međedović answered that it was perhaps "twice as long." But it was actually six times longer, and he dictated it for six days.

16. My singer Murat Kurtagić^[40] also learned his "longest" poems from a published source. His wife, who was barely able to read, read them to him painfully slowly. He told me that the poems from the book were so long that "even if I sing for six hours 'at full speed' (*brzom*), I cannot complete them." Accustomed to "picking up" the poem of another singer in only one hearing, and having an extraordinary memory, the singers were able to remember every detail of the poem read to them. It is important to add that the poems from the published source were collected in other regions, and contained different, unusual diction and new themes, unknown up until that time in the region where Međedović and Kurtagić lived. As many of the heroes from the songbook, on the other hand, were the same, and many themes familiar to them, the singers felt that the published poems were as truthful, or even more truthful, than the poems of the singers from their own region. They were happy to enlarge their repertoire, and bring the new tales into their community. However, what they brought did not enter their tradition in the traditional way and was not learned in a traditional way.

To summarize the argument thus far:

The poems of Bosniac traditional oral singers do not resemble Homer's poems. Only the poems of post-traditional singers resemble them. In the Bosniac tradition such poems begin to appear when the singers 1) start learning poems from a written source, 2) develop their own, highly unique, performance style, 3) create much longer poems, as the performance occasions change, 4) develop referentiality by "mixing" poems and using traditional themes and motifs in a non-traditional context, 5) introduce new themes, new diction, and the contents of non-epic traditional forms into their epics, 6) approach their own tradition with irony, and bring their own ideas into it. Most of these arguments seem to me applicable to Homer's art.

17. Traditional singers cannot learn the poems of post-traditional singers in a natural way, by listening to their performance. The post-traditional singer designs his plot in a new way, and his superb technique of singing, or rather declaiming, in performance (developed mostly by the singer himself in the Bosniac tradition) is both unique and non-traditional.

When Vujnović told Međedović that he might as well learn his poem and perform it, Međedović answered: «You could never learn to perform my poem like I do, even if you tried to learn it for the rest of your life.» This shows his awareness that his technique is unique. Vujnović replied: «I have written down your poem, as you dictated it, word-for-word. In three months I can learn it by heart, and sing it the same as you sing it.» Međedović agreed that this might be possible. Within the tradition, a young singer is expected to learn both the technique and the poems from an old singer, by listening to his performance.

18. If the post-traditional singer and/or his disciple wish to preserve the epic for posterity, the only way to accomplish this is to dictate it to someone, or write it down with his own hand (or, today, record it on film or tape). Consequently, there is a strong reason for such a singer and his pupils to find a way for preserving his poem in order to learn it by heart, and thus save it and perpetuate it.

Georg Danek argues, very convincingly, that the *Iliad* must have been preserved in writing before the inclusion of the *Doloneia*, and that the poet of the *Doloneia* very likely learned the *Iliad* by heart from written text.[\[41\]](#)

19. If Homer's *Iliad and Odyssey* were, as I suppose, post-traditional products of art, no traditional singer could learn them by listening to Homer's performance. The rhapsodes, who had learned Homer's epics by heart, literally word-for-word, more than likely from a written source, were reciters who reproduced a poem. Therefore, it does not seem appropriate to apply

the principles of oral traditional literature to post-Homeric reciters of Homer's epics. They were performers and actors, and the changes they introduced into the texts were of minor importance. A modern analogy would be the composers of classical music and the performing pianists.

20. The *traditional* singers of tales are conservative, and feel that the content of the traditional poems is true, historical, and sacred. They strive to learn their epic poems "word for word" from other traditional singers. However, in the tradition of singing long poems, and without knowledge of writing, this is not possible. Their mytho-poetic creations consist of using thematic structures, similar to those they have learned before, and construct them into a new whole. They place the individual "true" story into a mythic structure of their own. Accordingly, within the tradition **the same individual story** will be found incorporated into **different mythic structures** (Duel, War, Wedding, Return, Siege, Rescue and some combination of all of them).^[42] This technique is essentially similar to the tragic poets' re-creation of the tale of Orestes and Electra (as I argue in my book on tragedy and Aristotle's *Poetics*, titled "Tri orla tragičkoga svijeta," CeKaDe, Zagreb, 1989).

21. A. B. Lord's thesis outlined in *The Singer of Tales*, which states that the traditional singer who learns from a published source does not differ from one who learns by listening to other singers, is misleading. The poems of such a "learned" singer become essentially different from the traditional poems. Learning from written sources destroys the tradition of the singing of orally-learned oral epics. Whoever is acquainted with such materials will confirm my statement. One only needs to analyze a dozen or so of "The Wedding of Smailagić Meho" epics, kept in *The Milman Parry Collection*, that were all learned from the same published source. All of them follow, more or less slavishly and accurately, the plot-structure from the published source, including Međedović's version.^[43] Consequently, such epics cease to be part of the living tradition. From the standpoint of studying traditional epics, such hybrid poems should not be considered as traditional. As soon as the singer learns the plot from a written source, his plot becomes inflexible. One of Parry's Bosniac singers learned such a poem by heart word-for-word, with close to 90% accuracy, although it is over 2,000 verses long. David E. Bynum rightly felt that such a way of learning causes "thematic paralysis" in the singer's creation.^[44]

On the other hand, learning poems from written sources gives rise to post-traditional singers, like Međedović. Their poems and their technique are very similar to Homer's epics. It is up to Homerists to investigate if Homer may also have been acquainted with written sources. I think that his catalog and detailed genealogical references point to such a possibility.

In 1937, two years after Parry's death, Vujnović collected by dictation the only *bona fide* traditional version of the poem *The Wedding of Smailagić Meho*.^[45] There is one other known

version, published in 1886, which was collected by Friedrich Salomo Krauss.[\[46\]](#) It was Parry's old singer Ibro Bašić from Stolac, who dictated it to Vujnović. Bašić did not learn his poem from the published source, but in a traditional way from another singer. What is equally important is the fact that the published version from 1886 was collected in his region.

Bašić's plot differs considerably from the published source; its mythic structure has changed from Wedding-War song, in which Meho, the young hero rescued Fata and after the war married her, into a Wedding-Duel song in which Meho not only rescued Fata, but also won his second wife in a heroic duel! (This version of the poem illustrates the non-traditionality of Međedović's and other versions kept in *The Milman Parry Collection*, and recorded by Parry and A. B. Lord).

22. The theory of gradual fixation of the Homeric texts over an extended period (Gregory Nagy), does not find an analogy in South Slavic materials, unless we take into account the published versions of Međedović's *The Wedding of Smailagić Meho*.[\[47\]](#) Since there are no substantial differences in plot structure within the extant manuscripts of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, then the primary source of all of them is one version (possibly one manuscript). However, the *Doloneia* seems to have been added to the *Iliad*. Its style and diction indicate that Homer was not its author. I am not aware whether anyone has yet provided a satisfactory explanation of why the *Doloneia* was added to the *Iliad*, and why Homer did not include this important part of the story into his own *Iliad* right from the beginning. Whatever the reason, Bosniac traditional epics akin to the *Iliad* contain within their plot the theme of the dangerous night-ride of the two heroes into the enemy stronghold, and their capturing of the invincible horse's garments.[\[48\]](#)

The hapax legomena, the extremely rich diction, the dialectal mixture and the amazing poetic excellence in Homer's epics prove the craft of a single post-traditional poet. A number of verses containing misunderstood words, a huge number of verses excluded from older versions, as well as whole passages repeated verbatim in Homer's texts, indicate very heavy and gradual text editing, with the possible influence of many performances, and, very likely, a school of Homer's disciples.[\[49\]](#) At least some variant readings seem to be legitimate. There is perhaps no way to decipher the "right" version of many verses, as such a version does not have to be Homer's version. Still, the appearance of gradual text fixation may have been caused by many centuries of copying and re-copying manuscripts, as well as text editing.

If the analogy with Međedović stands, Homer, as a post-traditional poet, would never repeat the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* identical to the versions we know. In his subsequent performances, he would have introduced many changes into the plot, as Međedović did in his second version of *The Wedding of Smailagić Meho* (collected by A.B. Lord).[\[50\]](#) Homer's diction and the length of his poems would also change, if the poems were recorded after a lapse of time.

23. A. B. Lord's postulate "*And there are no oral singers who are not traditional*" (*The Singer of Tales*, p. 155, Lord's italics), upon which his own understanding of an "oral traditional" Homer and Međedović was built, needs revision. The term "tradition," at least among Homerists, needs a new definition, as many of these scholars seem to have taken over this term from Parry and Lord without due caution. Actually, it is an indisputable fact that there are many oral singers who *are not* traditional. A number of collections of oral tradition poems, including *The Milman Parry Collection*, contain non-traditional poems, although they were sung in performance by the singers.[\[51\]](#)

Parry approached Homer as "traditional" poet, before he realized that he was an "oral" poet. He based Homer's "traditionality" on the difference of Homer's style and diction from the style and diction of written literature. It is fair to say that his early conception of "tradition" was vague, and that his early approach to "orality" versus "literacy," and the great divide between them, was equally bookish, romantically overemphasized and influenced by the exaggerated generalizations of Marcel Jousse. While for Parry a "traditional poet" meant "also an oral poet," I do not think that for Parry "oral poet" meant "also a traditional poet." Unfortunately, Parry did not have time to reassess Homer's "traditionality," based on his intimate knowledge and observation of *bona fide* oral traditional singers, and the post-traditional Međedović.

24. Homer was an oral poet-artist, but he was not a traditional singer of tales. The following seems to me the correct postulate, applicable to the ancient Greek, Bosniac and South Slavic tradition: "*And there are no traditional, and no post-traditional, singers, who are not oral.*" Homer might have dictated his *Iliad*, and he might have written his *Odyssey* with his own hand. It makes no difference with respect to his traditionality, or his post-traditionality, or his orality.

The "dictation theory" has long history, and was even depicted in 1663, in a sketch by Rembrandt. It is thought that at some point in time, presumably in the 8th century BC, Homer dictated his poem(s) to a scribe. There is no doubt in my mind that it was Parry who first anticipated the dictation theory, as can be concluded from the way he collected in 1935 in Bijelo Polje, and from his yet unpublished manuscripts "Pitanja iz Bijelog Polja" and "Ćor Huso." However, it was later formulated by A. B. Lord.

Richard Janko favors the "dictation theory" to explain the origins of the Homeric texts.[\[52\]](#) Janko claims that he was able to discern differences in diction between the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, which led him to conclude that the *Odyssey* was more recent. Still, he holds that it is possible that the same poet created both epics, and that they are traditional. It seems to me that his position

about the same poet for both epics is correct. However, as for his use of the term “traditional,” I do not agree. To be more specific, I have collected the “same” poems by the same traditional singer, Murat Kurtagić, from whom A. B. Lord recorded poems on two occasions, ca 30 and ca 40 years before I did. After comparing the diction in the “same” poems, composed decades apart, I found that the singer’s diction had not changed at all over this period. Lord did similar experiments and obtained analogous results when recording poems by Parry’s traditional singers (in the fifties and the sixties). According to this analogy, if Homer were indeed traditional his diction would not have changed, but as we just noted, Janko argued that his statistical data had shown marked differences between the diction of the two poems, indicating historical phases of change in the poet’s language. Janko also claims, in his commentaries of Homer’s “Books” 13-16, that Homer did not “harmonize” some of his themes with his tradition. The traditional singer always composes traditionally, within his tradition. Consequently, his work is traditional in its entirety. If the oral poet harmonizes his themes with his tradition, it proves that he had already stepped out from his tradition.

However, if Homer were post-traditional, his diction would contain significant changes after a lapse of time, as was the case with Međedović’s diction at the time when Lord collected his poems (in 1950-1, ca fifteen years after Parry). The richness and novelties in Homer’s diction in the *Odyssey*, and the poet’s introduction of many themes requiring the use of new diction (presumably used never before within the ancient Greek epic tradition) seem to support my view. As a post-traditional poet, Homer indeed had to “harmonize” his themes with his tradition. But his epics could never become traditional. Thus, Janko’s findings strongly confirm my thesis of Homer’s post-traditionality, and my thesis shows that Janko seems to be right. Namely, if the post-traditional “Homer” created his epics in the 7th, 6th, 5th, 4th, or 3rd century BC, the features of his diction and language would reveal it (along with a significant number of anachronisms).

Post-traditional singers, like Međedović and Homer, were oral poets. Even if Homer dictated his *Iliad*, but wrote his *Odyssey* himself (and both possibilities seem to me probable), he dictated and wrote both poems in the oral style, using oral diction; he transcribed his own epics “from his own mind,” “from his own heart.” Some Bosniac traditional singers, who have learned to write, did the same. Parry collected epic poems, written down by *bona fide* traditional singers of tales, with their own hand. Many contemporary singers used other recording devices. The well-known singer Ašir Ćorović from Rožaje, collected his own traditional songs on tapes, singing into the microphone of his own tape-recorder.

SIMILE ON A TRADITIONAL AND POST-TRADITIONAL SINGER

The epic tradition may be likened to a framed mosaic, or rather a framed puzzle board, in which all the shapes of the individual pieces of the puzzle constantly but slightly change their form, including the frame itself. Each of the traditional singers, as a single “embodiment of the tradition,” knows a certain number of those ever-changing pieces (poems), and the sum of the pieces he knows represent the whole puzzle board within his mind. The frame represents the singer’s knowledge of tradition, which extends to the diction, stories, lyric poems, legends, proverbs and even further, to the totality of tradition (religion, customs, beliefs, way of life etc.) Whenever the singer recreates any of his poems, each of them changes its shape a little bit. Each new poem he learns from other singers gets its place, and its shape, within this flexible puzzle board; each new experience and piece of knowledge of the tradition is built into the accommodating frame. Thus, whenever the traditional singers pick up and re-create any of their poems from the puzzle, it is within tradition, and each poem is wholly traditional.

The post-traditional singer broke the frames of the puzzle board or mosaic within himself. How did it happen? He had learned the poems from written sources and from various regional traditions. They were inflexible when transplanted into his own tradition. When they entered within the frames of the puzzle board in his mind, their shape was firm. They nourished themselves on other traditional poems, and they grew until breaking the frames of the board.

In the creation of any of his poems, the post-traditional singer builds anew the whole puzzle board and its frames. He does it by shaping and framing within one of his poems the whole puzzle board. That is why he cannot ever, as an artist, reach the perfection of the tradition. Sometimes, it may appear that he is able to surpass his tradition and that he is its pinnacle (Homer), but it is much more often that he fails. What he is trying to accomplish in his creation is indeed impossible: he wants to reach and express the totality of his own tradition within a single epic poem. That is why the post-traditional oral singer’s artistic creation is not essentially different from any writer’s creation.

DIGRESSION ON POST-TRADITIONAL DICTION

The post-traditional singer’s step out of the tradition is final and complete; it appears as “half-way out, half-way in” only to those scholars who are not familiar with any particular oral tradition well enough. (J. M. Foley’s notion of Homeric epic as “oral-derived text” comes to mind as a good example). Such a singer does not only change his poems by lengthening, embellishing, new designs, new themes and ideas, and so forth. His diction also changes throughout his life dramatically. It is not the same *Kunstsprache* that the traditional singers use.

In order to compensate for the lack of traditional meaning and mythic level, both irreversibly lost within his poems, the post-traditional singer strives to enrich his diction. The linguists have found in Međedović's diction a huge number of turcism, new word-forms, and loan words from the published songbooks. Where did he learn his turcisms? He spent seven years in the Turkish army, and obtained command of spoken Turkish. The new word-forms were his own invention, and he enriched his vocabulary from the songbooks and everyone he met, including Parry and Vujnović. His interest for epics led him to the study of Christian epics, and he was proud to have learned poems from Christian singers and songbooks so that he could perform a few of them. They also contained some new diction, and wonderful novel verses, never used in the Bosniac traditional epics. Moreover, they enriched his understanding and appreciation of the «enemy side,» its own great heroes and its different religious views and customs. Such knowledge contributed to his greater objectivity and led him toward the impartiality that Homer is rightly famous for.

Great poetic talent, and the ability to use elements of non-traditional diction, enable post-traditional singers to create new themes, and to describe whatever they want in verse. One can appreciate Homer truly only when one realizes that the numerous details he depicted entered into epic poems for the first time! It is obvious that Homer is not only aware of it, but that he introduces new words and colloquial phrases into his epics with delight. (His similes are post-traditional, and so is his own masterful use of direct speech, as are many of his other embellishments as well). The design of his epics is his own.

The traditional singer is incapable of such a feat, as he had not ever heard it. Indeed, the traditional singer does not appreciate it. For him the embellishments are just excessive lengthening and the stuff of liars. For the traditional singer the true tale and its proper river-like flow is what matters. He tries to re-create the truthful event within a well-known world of his tradition. He does not have to create anew the whole world, as Homer did, and Međedović tried to do, in order to tell his mythic-historic tale.

Zlatan Čolaković

[1] Avdo Međedović (born ca 1875, died 1955). In the summer of 1935, Milman Parry and Nikola Vujnović collected from him over 80,000 verses. Albert Bates Lord and Miloš

Velimirović also recorded his poems, in his old age (1950-1951). A. B. Lord, David Eliab Bynum and Zlatan Čolaković edited and published in the Bosnian original six of his poems, collected by Parry-Vujnović. A. B. Lord and Georg Danek translated his epics into English (prose-translation) and German (verse-translation). Z. Čolaković edited the critical edition of seven of Međedović's epics, including his conversations with Parry and Vujnović (forthcoming). Međedović's bibliography is listed in Čolaković's book *Mrtva glava jezik progovara*, Almanah, Podgorica, 2004, henceforth: *MGJP*).

[2] On Parry's collecting in 1933-4 with Nikola Vujnović and Il'ja Nikolajevič Goleniščev-Kutuzov, and especially in 1935 with Vujnović in Bijelo Polje, see chapter 13 in *MGJP*, also published in Almanah 25-26, Podgorica, 2004 (in Croatian). See also chapter 16 in *MGJP*, first published in «California Slavic Studies,» vol. 14 (Los Angeles – Berkeley – Oxford, 1991) under the title *South Slavic Muslim Epic Songs: Problems of Collecting, Editing, Transcribing and Publishing* (in English).

[3] In the Bosniac tradition, a singer's learning of a new epic through only listening once to its performance by another singer is nothing surprising, nor "miraculous," as it was described by the scholars who discovered this phenomenon. Actually, it arises from necessity. No singer will repeat his long poem twice. Every poem consists of formulaic expressions, themes, and thematic structures, familiar to the audience and well known to the singers, who have previously created similar themes and thematic structures, and who have already appropriated the "formulaic" language, or rather the *Kunstsprache*, of epic poems. Thus, the singer needs to "learn" only the new plot of the poem, and some of its "leit motifs," in as many details as possible. All the capable singers learned the new poems by listening to their performance only once.

[4] Recently, I published the transcript of this conversation almost in its entirety (see *Homer: Ćor Huso ili Avdo, rapsod ili aed*, Almanah no. 27-28, Podgorica, 2004). I have also provided my interpretation of it, similar to what follows in this text. My essay provoked strong reactions among many Slavicists, Homerists and folklorists. Some of the connoisseurs of Bosniac epic singing, like N. Kilibarda, R. Durić and V. P. Nikčević disagreed with me, but others, including G. Danek, I. Rebronja and M. Maglajlić, agreed with some of my comments.

[5] Vlahovljak's notion of «tradition» is «all the poems of Blind Huso,» as other singers also sang Blind Huso's poems, but not as finely and as accurately as he did. Thus, Blind Huso was the finest «embodiment of tradition,» and the other singers were lesser «embodiments of tradition.» In my opinion, this is an acceptable definition of the tradition and of the traditional singers.

[6] Milman Parry was very interested in learning as much as he could about Blind Huso. In Bijelo Polje, he found several old singers who had surely learned their poems from Blind Huso. The best of them were 75-year old Ragib Gojaković, 90-100 years old Hajro Ferizović and Mumin Vlahovljak. A. B. Lord was working on the repertoire of Blind Huso's poems, compiling them from the information provided by many singers. J. M. Foley claims that Blind Huso was, like "Homer," a legendary "cultural hero," not a historical person. This claim does not stand. (See my note on *Ćor Huso* in *MGJP*, p.490, and my text *Homer: Ćor Huso ili Avdo, rapsod ili aed*, Almanah no. 27-28, Podgorica, 2004).

[7] The Bosniac traditional singers re-create “truthful” mythic-historic events. They possess “knowledge” of events from the past, and are able to “enliven them” with the help of a divine female (*vila*), or they are inspired by God. It is very similar to the help Homer or Hesiod requested from the Muse, the daughter of Remembrance. As the re-creators, they essentially are not poets and artists, but “historians,” “the savants of the past” possessing “prophetic” powers. Međedović often starts his epics invoking God’s help:

“The first word: Help give us, oh God!

Here is the second (word): He will, if it’s His will!”

My well-known singer Murat Kurtagić invokes his *vila* with the following verses:

“And you, oh vila, provide me with your help

To celebrate in song the memory of the past!”

[8] In his conversation with Parry and Vujnović, recorded the day before, on August 9, Međedović indeed boasted that his creation of Vlahovljak’s poem would be at least twice as long.

[9] As we see, Vlahovljak adamantly claimed that Blind Huso did not embellish his poems. Now I quote A. B. Lord, from his well-known text *Avdo Međedović*, published in *SCHS 3*: «His (Blind Huso’s, ZČ) most distinctive characteristic as a singer was his ability to «ornament» a song. Of this we are told by all who knew him. Avdo was a worthy student of Ćor Huso’s school.» I have read transcripts of Parry’s recordings containing testimonies of several singers from Bijelo Polje, who surely knew Blind Huso. None of them mentioned that Blind Huso embellished or ornamented his poems.

[10] Parry is nearby, recording this conversation with his apparatus. Vlahovljak uses fine irony in his conversation with Vujnović. He tells Vujnović that Parry is obviously his «boss,» and that he realized Parry made an experiment consisting in recording his poem, and then Međedović’s version of it.

[11] To fully appreciate this wise comparison, one needs to know that various cigarette makes were named after the rivers. Vlahovljak claims that each individual poem may be likened to a different river. Each river has its own flow, its own identity. Thus, Međedović in his creation «mixed the poems.»

[12] In the beginning of his version of Vlahovljak’s poem, Međedović freely enlarged the assembly of heroes, and mentioned «thirty-six» of them.

[13] Vujnović is a guslar himself, so he states that as a singer of tales he agrees with Vlahovljak.

[14] The technique of epic making and its diction in that area differs considerably from the tradition in Bijelo Polje. The Bosniac singers from Bihaćka Krajina used not only a different

musical instrument for accompaniment (tambura), but they also created in stanzas (Bynum), and there was a distinct influence of ballads (Čolaković) on their epics.

[15] See Z. Čolaković and A. B. Lord, *Nasljeđe Milmana Parryja (The Legacy of Milman Parry)*, Almanah 31-32, Podgorica, 2005; 1st ed. *Latina et Graeca* 26, Zagreb, 1986. I agree with Lord's view for the following reason: Parry, as well as other collectors, worked with many ordinary singers. In their performance one can easily notice the theme as one of the important connecting parts within the plot. Lord also mentioned Parry's view that «Gesemann came close to the notion of composition by theme.»

[16] According to Međedović, his longest poem was «The Captivity of Tale of Orašac in Ozim» (*Parry text no. 12428*). Vujnović started writing down this text by dictation on July 30, 1935, and the poem was left unfinished, after four days of recording, comprising already 3,738 verses.

[17] Matthias Murko claimed already in 1929 that he observed singers who were creative poets alongside traditional singers of tales, and that the naïve conception of the rhapsodes succeeding the aoidoi in Homeric scholarship should be abandoned (see Th. de Vet: *Parry in Paris, Structuralism, Historical Linguistics, and the Oral Theory*, *Classical Antiquity*, vol. 24, 2005). Parry quotes and was inspired by Murko's excellent work *La poésie populaire épique en Yougoslavie au début du XX^e siècle, Travaux publiés par l'Institut d'études slaves*, 10, Paris, 1929. See also my essay on the rhapsodes and the aoidoi titled *Homer: Blind Huso or Međedović, Rhapsode or Aoidos?* Almanah 27-28, Podgorica, 2004, in Croatian).

[18] I have illustrated it in my books *MGJP* (Croatian/English edition) and *Epika Avda Međedovića, Kritičko izdanje* (forthcoming).

[19] I am thankful to Gregory Nagy, Stephen Mitchell and David Elmer from the *Milman Parry Collection*, Harvard University, for giving me the copy and the access to this invaluable Parry's manuscript, and for copies of Parry-Vujnović conversations with Avdo Međedović and Mumin Vlahovljak. Parry's questionnaire and Parry-Vujnović conversations with Međedović prove that Parry not only possessed an excellent command of the Bosnian language, but that his research in 1935 extended into the study of plot, catalog creation, referentiality, characterization, dialog creation, embellishment, digression, duplication, repetition, the difference between dictated, written, and sung texts, and many other problems in Homeric studies. I have devoted a chapter to it in my forthcoming critical edition of Međedović's poems.

[20] The further proof and illustrations of my statements in this essay, based on a close analysis of Međedović's and Homer's epics, is provided in *MGJP* and in the introductory chapter to my critical edition of Međedović's poems, titled *Post-Traditional Epic Making of Avdo Međedović and Homer* (in Croatian, forthcoming).

[21] In his conversation with Vujnović (*Parry text 12443*), Međedović claims that he had “used twice as many embellishments” in his poem *The Wedding of Smailagić Meho*, or that he lengthened it at least to double its original length. The poem had been read to him from the songbook. Međedović clearly states that his technique differs considerably from the technique of other singers:

Međedović: I told you, by God, brother, if any good guslar completed his singing of a poem in five hours, my singing (of the same poem) will last ten hours. Now, it is either right, or it is wrong. I tell you this straight, as it is the question of life and death!

I have recently published Vujnović's conversations with Međedović almost in their entirety. See Zlatan Čolaković: *Međedovićeva kazivanja o svom životu, pjesmama i pjevačima*, Almanah 33-34, Podgorica, 2006). It will also appear in my forthcoming critical edition of Međedović's epics. In Lord-Bynum edition, a very important part of these conversations was left out (compare my edition with *SCHS 4*).

[22] On the *Epic Cycle* see J. S. Burgess: *The Tradition of the Trojan War in Homer and the Epic Cycle*, John Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 2003). See also J. S. Burgess: *Neoanalysis, Orality and Intertextuality: An Examination of Homeric Motif Transference*, *Oral Tradition* 21/1, 2006, 148-189.

[23] See A. B. Lord: *An Example of Homeric Qualities of Repetition in Međedović's «Smailagić Meho»*, Serta Slavica In Memoriam Aloisii Schmaus, Trofenik, München, 1971. On Međedović's technique of plot-structuring see my book *MGJP*, esp. the Chapter 17 in English, titled *The Heroic Mythic Story*).

[24] For example, in his extended digression, Međedović's character from the epic *The Arrival of the Vizier in Travnik* tells at length the plot of another poem in Međedović's repertoire. Parry noticed it and wrote the following question for Međedović in his manuscript "*Pitanja u Bijelom Polju*," written in Bosnian (my translation): "*It seems to me that there is a whole poem describing this action. Do you know that poem? Can you sing it?*" This poem Međedović indeed included in the list of his repertoire, compiled by Vujnović.

[25] It is unfortunate that only two of Međedović's epics have been translated: one of them into English (*The Wedding of Smailagić Meho*) and one into German (*The Wedding of Vlahinjić Alija*). None of them illustrates his ability to create dramatic and tragic plots (see my edition of his poems *The Firman of Execution on Derdelez Alija* and *Raven the Captain and Mujo the Sirdar*, published in *MGJP*).

[26] On ekphrasis in Međedović's epic, see Georg Danek: «Ein Bild von einem Helden,» Ekphrasis im bosnisch-muslimischen Heldenlied (Avdo Međedović, «Die Hochzeit des Vlahinjić Alija»), published in Ch. Ratkowitsch, *Die poetische Ekphrasis von Kunstwerken*, *Sitzungsberichte der phil.-hist. Klasse 735*, ÖAW, Wien, 2006, 246-266).

[27] I have video-taped ca 40 hours of traditional singers' performances and ca 2 hours of post-traditional singers' performances. I have also audio-recorded an additional 50 hours of traditional epic performances (the list of the Čolaković collection is provided in *MGJP* and Almanah 31-32, Podgorica, 2005).

[28] The traditional singers sometimes play their gusle with virtuosity, they act, they often change their voice and melody and their facial gestures are very interesting to watch. Often, they act theatrically, and their audience seems to be enchanted, as hypnotized. The audience believes

that the vividly described action happens “right now, here.” The legends about Blind Huso tell that “he spoke with his bow.” Indeed, he was using declamation while waving his bow. It seems obvious that he used singing-declamation in a mixed mode. Finally, some singers, although remaining seated during their singing, extremely slowly moved their body from one corner of the room to another. To the audience this seemed miraculous.

[29] In his conversation with Vujnović (*Parry text 12425*), the 75-year old singer Ragib Gojaković, who sang an extraordinary version for Parry of a poem learned from Blind Huso (strikingly similar to the *Chanson de Roland*), describes Huso's performance as follows:

Gojaković: The Autumn night. Do you know how long the night is in the Autumn? It's fourteen hours long. We would sit there until the roosters start crowing, and then he (Blind Huso) would say: 'I beg you, by God, go away now!' But we wanted to hear his poem in its entirety, He could not complete it. God only knows how lengthy were his poems ...

Vujnović: Was he a good singer?

Gojaković: *Aman jarabi!* (*May God help!*) How fine was his singing. One would listen to him, even if hungry. Thus he sang his poems.

This conversation indicates that some of the best traditional singers also developed very long epic poems.

[30] All the singers from the Bijelo Polje region sang the poem *The Death of Mustajbeg of the Lika* as one poem, but Međedović divided it into two poems. In the first poem, he describes how Mustajbey was killed, and in the second how his defeat in a duel was avenged.

[31] Međedović claims that he had heard Blind Huso performing the epic poem only once, ca 1885. He was at that time about ten years old and was not able to learn from him, as he was too young. However, he remembered that Blind Huso's declamation technique, instead of singing, was similar to his own. I presume that Homer also mostly recited his verses. The mixed singing-declamation mode seems to me the most probable for Homer (Lord's fine singer Bejto Smakić mixed declamation and singing in his performance).

[32] For example, there is a well-known theme of «a hero entering into the sultan's court wearing his boots and armed.» In Međedović's poem *The Death of Mustajbey of the Lika*, the main hero enters his own wife's chamber in his boots, carrying his whip. She salutes him with the words traditionally used in addressing the sultan:

I feel frightened when I look at you,

Moreover, even when I talk to you!

The chorus of elders salutes with similar verses the spirit of Darius, just risen from the grave, in Aeshylus' *Persians*. The ominous scene of «an armed hero in the chamber of a young woman» appears duplicated in the poem. Such a scene is unique in the Bosniac epic tradition, although

Međedović in creating it used both the traditional diction and the traditional device of duplication.

[33] See Fitzgerald's *Postscript* to his verse translation of *the Odyssey* (Anchor Book edition, New York, 1963, first ed. Doubleday&Company, 1961).

[34] See my edition and my comments of Međedović's epic «Gavran harambaša i serdar Mujo» (*MGJP*, Chapter 11).

[35] Parry felt that Međedović joined the plots of two poems in his *Wedding of Smailagić Meho*, and that he «invented» a number of themes in his epic *The Arrival of the Vizier in Travnik*. (Parry's manuscript *Pitanja iz Bijelog Polja*).

[36] Vujnović asked Međedović if he had «added» some heroes, and if he «invented» some of them, within his extended catalog. Međedović does not confess that he «invented» some of them (which is evident, as none of them ever appeared within his tradition), but admits that he has probably «added» some of them, as he «never leaves them out» when creating his catalogs. Moreover, he freely admits that his elaborate creation of battles and strategic army movements over the hills and valleys is his own «embellishment.»

[37] Homer «pulled in» many events from the beginning of the Trojan war within the *Iliad*, and introduced the «rescuing» poem of young hero's initiation (Telemachia) into *the Odyssey*, as well as the events regarding the returns of Agamemnon and Menelaos.

[38] Vujnović told Međedović that one singer claimed to have learnt the best poem of Blind Huso. Međedović replied: «So what good is it, that it was Huso's poem, if the one who heard it was not a good singer?»

[39] (*The Best of the Achaeans: Concepts of the Hero in Archaic Greek Poetry*, The John Hopkins UP, Baltimore, 1979).

[40] Murat Kurtagić (born in 1914 – died in 1999) was one of the finest Bosniac traditional singers. Parry and Vujnović met him in 1935, but Kurtagić refused to collaborate with them at that time. A. B. Lord felt that he was the finest singer he had ever recorded, and called him «a truly phenomenal singer» (*SCHS 1*). I collected Kurtagić's poems on three occasions, and possess audio-video recordings of ca 60 hours of his singing, story-telling and conversations with him. See some of his epics in the original, and in an English translation, in my book *MGJP*.

[41] Georg Danek, «The Doloneia Revisited», presented in the Summer of 2006 at the Oslo Symposium «Relative Chronology in Greek Epic Poetry.» I am grateful to Professor Danek for sending me the copy of his paper.

[42] “The originality and uniqueness of the myth-maker (the traditional singer) does not reside in his approach to the mythic story, but in his own individual way of composing a story. The lesser myth-makers are unable to construct their stories well and logically... Only the sovereign masters

of the traditional craft create their own compositional schemes, perfecting them throughout their artistic lives» (*MGJP*, p. 624).

[43] Strangely enough, it was not only A. B. Lord, but Parry as well, who did not understand the fact that learning a poem from a published source differs essentially from learning a poem from another singer. Moreover, Parry was disappointed that Međedović did not follow the plot from the song-book «closely enough» (*Pitanja u Bijelom Polju*).

[44] *Serbo-Croatian Heroic Poems, Epics from Bihać, Cazin and Kulen Vakuf*, Translated and annotated by David E. Bynum, Garland, New York – London, 1993).

[45] Parry text 12491, recorded by dictation on August 17, 1937.

[46] The singers learned their version from the heavily and quite badly edited publication (Kalajdžić, Mostar, 1925). The editor was Alija Nametak, the well-known writer, collector of epics and self-taught «folklore scholar.» A. B. Lord was aware of the improper edition and change of dialect in the song-book. However, he did not realize the full extent of Nametak's interventions. This editor mixed into the original poem parts of many other poems he had collected, and thus made an awkward hybrid. Today this has been proven beyond any doubt. (See Sead Šemsović: *Smailagić Meho – usporedna analiza dviju pjesama istog naslova*, Almanah, 31-32, Podgorica, 2005). Nametak completed this edition when he was only nineteen. He was ashamed of what he had done, and kept it a secret throughout his long life.

[47] In the Lord-Bynum's edition of 1974, sixty verses were omitted, and the edition contained many mistakes (*SCHS IV*). In Kujundžić's 2nd edition (1987), those sixty verses, published in *SCHS VI*, were added, and the editor tried his best to correct the Lord-Bynum edition, but did not use Vujnović's original manuscript. Many of his corrections were proper, but some were plainly wrong. Trying to bring some sense into blurry passages, the editor excluded some verses, and changed the order of verses. Kujundžić introduced many new mistakes, and he split the epic into twelve *cantos*. The mistakes this editor made closely resemble and explain the cause of some variants in extant Homeric manuscripts. This edition was subsequently published in popular editions, containing many new mistakes, and was sometimes shortened substantially (Bašić's edition, 2003). In one popular edition catalogs were omitted. I have prepared the third scholarly edition (2006). It contains the sixty verses omitted in the 1st edition, but does not continue the division into cantos, nor the mistakes introduced in the 2nd edition. I have changed many verses, as printed both in the 1st and the 2nd edition, and I did use the Vujnović's original. However, I found out that even the original, taken by dictation, contained many obvious mistakes.

The first scribe made mistakes typical of someone coming from the different region (Hercegovina), who cannot hear, nor can differentiate, some sounds; Lord-Bynum's mistakes indicated their American background, and their insufficient knowledge of the language involved; Kujundžić's mistakes were typical for a Bosnian unfamiliar with Montenegrin dialect; I have also made some mistakes, typical for a native Croatian; luckily, the native lectors from Montenegro found out before the publication of my edition that I was not aware of some localisms and their meaning. If the publication of this epic continues at this pace, in three to four hundred years the

whole corpus of publications will contain quite many variant readings (maybe as many as the extant Homeric manuscripts!).

[48] See my edition and my comments of Međedović's epic *The Arrival of the Vizier to Travnik* (*Epika Avda Međedovića, Kritičko izdanje*, forthcoming).

[49] The post-traditional singer's poems cannot be learned by traditional singers, and there are no traditional singers who have learned their poems from Međedović. Only his own son Zaim learned from his father both his performance style and a few of his poems. He stated to A. B. Lord, in 1951, that in his own singing he used many words, phrases and descriptions that he had learned from his father by heart, although he did not understand their meaning! One should think of traditional verses as musical phrases. If they sound beautiful and interesting, the singer will learn them and continue to use them, as Homer did. (In 2005, I have video-taped Zaim's singing, and his recollections of Parry-Vujnović recording).

[50] In that version Međedović introduced new characters and a horse-race in the plot-ending, and his diction had changed dramatically. Međedović said to Parry and Vujnović that he made his epic *The Wedding of Smailagić Meho* over 12,000 verses long, following Parry's request, but that he could have made it two or three times shorter, if he had been asked to do it.

[51] For example, the large part of Lord's recordings of Serbian epics is not traditional, as most of the Serbian singers have learned their poems from the published sources, not from other singers. That particular oral epic tradition, when Parry and Lord collected, was already on its deathbed. Oral singers can be traditional, post-traditional and non-traditional.

[52] *The Homeric Poems as oral dictated texts*, Classical Quarterly 48, 1998. See also Janko's books *Homer, Hesiod and the Hymns: diachronic development in epic diction* (Cambridge, UP, 1982) and *The Iliad: A Commentary, Vol. IV, Books 13-16, General Editor G. S. Kirk* (Cambridge, Cambridge UP, 1992). On the *Iliad's* text edition, see Janko: *The Iliad and its Editors: Dictation and Redaction*, Classical Antiquity 9, 1990.