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Third Word:

## Being There: *Performance Theory*

Much of our discussion so far has focused on the first two questions underlying this book and its title: (1) "What is oral poetry?" and (2) "What is an oral poem?" In the First Word we discovered that oral poetry isn't any one thing. It names forms of verbal art as various as oral performance, voiced texts, voices from the past, and written oral poetry. In the Second Word we found that oral poetry isn't a *thing*, or *things*, at all. Even the apparently innocent phrase "an oral poem"—with its connotations of singularity and detachability—is a dangerous misnomer. Instead of identifying an utterance in context, "an oral poem" points toward a freestanding item. In fact, we learned that the poet's words can't be pried out of their natural, nourishing base in the poetic tradition without fundamentally changing their meaning.

We could say it even more simply: *diversity* and *context*. The First Word established the inherent diversity of our subject: the Tibetan paper-singer, the slam poet, Homer, and Bishop Njegoš all compose oral poetry. We understand their oral and written performances best when we understand a double-sided truth—that theirs is a shared enterprise also enriched by inevitable differences. The Second Word concentrated largely on context. As we saw, each of the four categories of oral poetry depends in some important way on the poetic tradition from which it derives and the living situations in which it is composed and received. Oral Performances are rife with signals that fall victim to the always-reductive process of textualization. Voiced Texts move in the opposite direction, assuming their intended form only in performance and drawing their meaning from certain expectable "givens" on the part of poet and audience. Voices from the Past are texts but more than texts, revealing telltale features and structures with idiomatic meanings. Even Written Oral Poetry depends upon the oral poet's specialized language and its traditional implications. Across a diverse spectrum, context matters.

In the Second Word we also began to wrestle with the third of our four

questions, “What is *reading*?” by sampling the international variety of activities too often artificially compressed into a single concept: the act of reading. By itself, the history of reading in the West—stretching from tablet and manuscript to Internet—puts the lie to our unexamined assumptions about what it means to engage the technology of the written word. Reading just isn’t as uniform a phenomenon as paperbacks or even home pages can make it seem. Broadening the perspective to include ancient and non-Western cultures, we saw evidence of a yet greater variety of reading acts. Our small collection of examples from widely different places and eras included a foreign but nonetheless intelligible language in Indonesia, sonorous texts in Tibet, and a curious-looking library of ancient Hebrew scriptures. In the final scenario from the *Iliad* we saw how Homer portrays writing and reading—explaining a technology he doesn’t use in terms of one that he does. As the Lykian king reads Bellerophon’s folding tablet, he’s decoding “signs,” to be sure, but at the most fundamental level these signs have nothing whatsoever to do with writing.

### What Do We Mean by *How*?

Diversity, context, and different kinds of reading; these will be the watchwords as we move toward methods for reading oral poetry. “What is *reading*?” now gives way to the fourth in the series of questions posed above: “What do we mean by *how*?” In order to answer it, we now embark on a three-Word survey of popular, proven approaches that will eventually lead to real-world applications in the Seventh and Eighth Words. But first let’s take a moment to remember the reason we need such a menu of approaches and to sharpen the focus of our final question.

#### *Ways of Reading*

To read is to decode, to generate meaning from signs. We don’t need an alphabet or even a text to do that. As stipulated toward the end of the Second Word, what we need is a method that will break the code of the communication. With oral poetry, as with Bellerophon’s tablet, the usual assumptions about textual logic prove either irrelevant or insufficient to the task. Something more is necessary—something that may well prove complementary to our usual assortment of interpretive tools, though not already a part of it. To be precise, what’s required of us is flexibility and adaptability of a particular sort. We must be ready to suit our thinking and frame of reference to oral poetry, rather than demanding that oral poetry suit our tried-and-true (but very parochial) ways of transacting the business of verbal art. Verbal art must come first, its readers second. If we don’t turn off the default switch, if we are unwilling to expand and diversify our notion of reading to fit the bill, then we will have re-

duced oral poetry to a text. Instead of opening up its unique and challenging expressive resources, we will have read it into submission.

To take realistic account of the diversity of oral poetry and the crucial importance of context, the "how" must involve a variety of perspectives, not one but many nontextual approaches. Let's be clear about exactly why this is important. First, because oral poetry is itself heterogeneous, we need a full menu of methods, a collection of perspectives that will allow us to understand the whole range of Oral Performances, Voiced Texts, Voices from the Past, and Written Oral Poetry. What is more, as mentioned above, these four categories are themselves only convenient, generalized clusters imposed upon a virtually infinite array of possibilities. Each of the four "types" sponsors enormous variety within itself, as attested by both the eons-long heritage of surviving oral poetry and its vast international scope today.

But the need for pluralism in approach goes beyond even this remarkable diversity of forms. As an article of interpretive faith I steadfastly maintain that no one method, no matter how promising or finely honed, will ever pass muster as the single "best" perspective, even if we confine ourselves to just one performance or work of oral poetry. No one approach can ever be as enlightening or fulfilling as a combination of approaches, any more than a single photograph can offer as full a visual representation as can multiple shots from different angles. To match the demonstrated variety of oral poetry's "ways of speaking" we need a correspondingly diverse menu of "ways of reading."

For this reason I seek to provide a critical repertoire whose strategies can be deployed as the need arises and the occasion suits. The Third through the Fifth Words will thus concentrate on developing a reader's kit of options, both because each option has something unique and useful to contribute and because all of them taken together can help us become a better audience for oral poetry. One of our \*proverbs\* in the Sixth Word puts it this way: "True diversity demands diversity in frame of reference."

### Three Perspectives

Over the next three units I will be describing three different methods for reading oral poetry: Performance Theory (the Third Word), Ethnopoetics (the Fourth Word), and Immanent Art (the Fifth Word). Each method has proved useful to scholars and students of folklore, anthropology, and literature, and each has substantially advanced our understanding of oral poetry.<sup>1</sup> Although the three approaches have distinctly different histories and evolutions, they also share some fundamental principles. Among their common concerns are a sensitivity to the role of context, a commitment to understanding and portraying verbal art on its own terms, and an awareness of expressive signals beyond

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the usual repertoire of textual cues. In a nutshell, these various approaches all champion what I have elsewhere called *word-power*, the special, idiomatic way in which oral poetry accesses meaning.<sup>2</sup> Whatever the particular approach, then, each one strives to decode and represent the more-than-textual implications of the given Oral Performance, Voiced Text, Voice from the Past, or Written Oral Poem.

Why focus on these particular methods and which of them is the most useful? Such questions are almost rhetorical, but that doesn't mean we shouldn't squarely face them. I've chosen these three approaches because over the past fifteen years or more they have proven extremely effective for the study of oral poetry worldwide. That's most certainly not to deny the contributions of other methods. On principle we should welcome the inclusion of any and all perspectives, since more arrows in the quiver can only aid investigation.<sup>3</sup> But for our present purposes it has seemed appropriate to limit the number of approaches in order to strike a sensible balance, that is, to avoid narrowness on the one hand and the telephone-directory mentality on the other. Taken together, these three ways to read an oral poem provide both a repertoire of reading strategies and a unified theoretical focus.

As to which of the three is the most useful, that will depend entirely on the oral poetry under consideration and the aims of the investigator. In fact, the most honest response is to refuse the question, to deny the very notion of unconditional preference or absolute usefulness. As indicated above, only via multiple perspectives can we come to a fair and suitably nuanced appreciation of how oral poetry works, what it does, how its audience responds, and so on. Choosing any single perspective—by itself, every time, no matter what the conditions—will severely constrain our viewpoint and limit our understanding. Like all verbal art, oral poetry deserves more than that: it deserves a diversity in approach to match its endemic diversity of content. To the extent that each of these three methods helps us (in its own way) toward fluency in the language of oral poetry, it will have done its job. Each tool can certainly serve a useful function, but the overall kit offers us the best chance at successfully reading oral poetry.

## How Performance Theory Works

Q: What difference does performance make?

A: Performance is part of the meaning.

In 1973 I had my first opportunity to watch and hear a South Slavic *guslar* perform an *epska pjesma*, an epic song, live. The occasion was the annual observance of the birthday of Vuk Stefanović Karadžić, the famous and beloved

nineteenth-century linguist, ethnographer, and collector of oral poetry. The place was his native village of Tršić, Serbia. So institutionalized an event was this that a permanent stage had been erected in a nearby field to serve as a natural amphitheater for the thousands of people from all over Europe who each year come to observe what amounts to an international celebration.

But the professionally constructed stage and the massive crowds weren't the venue for this oral poet's performance. He plied his trade under a spreading elm tree adjacent to Karadžić's ancestral home, a modest three-room white-washed building up a hill about a half-mile from the official goings-on. Sitting on a rough-hewn picnic table and surrounded by about two dozen listeners, he sang the story of an early twentieth-century battle in which Serbs had distinguished themselves. As we approached, we first heard the characteristic whining melody of the single-stringed *gusle* used for instrumental accompaniment, and then, as we edged toward the periphery of the gathered audience, the equally typical rhythm and melody of the poet's ten-syllable lines, one verse after the next in a regular series of vocal and instrumental pulses. A few steps closer and we could make out some of those verses: heroic formulas for famous heroes and places, grand descriptions of horses and armaments, and other sound-bytes drawn from the shared traditional wordhoard. In fact, it would have been difficult not to hear these "words," since they were delivered in a full-throated voice that was almost a shout. I knew immediately why the traditional term for singing epic—the way the *guslari* themselves describe what they do—is *turati*, "to drive out or impel." Performing epic in the South Slavic tradition is hard, physical work.

It's also highly participatory, or at least it can be. While we stood on the rim of the small group assembled around the *guslar*, various things happened. A few people wandered in and out, apparently unmoved by what was going on, but most of the audience paid rapt attention. However, even the most deeply engaged of them behaved little like the exquisitely silent, dependably polite coterie that grace poetry readings at colleges, universities, and other public forums in the United States. The most involved of the singer's audience responded by calling out alternate or additional lines, or by loudly offering observations about the action of the saga unfolding before them. One old man seated near the singer's feet thrust aside his lapel just as the song reached a heroic climax, proudly exhibiting a collection of medals that he'd won for bravery in battle. This kind and level of audience involvement—I'd call it audience participation—reminded me of ethnographic reports published by Matija Murko, who observed performances of oral epic all over the South Slavic lands in the early twentieth century. Murko merrily told the story of a bard who received perhaps the ultimate critical review: during one of his rest-breaks

the audience greased the string of his *gusle*, rendering it unplayable and terminating that night's performance without discussion or appeal.<sup>4</sup>

I tell this small tale of the Tršić *guslar* for a reason. That initial performance of South Slavic oral epic—experienced after much study of texts and some acquaintance with the acoustic recordings made by Parry and Lord—was not even remotely what I expected. It was more vivid, more arresting, more demanding, more contingent. The audience played a much larger and more determinative role in the moment-to-moment reality of the evolving song than I had suspected, and the singer depended a great deal more on encoded, implied meanings than I had understood from an inventory of texts. Some years later, after tuning in to a Belgrade television program that promised an oral epic performance but delivered only four solemn academics in baccalaureate robes droning ostentatiously from hymnal-shaped prompt-books, I realized from another perspective what it means to detach oral poetry from its traditional performance context. That first day in Tršić was not simply an eye-opener; it was an ear- and mind-opener as well.

What made this small glimpse so special, so utterly different from poring over a text? As the question-and-answer sequence that begins this section suggests, the difference lay in the fact that performance was part of the meaning. Consider Richard Bauman's classic account, specifically his observation that

performance represents a transformation of the basic referential . . . uses of language. In other words, in an artistic performance of this kind, there is something going on in the communicative interchange which says to the auditor, "interpret what I say in some special sense; do not take it to mean what the words alone, taken literally, would convey." This may lead to the further suggestion that performance sets up, or represents, an interpretive frame within which the messages being communicated are to be understood, and that this frame contrasts with at least one other frame, the literal (1977: 9).

The mere fact—and of course it is more than a mere fact—that the Tršić poet was actually singing his epic song live made the experience palpably different from turning pages in a detached textual artifact. In Bauman's terms the performance engaged another field of reference, another frame, another context. It called upon those present to decode another set of signals that came into play precisely because the song was happening then and there, in a live exchange between oral poet and oral audience.

What is more, the game was being played according to certain rules. All of the participants were transacting their business according to an unspoken agreement, under a communicative contract that governed music, specialized language, audience response, and other aspects of the ongoing situation. That

the contract was implicit rather than explicit hardly diminished its force or effectiveness. If anything, its status as an understood, behind-the-scenes agreement only increased its word-power. Its rules had become part of the grammar of the performance, as invisible and yet as powerful as the grammatical rules you and I are using to negotiate this sentence.

Because I had studied some texts and a few available recordings at that stage, I had an elementary fluency in the language of South Slavic epic performance. But my ability to "read" the *guslar*'s more-than-textual song was quite limited, and I certainly couldn't emulate the much greater fluency of native speakers with a history, in some cases a lifetime, of participation in the poetic tradition. Still, a performed play differs radically from a closet drama, even for theatergoers on their very first visit. Just so, the Tršić performance opened my eyes and ears to a new dynamic of presence, audience, and exchange. And it's precisely this dynamic at which performance theory aims. It seeks to break the code of what happens in all dimensions of the event, from the verbal component through the nonverbal dimensions of music, physical gesture, costume, and other constitutive aspects of what's transpiring. It seeks to read the signs, whatever the signs may be.

## Keys to Performance

In Bauman's terms what cues the event—what shifts the gears of communication—is one or more *keys to performance*. By invoking these signals the performer communicates via a recognizable shorthand, alerting the audience to the kind of experience in which they will be collectively engaged. Bauman enumerates the following as examples of such keys: (1) special codes, (2) figurative language, (3) parallelism, (4) special formulas, (5) appeals to tradition, and (6) disclaimers of performance. Very few performances will feature all of these cues, and most will also depend upon signals beyond these six. Since no two expressive acts can ever be identical, diversity mandates that keys naturally vary from one tradition, genre, individual, and instance to another. Furthermore, as Bauman himself stipulates (1977: 22), any list of features is by definition culture-specific. The responsible reader must learn the particular oral-poetic language in order to know which features serve as keys to performance, and exactly what shape they take within a particular tradition or genre. That's what fluency means. Nonetheless, his short list of six characteristics gives us something to work with as we try to understand how performance induces its own frame of reference. Let's look at some examples.

The *guslar* at Vuk Karadžić's homestead was employing a number of *special codes*, to cite Bauman's first key. One of them was his singer's dialect, a

peculiar version of the South Slavic language that little resembles the “street talk” of Belgrade, which lies perhaps an hour to the north by car, or of any other specific locale. Up-to-date urbanites describe it as archaic and filled with curious words and forms from other regions, not to mention highly stylized. Fellow villagers would find it curiously old-fashioned and filled with Turkish words they didn’t ever use (or sometimes even know), if indeed they stopped to think about such things. The *guslar*’s chosen dress, especially the white shirt with flowing sleeves, knee-length black pants, and shoes with turned-up toes (*opanke*), amounted to another code, marking him as a member of the Orthodox peasantry who had donned his “Sunday best” for the occasion. Our research team saw the same costume donned for the same purpose some years later during our fieldwork in the village of Orašac. The vocal and instrumental melodies the singer used to summon the traditional context of oral poetry were a third signal, serving initially as an instrumental overture and throughout the performance as a continuing nonverbal reminder of the historical and cultural “wavelength” for the event. Each of these signs was a key, a way into the experience—at least for the initiated. It’s well to remember that any language, no matter how powerful or subtle it may seem, requires fluent hearers as well as fluent speakers.

Special codes aren’t restricted to the category of Oral Performance. Consider the many codes that key the Voiced Texts of slam poetry: the close atmosphere of the club where the event takes place, the stage lights, the performance style, the judging ritual, even the high-energy introductions for each team and individual.<sup>5</sup> All of these aspects index the poets’ performances, situating this one night’s activities in this particular spot against a larger backdrop of associations and linking the specifics of the here-and-now with a generic context based on other places and times. Voices from the Past provide us only a text to deal with, but to a degree special poetic dialects survive the media-transition. The infamous Homeric language—many-layered both historically and geographically—attests to that. What Homer speaks is a variety of ancient Greek never spoken by anyone except for composing hexameter poetry, so its use evokes a frame of reference. Likewise, although Written Oral Poetry has no access to meaning-bearing features like tone, gesture, and costume, it can and does depend heavily on the stylized poetic language to set the stage for an imagined or rhetorical performance. Neither Bishop Njegoš nor Elias Lönnrot sang before a live audience, but they were performing nevertheless. When they wrote—whether in South Slavic decasyllables or Finnish octosyllables—they were in effect keying performance via the special code of the epic language. They were effectively saying “interpret what I say in some special sense; do not take it to mean what the words alone, taken literally, would convey.”



The characteristic of *figurative language* is of course not limited to live performance in particular or to oral poetry in general. Indeed, we can find some version of every one of Bauman's keys in text-based literature and in everyday speech, so we shouldn't think of any single feature as an infallible litmus test for genuine oral poetry, of whatever sort. What matters is the particular kind and regularity of figurative language (or special codes or any other key). The question to be asked is not whether we can locate this or that feature in a given poetry, but whether the feature is truly constitutive of the poetry. Is it a signal, a telltale detail, an encoded message meant for hearers or readers?

Consider the force of a heroic simile, which normally does little or nothing to advance the storyline but includes important directions on the reading process. If the *guslar* at Tršić had described two horses charging across a plain in the following way, for example, he would have been invoking performance and creating a traditional frame of reference:

The foam fell on their rounded rumps  
and from the rumps it fell to the plain;  
one would say that lambs were being born.  
From their nostrils flames emerged  
and set fire to the mesh on their forelocks.  
Clouds of smoke billowed before them  
as if Venetian rifles were being fired  
whose smoke was poisoned.  
Like hares they crossed the level plain;  
like wolves they took to the mountains.  
Like two fiery dragons on phantom steeds,  
all day long until nightfall they crossed the ranges.

These are Avdo Medjedović's words—or should I say his “word”?—from a 1934 performance of *The Wedding of Smailagić Meho*.<sup>6</sup> Via this extended byte of figurative language he was doing much more than simply marking time or decorating his narrative. He was prescribing how to read his epic story, how to decode his song, by reinforcing its character and most basic identity as a performance networked in a poetic tradition. He was implying at least as much as he was saying, telling his audience not just what happened but how they should interpret what happened. He was saying “hear this against the background of our epic tradition.”

This same key also finds its way into other categories of oral poetry, such as Voiced Texts. Poets of all stripes use figurative language, as we noted, but slam poets often turn to highly charged political and ethnic imagery that over the course of performances by numerous poets becomes recognizably idiomatic. In her “releasing the stone to fly,” Lynne Procope observes that

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the engravings on our surface are an anticipation of our  
 survival  
 and our substance is hope  
 our matter is more than divine  
 we are what god intended with free will  
 so i choose to love this black man  
 rewrite struggle in the hard lines on his back  
     i choose to love him black  
 but never in the hope that he will love me back.<sup>7</sup>

In delivery such images, running against the mainstream current of a privileged society personally unacquainted with the struggle against poverty and prejudice, take on an urgency that can't be conveyed on the page. And this is not to mention the sound-rhetoric of gestures, tonalities, emphases, and the like that can themselves become figurative and engage the audience in the insistent present of the spoken-word event.<sup>8</sup> That's why slam poets perform and that's what voiced texts do; they demand attention and inspire participation.

As for *Voices from the Past*, again the keys translate to the medium of oral-connected texts, at least to an extent. Consider the highly formal, multi-line similes so typical of Homer's poetic language, a good many of which gloss the clash of armies in the *Iliad* by ironically juxtaposing deadly warfare to the untroubled innocence of natural, domestic scenes. Listen to how Homer portrays the thousands of Greek warriors at Troy as they mill anxiously about, their blood up, eager to have at one another (Book 2, lines 469–73):

As the myriad hordes of murmurous flies  
 that swarm through a farmer's stables and pens  
 in springtime, when milk overflows the pails,  
 so many Achaeans faced those Trojans  
 raging to devastate the enemy.

I've italicized the pivot-words *As* and *so* in order to emphasize two of the features that identify this Homeric key to performance. Once again, figurative language does much more than prettily embellish the basics; it alerts the audience to the nature of what is transpiring and tells them how to take it. With Written Oral Poetry, traditional figures of speech can and do survive from living oral poetry into authored texts never meant for live consumption. Such is the power and resiliency of the traditional language that it can key performance even in text-bound forms of oral poetry, provided the readership can "hear" the signals. Actual voicing, hearing, and live participation may not be a part of the equation in Lönnrot's *Kalevala* or Macpherson's Ossian poems, but performance imposes an interpretive frame nonetheless.

Like figurative language, *parallelism* is a feature of most poetries, whatever their origin, nature, or audience. But once again the distinction lies in the particular kind and regularity of the characteristic in question. Is it a dependable characteristic, a constitutive feature of performance in the tradition in question and does it therefore cue the audience? Is it one of the signals in the expressive repertoire of the performer, used idiomatically to help create a framework for reception? For the Tršić *guslar*, the answer was most certainly yes. He was participating in a tradition that fosters and draws meaning from certain sorts of parallelism. One basic and far-reaching symptom of the widespread parallelism in South Slavic epic is the additive, pulsating nature of his and his fellow poets' verse-making. With rare exceptions, each ten-syllable line is syntactically, rhythmically, and musically complete in itself, an independent entity related to neighboring decasyllables only as one proximate member of a usually temporary alliance. Each verse is a freestanding unit with a poetic life of its own.

The opening of Halil Bajgorić's performance of *The Wedding of Mustajbey's Son Bećirbey* (lines 1–7) illustrates this additive, granular organization:

Oj! Djerdelez Alija arose early,  
 Ej! Alija, the tsar's hero,  
 Near Visoko above Sarajevo,  
 Before dawn and the white day—  
 Even two full hours before dawn,  
 When day breaks and the sun rises  
 And the morning star shows its face.<sup>9</sup>

One line-unit follows the next, one name or time designation parallel to another, with each verse structurally independent from those that flank it. The lines work together in this passage, of course, but each one can and does exist in combination with other decasyllables elsewhere in the poetic tradition. Like beads on a string, as Aristotle says about the elements in a periodic style, the increments that make up the whole are parallel, but themselves discrete.<sup>10</sup> This phenomenon should come as no surprise. In "What the Oral Poets Say" the *guslari* as much as told us the same thing when they insisted on the integrity of whole lines as "words," explaining that our concept of a word just didn't square with theirs.

Do we find parallelism in other oral poetries, particularly those involving texts? Yes, indeed, as long as we don't insist on defining this cue too narrowly.<sup>11</sup> The Voiced Texts performed by slam poets feature parallel lines, images, and larger structures, with the relationships between paired or grouped elements driven home in a visceral acoustic way in the heat of live performance.<sup>12</sup> Voices from the Past, like *Beowulf* or the Old French *Song of Roland*, are well

known for the additive, byte-like texture of their narratives both line to line and scene to scene, and Written Oral Poetry behaves similarly. To the extent that we're fluent in the language of the given oral poetry, to the extent that we know what to listen for, we can read such signs. And what exactly do they stand for? For the moment, let's be content with understanding their word-power as an invocation of performance, an invitation for all present to communicate according to the implied rules of the game.

*Special formulas* ramify throughout many oral poetries, prominently enough that they encouraged the development of Oral-Formulaic Theory, which is in turn linked to Immanent Art, one of our three "ways of reading."<sup>13</sup> But we're getting ahead of the story. These special phrases, like the *guslar's* (and Bishop Njegoš's) "well-wrought tower" or "shaggy brown horse" or Homer's "wine-dark sea" or the Old English poets' "foamy-necked ship," turn up again and again. When they recur they serve a structural function, to be sure, but they also act as prompts, invoking the context in which the audience is to construe the poet's words. Those fluent in the language of oral poetry have heard these formulas before; there's nothing new or original or iconoclastic about them. Nor should there be, since their effectiveness depends on their idiomatic quality. For the audience who can read them, such signs aren't dead-letter clichés but more-than-literal cues on how to proceed. Precisely how we should decode them is a subject for Immanent Art, which deals with the word-power of formulas. For now, the important point is that such formulas key performance, whether live or in a text.

At the same time, we should recognize that special formulas, like any other poetic feature, won't be of equal importance in all oral poetries. A vast scholarship exists that proves such variability beyond a doubt: while formulas are the stock-in-trade of oral poets in some traditions, they're relatively rare phenomena in other traditions. For another thing, Voiced Texts seem not to depend as heavily on recurrent bytes or "words." In slam poetry, for instance, recurrent phrases are not common, primarily because poets compose in a much more wide-open species of language. Rather than dipping into shared reservoirs of poetic diction like those available to Homer, the *guslari*, and many other performers, slam poets mold their texts more individually. Theirs is thus a more personal, idiosyncratic craft at the level of nuts-and-bolts phrasing; they use words much more often than "words." If there is a formulary aspect to slam poetry, it lies chiefly in the recurrent style of delivery, in the tonal, gesticular, and other kinesic aspects of performative expression.<sup>14</sup>

Variability in the density of special verbal formulas reinforces at least two lessons. First, there truly is thoroughgoing diversity in oral poetry; a feature that qualifies as a key in one poetry may well be rare in another. Second, and

complementarily, no single feature can ever qualify as a litmus test for performance across a spectrum of oral poetries. Just like different languages, oral poetries have their own sets of operating rules. We reduce them to a single simplistic model at our peril.

Among the six features cited, the closest we come to a universal signal is probably the *appeal to tradition*. Either explicitly or implicitly oral poets are constantly establishing and reestablishing the authority of their words and “words” by reaffirming their ties to an ongoing way of speaking, to an expressive mode larger than any one individual. We might think of this key as the nontextual equivalent of a footnote or a subheading or some other cueing device. It creates a frame of reference within which the poet will operate and identifies for the audience what well-marked path to follow. The Tršić *guslar* began his performance with just such a nontextual device, a prologue or *pripjev* to his song, similar in form and function to the *pripjev* with which Halil Bajgorić began a performance of *Halil Rescues Bojičić Alija* (lines 1–9):

Oh my gusle, maplewood gusle,  
 Speak now and ever,  
 Speak softly, loudly—  
 The gusle is mine but it's played for all of you.  
 I will sing a song of truth,  
 Which I heard from my father  
 In one thousand nine hundred  
 And twelve by count,  
 A song about a certain hero.

Applicable not just to a single story but to any song about any “certain hero,” this coded appeal to tradition uses a number of strategies to fulfill its keying function. The singer speaks to his accompanying instrument or *gusle*, the symbol of epic performance in the South Slavic tradition, claiming it as his own but stipulating that the poem is performed for the audience (as are, by extension, all songs that make up this oral poetry, whenever and wherever and by whomever they are sung). He pronounces it a song of truth, and backs up that assertion by citing his avowed source and the supposed date he learned it. Fieldwork teaches us that such sources and dates are rhetorical rather than actual, a distinction without a difference for the *guslar* and his audience. As always, it's not the literal but the idiomatic, performative meaning that really counts.

Performers use this same key in other kinds of oral poetry as well. The prologues to the Old English *Beowulf* and to the ancient Greek *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, all Voices from the Past, are familiar analogues to the *guslar's pripjev*.<sup>15</sup> In invoking the muse, for example, Homer addresses the source of oral epic poet-

ry in his tradition, and from that direct, unambiguous linkage flows the story. We would have difficulty finding a clearer appeal to tradition than the first ten lines of the *Odyssey*:

Sing man in me, O muse, the many-turning one who very many times  
Was driven back, after he had sacked the sacred citadel of Troy.  
He saw the cities of many men and came to know their minds,  
and on the sea he suffered many woes in his spirit,  
striving to win his soul and the homecoming of his comrades.  
But he could not save his comrades, though he tried;  
they perished on account of their own reckless crimes,  
the fools, who devoured the cattle of Hyperion's son Helios.  
For this reason their day of homecoming was lost to them.  
From somewhere, O goddess, daughter of Zeus, speak of such things to  
us as well.

More than providing an outline of the ensuing action, this prologue seeks to tap the wellspring of myth and oral poetry, to frame the story in a known and dependable context. What follows will be delivered in performance and on the authority of that source. The appeal to tradition acts as a kind of oral *imprimatur*.

Written Oral Poetry works in a cognate fashion, though of course it's limited to a textual incarnation of performance. Voiced Texts may refer to tradition via methods that are more oblique. Consider, for instance, slam poetry's ritual of the "sacrifice poet," the slammer who begins the event with a separately scored, noncompetitive performance to warm up the audience and help calibrate what follows for the judges.<sup>16</sup> This too is an "appeal to tradition" that links the present proceedings to the historically recent but widespread movement of spoken-word poetry in North America. But appeals to tradition are hardly restricted to prologues or warm-ups. Like the other keys, they take shape within the dedicated, specialized language of the particular oral poetry. Each "wordhoard," as the Old English poets called their tradition, requires a differently notched set of keys to unlock it.

The final entry in Bauman's short list of six features, *disclaimer of performance*, turns out not to play any major role in the South Slavic epic tradition exemplified by the Tršić singer. If anything, the *guslari* are only too eager to affirm their individual mastery of epic performance. But demurral by a performer—essentially the "Unaccustomed as I am to public speaking" gambit that breaks the ice for a speech before a large audience—is not uncommon among oral poetries. Bauman mentions both Cree storytellers' denial of expertise and "the plateau Malagasy, for whom the elaborate assertion of verbal

incompetence is a diagnostic feature of *kabary* performance" (1977: 22). Notice what's going on: saying you can't means asserting that you can and you will. This is another good lesson in the expressive nature of all of the keys; every one of them is nominal in form but institutionalized in meaning. What functions as a resonant signal in one oral poetic language may well have no special force in another. It may not even exist in that other tradition. Each oral poetry maps its reality onto a different set of signs. As for keying performance, those signs—like Homer's *sēmata*—are fundamentally nontextual.

From keying performance we'll move in the Fourth Word to examine another "way of reading": the approach called ethnopoetics. Although our perspective will shift, many of the same concerns will be surfacing. Once again, we'll be inquiring about the more-than-textual aspects of oral poetry; we'll be asking how to understand its special character and, in the case of ethnopoetics, how best to transmit that understanding to readers of editions and translations. In short, our focus will remain both on word-power (in the ordinary sense of words) and on the power of "words."

## Notes

1. See also Foley 1995a, which explains and illustrates each approach at length and identifies the theoretical basis that they share.
2. See "Dovetailing: Word-Power," in the Fifth Word below; also Foley 1995a: esp. 56–59, 102–8.
3. One of the most prominent and interdisciplinary approaches has been developed by a consortium of departments at the Universität Freiburg, which looks at living oral traditions, texts from the ancient world to the modern novel, and historical and philosophical works. Most of this school's writings are in German, many of them published in the ScriptOralia series issued by Gunter Narr Verlag; for an overview of some of its main ideas in English, see Oesterreicher 1997. Also worthy of mention as another useful method is Paul Zumthor's work on medieval (oral-connected) traditions (e.g., 1990).
4. Murko 1990: 122.
5. See further the description of an actual slam event in the Seventh Word, as well as the ethnopoetic transcription of a slam performance in the Fourth Word.
6. *SCHS* 3: 108, with lineation introduced.
7. Bonair-Agard et al. n.d.: 26.
8. See further the application of the approach called ethnopoetics to Procopé's "elemental woman" in the Fourth Word below.
9. Quotations from Halil Bajgorić's performances are taken from my own editions of *The Wedding of Mustajbey's Son Bećirbey* (Foley 2003) and *Halil Rescues Bojičić Alija*. These performances were recorded by Milman Parry and Albert Lord in June, 1935 (for details, see Kay 1995: PN 6699, 6703).

10. *Rhetoric*, III.9. Aristotle relates this style to poetry and memorability.
11. As a general caveat, we should be careful to allow for *tradition-dependent*, *genre-dependent*, and even individualized versions of any poetic feature. See further Foley 1990: 5–19.
12. See note 5 above.
13. See further the Fifth Word below.
14. See note 8 above.
15. For an ethnopoetic analysis of the prologue to *Beowulf*, see the Fourth Word.
16. See further the description in the Seventh Word.

## Further Reading

Performance theory: Bauman 1977, 1986; Bauman and Briggs 1990

Applications to ancient Greek epic: G. Nagy 1996b; to Old English narrative poetry:

Foley 1995a: 201–6; to Hispanic verbal art in New Mexico: Briggs 1988; to Mexican *corridos* and Scottish storytelling: Bauman and Braid 1998; to Mexican folk drama:

Bauman and Ritch 1994

Application to text-making: Fine 1994; Foley 1995b

Related scholarship: discourse-centered approaches: Sherzer 1998, Urban 1991; ethnography of speaking: Bauman and Sherzer 1989; folklore and cultural performances: Bauman 1992