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Homer and contemporary folklore – different time, one tradition

Abstract: In the article, I present an issue of importance to the interpretation of folk culture, namely if texts representing contemporary folklore to some extent continue the traditional poetic structure. The major question is if contemporary folklore may go back to the time when oral culture prevailed. Original folk texts from various Slavic nations were subjected to an analysis. The textual persistence of identical elements of the poetics of folk works in all Slavic languages is an argument in favour of a thesis that these structures go back to the proto-Slavic community. The occurrence of folklore units, absent from dialects and the literary language, is evidence of their proto-Slavic origin.

The formulaic discourse of the epics of Slavic folklore and the like structure of Homer's texts allow to advance an argument that both textual structures have the same origin and come from one tradition while the time of documenting thereof is different.

Key words: oral creative activity, proto-Slavic poetic language, Slavic folk song, Homer, folklore formulas.

Abstrakt: Homer i współczesny folklor – różny czas, jedna tradycja. Artykuł podejmuje istotną dla interpretacji kultury ludowej kwestię: czy teksty współczesnego folkloru są w jakimś stopniu kontynuacją tradycyjnej struktury poetyckiej. Zasadnicze pytanie brzmi: czy współczesny folklor może swymi korzeniami sięgać czasów dominacji kultury oralnej? Analizie poddane zostały oryginalne teksty folkloru różnych narodów słowiańskich. Tekstowa żywotność w całej Słowiańszczyźnie identycznych elementów poetyki utworów folklorowych przekonuje, że są to struktury obecne już w czasach wspólnoty prasłowiańskiej; Obecność jednostek folklorowych – nieobecnych w codziennych gwarach i w języku literackim – przekonuje o ich prasłowiańskim rodowodzie.

Formuliczność epiki folkloru słowiańskiego i takoważ struktura tekstów Homerowych pozwalają stawiać tezę o wspólnym pochodzeniu obu tych struktur tekstowych, o jednej tradycji przy różnym czasie ich dokumentowania.

Słowa kluczowe: twórczość oralna, prasłowiański język poetycki, słowiańska pieśń ludowa, Homer, formuły folklorowe.

In contemporary Europe, the issue of the relations between local tradition and the shared cultural heritage is gaining in importance. In these circumstances, a juxtaposition of Homer's works and contemporary folklore, although slightly surprising, is not unjustified. Bearing in mind the fabric (uttered words) and the form of the message, both cases should definitely be viewed as manifestation of what we refer to as "literary" works.

Before I proceed, several reminders will come in handy, namely:

The history of European literature begins with the poems of Homer and Hesiod. In written form, 'Homer' may have made a partial appearance in the early seventh century B.C. Even this vague date is not authenticated (...). It depends on an inference from the probable date of the invention of the Greek alphabet in which the poems were written (Havelock 1986, 19).

The above statement shows clearly that Homer's poems were written at a time of no competition for the oral tradition. However, they have survived only because they have been preserved in writing. The very time of their origin, coupled with detailed research into their language and style (Тронский 1973)] are conclusive evidence that these works respect the specificity of the oral culture.

M. Parry and his disciple, A. Lord, researchers from the Harvard school dealing with the idiosyncrasies of folklore works (especially the south Slavic epic poetry) noted that "the formulaic character of Homeric (and Yugoslav) content, tracing the control over the narrative exercised by typical themes and episodes. The discussion is kept for the most part within the context of stylistics. The poems are still 'literature' albeit with a style of their own, namely an oral style" (Havelock 1986, 52).

This statement clearly juxtaposes two types of verbal creativity of our interest. Interestingly though, folklore is represented here only by its epic element. This approach is hardly surprising in the light of the Harvard researchers' assumption. Their intention was to understand what we could refer to as "a creative act" performed by a folk singer. Long epic songs provide opportunities for these observations. This type of analysis of oral folk works allowed A. Lord to provide more details to M. Parry's definition of a formula: "a group of words which is regularly employed under the same metrical conditions to express a given essential idea" (Lord 1975, 30). According to this concept, a formula is the basic unit of the folk poetic style.

In the context of these deliberations, information that M. Parry had written two dissertations dedicated to the traditional epithets in Homer's epic poetry and Homer's formulas and metrics is of significance (Parry 1928a; Parry 1928b).

Notably, the researchers' deliberations centre on an analysis of texts (sung) in verse. The other type of folk works – prose – is strongly influenced by casual speech, an actual dialect. In these two varieties of oral expressions, extreme conditions prevail: submitted to specific standards of the "poetic nature", versed works are predestined to preserve tradition. Of special use here is the rhythm and the rhyme of a poem; in this respect, prose is more free which does not imply, however, that the specific poetic rules do not apply.

In an analysis of the linguistic structure of the folklore of different (Slavic) nations, attention should be paid to their specific characteristics. Formulas prove useful in epic works, long texts. While south Slavic folklore is in fact bereft of epic poetry, it is nevertheless affected by a formulaic structure, especially in the ballad. An analysis once carried out on the incipit of a famous Polish ballad about a woman from Podolia¹ has resulted in several important conclusions:

¹ The incipit in question is like this: *Na Podolu biały kamień
Podolanka siedzi na mim.*

A text segment's affinity for a specific type (model) of the formula is determined by the semantic and syntactic factors. On the other hand, the arrangement is not fixed on the metre level if it is not repeated in all the translations. (...)

In the course of identifying the formula described above, of significance is:

a. a fixed arrangement of the grammatical categories, i.e. word order:

Locative adverbial: (predicate) – modifier – subject,

Subject – predicate – locative adverbial;

b. with respect to the meaning, it is a fragment of text locating the plot; in the text structure it performs the function of the incipit (of an entire text or a strophe);

c. occurrence of invariable elements: *biały kamień* and *siedzi na nim*. It turns out that the occurrence of the selected pair of rhymes largely determines the content and grammatical structure of the text segment;

d. the rhyme is an element which organises the formula (just like the invariable fragments) (Sierociuk 1977, 14).

The above findings should also be borne in mind in the considerations in this article.

In their scholarly work, the Harvard scholars adopted a methodologically homogeneous view of two “creative acts” extended over time. To these considerations, of importance is also the fact that folk creative activity is represented by works of communities occupying areas not very distant from each other. While mutual cultural continuity (and dependency) is out of the question, the research areas: Greece and the former Yugoslavia, were located very close to each other. This circumstance may be significant as, unlike in southern Slavic tribes, the folklore of eastern and western Slavs practically lacks epic poetry.

Are there indications of a shared cultural legacy in the context of oral folk creative activity? This question in fact pertains to the issue of cultural continuity; it tends to assume the following form: was there a proto-Slavic poetic language (Sierociuk 2001)? When the answer is positive, there are grounds for juxtaposing Homer's and folk works.

Let me therefore take a closer look at vital issues, namely proving continuity of the folklore tradition; it is also a good opportunity to refer to the oral nature of folk creative activity. I do realise that referring to the oral nature of contemporary folklore texts (typical of primitive cultures) may seem rather surprising, especially in the context of the prevalence of the culture of writing.

In the light of lack of source texts, when we want to justify the existence of a poetic language in the pre-literate period, out of necessity we need to rely on an analysis of phenomena which could only be preserved in the oral tradition. We need to realise that this procedure may take a course similar to the reconstruction of dead languages or ones representing the time when communication communities emerged. In the light of these facts, my intention is to present the arguments as part of a cohesive, logical series of premises.

While discussing the poetic function of any utterance, a fundamental question needs to be answered, namely: did the opposition *informal language vs. artistic/poetic language* exist in the time of our interest? In order to simplify the subsequent

considerations I will assume that the artistic language is an arena of language elements foreign to the informal variety used to communicate with words on a daily basis.

Assuming the generally accepted model of components of communication with language and the related functions of language suggested by R. Jakobson (Jakobson 1960) one should agree that in the time of our interest, texts were communicated by the addresser to the addressee with the poetic function playing an important role. We should probably agree that the elements foreign to informal (ordinary) language could have appeared in texts related to religion or folk magic.

Providing an answer to the question about the religion of the proto-Slavic period may be the first indirect proof of existence at that time of special language formulas (or rules) used to communicate to the tribesmen content revolving around beliefs or used in the course of religious practices.

The traditional beliefs of Slavs have attracted attention for a long time; literature on the subject is quite impressive. The subject has been covered by historians and linguists alike; cf. the most significant Polish publications: A. Brückner, *Mitologia słowiańska i polska* (Brückner 1985), S. Urbańczyk, *Dawni Słowianie. Wiara i kult* (Urbańczyk 1991), T. Linkner, *Słowiańskie bogi i demony* (Linkner 1998), J. Strzelczyk, *Mity, podania i wierzenia dawnych Słowian* (Strzelczyk 1998).

Written sources offer sparse information about the nature of the religion or the practices. Nevertheless, we know about a slightly later time that

when it comes to other details, in short all the northern barbarians have the same arrangements and habits as they tend to think that only one god, the creator of the lightning, is the lord of the entire world and they offer him oxen and any other animals as sacrifice. They know nothing about destiny nor do they acknowledge its role in human life" (Labuda 1999, 170).

As the nature of religious beliefs and, subsequently the possible survival thereof in the altered reality of the Christian world may prove useful to the subsequent line of reasoning, let me refer to several opinions on the above:

As a traditional, group religion, the Slavic system developed in the process of spontaneous ideological work heavily relying on the heritage, processed to an extent hard to define yet immutable in its core. A multitude of numinous was at its heart as a subject of cult while polyodoxy prevailed, untouched by archaic multiplicity of deities, representing its component. The multitude of numinous resulted in religious liberalism (Łowmiański 1986, 241).

The experiences of historians of the subject prove indirectly that there was a need to use texts with a clear poetic function, texts of prayers and charms. At the same time, the nature of religious practices, close to Christian practices, could have contributed to the former's extended persistence.

Therefore, could there have been a poetic language in the proto-Slavic period?

With reference to the pre-literate time in the history of Poland, the issue of literary language was pondered by S. Urbańczyk (1979). However, he followed only the lead of source evidence and disregarded the oral tradition. S. Urbańczyk took into

consideration the certifications of the persistence of folk texts but only documented in historic texts; he treated them like works of written literature.

In my considerations, of importance is an analysis of genuine texts of sung folklore, traditional oral literature. The analysis pertains to original folk songs of a majority of Slavic nations. It is a review of the oral language of western, eastern and southern Slavs. It is a search of the elements of the poetic language of oral folk works shared by all these nations.

The time of my interest, preceding the disintegration of the proto-Slavic community, coincided with the long literary tradition which made a contribution to the history of universal culture. Long before the beginning of the new era, human achievements in literature were represented by Homer's and Sumer epic poetry including the Epic of Gilgamesh. It is important that these works' structure is made up of many elements traditionally considered typical of oral literary culture – the formula (as mentioned before).

Before I proceed with an analysis of the linguistic material, let me remind several fundamental characteristics of the language of folk oral creation. By juxtaposing folklore texts and casual texts from the same linguistic environments, researchers into Slavic folklore draw attention to the autonomy of the linguistic structure of folklore demonstrating themselves in the persistence of linguistic units foreign to the local dialects. Some of the peculiarities were indicated by P. Bogatyriev (Богатырев 1962; Богатырев 1963); examples of detailed studies of the folklore of selected nations representing the three major groups of Slavs include S.J. Ermolenko's works (Эрмоенко 1987) on the Ukrainian folklore, B. Koneski's (Конески 1967; Конески 1971) works on Macedonian folklore and J. Sierociuk's (1990) analyses of the entire lexical and semantic domain (native terminology) in Polish folklore. Works taking into account other aspects of the language of folk oral creation are evidence of persistence of various means of artistic expression in this environment, typical not only of folklore where the formulaic nature and the related fixed phrasemes, especially epithets, play an important role.

While formulas helped folk singers to create especially long epic texts, they could also have been used to create shorter texts. Detailed research into Polish folklore (rather bereft of epic texts) shows that the formulaic nature may demonstrate itself in the presence of a specific syntax or an intonation pattern (Sierociuk 1977). Notably, if "originally, the native medieval Polish poem did not have rhymes or at least systemic rhymes" (Woronzak 1958, 245) then in the proto-Slavic times rhymes were most probably also non-existent. It is equally clear that the formulaic nature of folklore is conducive also for preserving archaic linguistic units. This opinion is shared by researchers into Homer's works: "Именно формульный строй обеспечил для древнегреческого эпоса сохранение разноречной лексики и морфологии от микенских времен вплоть до VIII–VII вв. до н. э." (It was the formula of the structure that made it possible for the ancient Greek epic poetry to maintain diverse vocabulary and morphology since the Mycenaean times until the 8th–7th centuries ACN), (Тронский 1973, 72).

What is more, the formulaic nature is not specific only to versed texts. As W. Propp (Propp 1976) proved, fable has a specified structure which not only facilitates story-telling but also marks the genre determinants. The formulaic nature of prose texts (fables) was proven by N. Roşianu (Roşianu 1973; Рошияну 1974). Similar

idiosyncrasies of folklore texts are typical not only of the Slavic universe but also Romanian creative texts as largely covered by O. Bîrlea (1979).

In his *Kultura ludowa Słowian* K. Moszyński included many significant comments on the structure of the language of Slavic folk works, for example:

The so-called trichotomy was extremely popular among all Slavs both in songs, fables and many other works; the entire content of a work or – much more frequently – its fragments disintegrate into 3 completely symmetrical parts (Moszyński 1968, 655).

Therefore, if we assume that the folklore of Slavic peoples is in fact based on a uniform poetic system, we need to accept that the system did not emerge independently for each language. We need to agree, however, that the sources of the system go back to at least the time of the proto-Slavic community. Leaving their proto-mother country, Slavs must have taken with them an already established system of the poetic language, the major framework of some sort of poetic art. Notably, this knowledge is spread in a similar way also in our times.

The fact that folklore undergoes constant changes has been indicated by numerous scholars (Burlasová 1973; Sierociuk 1990); therefore, in many cases approaching materials from different times in the same way is a grave methodological mistake. However, in this case the idea is to indicate the elements of language present in the language of Slavic folklore after their community disintegrated. This is the reason why this requirement is meaningless with respect to this article. The texts referred to above were written down in the last two hundred years of the second millennium.

As my intention is to prove the existence of poetic tradition in the proto-Slavic time, attention needs to be drawn to the presence (in the language of folklore of nearly all Slavic peoples) of elements which certainly were not created in a later period of time, irrespective of the development of language relations in a specific area. In this procedure, I will make use of only two selected examples which seem to fulfil the above conditions.

I need to emphasize very strongly that I do not mean an exemplary reconstruction of the elements of the phonetic and phonological layers. In this respect, the considerations will be definitely different from the attempts at reconstructing the structure of the proto-Slavic language. Bearing in mind the specificity of folk oral creation, I will focus on a set of elements of the structure of the poetic language rather than specific fragments of the individual works. From this point of view, reconstruction of specific works from the proto-Slavic period is not possible at all.

Among the numerous folk poetic words is *dąbrowa* which distinctly juxtaposes the language of Polish folk songs with informal dialects (Sierociuk 1976, especially the map on page 196). An analysis of this lexeme's connectivity with epithets shows that, unlike the word *las* (forest) which may be *dense*, *green*, *dark* or even *black*, in Polish folk songs *dąbrowa* appears in two contexts: with the word *zielona* (green) or without an epithet. This is also true for other nations. In Belorussian folklore *zielonaja dąbrowa* is mentioned only in a song (in a song – 25 times, in prose – 0 times) although in the collection under scrutiny “the prose contains over 1.5 times more words than the text of the song” (Glinka 1969, 218). This connection is confirmed in the folklore of

southern Slavs in the *Słownik prasłowiański* where volume IV reads as follows: “decline since the 14th c. *dùbrava* ‘a forest, typically in a farmland valley’ (cf. Chakavian dial. *dumbrava* from a folk song from Istria: V zelenoj *dumbrave*, RJAZ; with a secondary intrusive *m*, p. Skok ER I 449)” (SP, 182).

Another example of folk poetic creativity, typical of all the Slavic nations, is *wrony* as an epithet of a *horse*. Let me remind that “the motif of a horse was nothing new in pagan (Slavic – J.S.) beliefs. The animal’s image was carved on the front of the Zbruch Idol and on one of the stone steles. However, it was most popular in beliefs of Polabian Slavs and the peoples of Western Pomerania” (Gašowski 1988, 583).

Wrony as a name of equine coat colour has not been recognised in Polish dialects (Sierociuk 1996). This is an extremely folkloristic poetic word typically used in love songs. Therefore, it is strongly related to the poetic system as an element co-creating the linguistic model of the genre in folklore (Sierociuk 1987; Sierociuk 1999, 148). In Belarusian songs, *warany koń* is the most frequent poetic designation (Glinka 1969, 218) (in a song – 169 times, in prose – 0 times²).

Let me discuss singular examples (the size of the article does not allow to analyse a large number of them) which are evidence of the phrase’s persistence in the folklore of the specific Slavic nations:

Polish:

Dziwcyno młoda, ślicno, urodna,
Na kogóz się oglundos?
Na ciebie, Jasiu, mój Jasiuleńku,
Co *wrónygo kónia* mos; (Skierkowski 1934, 373).

Czech:

Sedla bych si na *koně vraného*,
jela bych s nim do pole širého,
spolu bysme bojovali,
nepřátelům hlavy posekali; (Oliva 1980, 85).

Slovak:

Sadla bych mu, sadla,
na jeho maštale,
až by zardžali, hoja,
jeho *kone vrané*; (*Pesne* 1986, 75).

Russian:

Он соскакивал с *вороного коня* ...; (*Русские* 1979, 177).

Belorussian:

Заезджу коніка, *каня варанога*,

² This compilation itself may be an indirect proof of the phrase’s absence from everyday speech of specific users of folklore. Unlike songs, prose texts are much more dependent on the local dialects.

Ой, скажы, дзеўчына, ці што будзе з тога ...; (*Вянок* 1988, 241).

Ukrainian:

Ой у полі криниченька
На чотири зводи,
Напували козаченьки
Вороній коні (*Пісні* 1986, 59).

Notably, according to S. J. Ermolenko (Эрмоенко 1987, 81), *вороній коні* lies at the heart of the poetic tissue of Ukrainian folklore³;

Bulgarian:

Куга ойдеш в Малинови двори,
ти не слăzi от *вранаго коня* ...; (Стоин 1975, 225).

Serbian:

Пођи збогом, неве наша, не обзири се
на братине *вране коње!* (Караџић 1977, 32).

The word *wrony* as an epithet of a horse fulfils the requirements of formulas and, as the above review of material shows, it is an element of the general Slavic folk poetic tissue. Having said that, I must add that this form has a property of interest to these considerations: as a component of the poetic language of Slavic folklore, it is therefore affiliated only to folklore. As Polish materials indicate (there are no confirmations of everyday use), it is also *exclusively* folk poetic creation. Therefore, if the folklore of all the Slavic nations contains a form absent from informal dialects, this absence is the best proof that the poetic language of all Slavs took shape when they were still members of a community before its disintegration.

In other words, a juxtaposition of the examples provided here and information about the stylistic properties of the language of the Slavic folk song leads to the following, very likely interpretation: in the absence of the specific units in the structure of the language of everyday communication (see for example the situation in the Polish language) and their presence in the general Slavic song folklore one should assume that in the proto-Slavic period, there was already a structure of the poetic language. It is hard to relate the presence of units which are linguistically and functionally identical to the independent and incidental development of the poetic systems in Slavic nations bereft of contacts.

Both types of literary work: Homer's narrative poetry and Slavic folklore, go back to a single source, namely oral culture. They also share a similar approach to words, the basic material.

J.W. Ong noted that

Oral cultures tend to use concepts in situational, operational frames of reference that are minimally abstract in the sense that they remain close to the living human lifeworld. (...) Havelock (...) has shown that pre-Socratic Greeks thought of justice in operational rather than formally conceptualized ways and the late Anne Amory Parry (...) made much the

³ Cf. entry *вороний* in: Жайворонок 2006.

same point about the epithet *amymōn* applied by Homer to Aegisthus: the epithet means not “blameless”, a tidy abstraction with which literates have translated the term, but “beautiful-in-the-way-a-warrior-ready-to-fight-is-beautiful” (Ong 1992, 41).

He made another important observation in the context of this article:

Traditional expressions in oral cultures must not be dismantled: it has been hard work getting them together over the generations, and there is nowhere outside the mind to store them. So soldiers are brave and princesses beautiful and oaks sturdy forever. This is not to say that there may not be other epithets for soldiers or princesses or oaks, even contrary epithets; but these are standard, too: the braggart soldier, the unhappy princess, can also be part of the equipment. What obtains for epithets obtains for other formulas (Ong 1992, 38–39).

While discussing the typicality of phrases, combinations of epithets co-creating poetic formulas, the standard attribute of a folk lover should be added, namely *czarne oczy* (black eyes). It accompanies the characteristics of a girl provided by the song’s protagonist. In fact, this combination is typical only of erotic folk poetry.

Beside the historical distance, both types of creative achievements differ with respect to the cultural context. Homer lived when collective memory was the only way to continue tradition; for centuries, the oral nature of folklore has been juxtaposed with culture based on the tradition of writing. Nevertheless, it seems that even in this context, the major elements of oral culture are still present in the social cycle. This is corroborated by a simple experiment conducted with students of the Poznań University’s Institute of Polish Philology who were requested to write down the Little Red Riding Hood fairy tale. Neither of the participants had attended classes during which the poetics of folk texts were discussed or any analysis was carried out of the fairy tale in question. Out of the resulting approximately 150 texts⁴, only several contained composition rules foreign to the folk poetic art. The incipit of the fairy tale which is a translation of the Grimm Brothers version (*There was once a sweet little maid ...*) has a distinct time indication. While in their opening lines, the students went beyond this repertoire [Sierociuk 2008], they remained within the limits established by N. Roșianu who has divided the initial fairy-tale formulas into two types: some only place the fairy tale in time – chronological (“*temporale*”), others define the topography (“*topografice*”) (Roșianu 1973, 19).

This experiment shows that, despite the dominance of the culture of writing, cultures with two different origins continue their coexistence. Cultural habits of childhood (a non-writing stage of life), especially exposure to “fairy-tale” literature, turned out to be persistent despite lack of active participation in the “folklore environment”. Let me finish by referring to J. W. Ong’s conclusion: “Oral formulaic thought and expression ride deep in consciousness and the unconscious, and they do not vanish as soon as one used to them takes pen in hand” (Ong 1992, 26)*.

⁴ All the participants were allowed 30 minutes for the task.

* The text is a slightly modified version of the first print: *Homer i współczesny folklor – różny czas, jedna tradycja*, [in:] *Мови та культури у новій Європі: контакти і самобутність*, Редколегія збірника: П.О. Бех, В.М. Зорівчак, С.А. Карпіловська ..., Київ 2009, pp. 453–462.

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