

## OLRIK'S LAWS: A JUDICIAL REVIEW

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Alan Dundes' inclusion of "The Epic Laws of Folk Narrative" in his collection, The Study of Folklore, is yet another evidence of Olrik's sustaining power.<sup>1</sup> First published in 1908, Olrik's early attempt to determine a "biology of the Sage" (p. 31) has had international circulation. And despite Dundes' cautions in the headnotes about its superorganic qualities which take the folk out of folklore, few systematic examinations have been made of Olrik's Laws, which is perhaps more than anything a tribute to their reasonableness. Now, seventy years later, we take most of Olrik's observations for granted, so much so that if pressed to evaluate them we are inclined mainly to praise his good sense. Yet Olrik himself recognized that he had made only a beginning and that, primarily, his essay brought many new issues to light: "to pursue," as he said, "each epic law in its full range over all humanity, and by so doing, to explain the significance of these compositional formulas for the development of man" (p. 141). This paper will pick up some of the threads left unraveled since the first decade of this century.

Surely one of the most distinctive characteristics of oral narrative is described by the Law of Two to a Scene (das Gesetz der scenischen Zweiheit). Olrik argued (pp. 134-35) that the appearance of more than two would constitute a "violation of tradition," so "rigid" is this Law. However, explication is needed to clarify this point. If "the bird can speak to Siegfried only after Regin has gone to sleep" (p. 135), the idea of "scene" must be expanded. More than two characters actually can speak in any one scene (tableau scenes, by Olrik's definition), but only two at a time; the third may pause, but then may join in the conversation while

one of the "original" participants withdraws: first A, then B; then A and C; then B and C; then A and C again. If this is what Olrik meant, the Law is not so rigid as he suggests, because all communication is essentially dyadic: oral tradition merely foregrounds that dyadic relationship more clearly than does some writing. Unanswered by Olrik, and still a question today, is why only two characters are allowed to speak in one scene. Is a three- or four-way conversation too difficult for the oral performer to delineate, and for the audience to distinguish? One would think so, but the matter does need more empirical demonstration.

The Law of Threes has intrigued folklorists before Olrik and arouses interest still. It is true that literature rarely uses the kind of triune repetition so frequently found in folktales, but the form of Faulkner's The Sound and the Fury, Dostoevsky's Brothers Karamazov, and even Le Carre's The Looking Glass War suggest that the number three is no stranger to written narrative. Several novel cycles have been written as trilogies; yet if one wants to see triads in superabundance, Moby Dick has more than triple the amount of any three oral narratives combined. The Pequod has a crew of thirty, including three mates and three harpooners. It is a traditional three-masted schooner carrying three whaleboats; it meets nine other ships on its voyage; Ishmael has signed aboard for a three-hundredth share, Queequeg for a thirtieth; the final encounter with the white whale involves a three-day chase, and the ship is destroyed under a three-star constellation. All told, Melville's triads number in the hundreds.

To speculate, the popularity of three may be largely a function of narrative efficiency. Dundes is correct in calling Olrik to task over the suggestions about the "naturalness" of threes.<sup>2</sup> Trinitarian arguments are embarrassingly inept. But three has its place in narrative because it is the smallest number which can be used to violate an established pattern: one declares a pattern, two confirms it, three violates it. Two older brothers go forth successively on quests: the first's failure prepares us; the second's establishes that failure is the norm; when the third

succeeds, his success is all the more sharply in contrast with the established tradition of failure of the first two. That trebling occurs so often in a dramatic rather than in a merely descriptive role is to me indicative of its function.

Olrik claimed that the "greatest law of folk tradition is Concentration on a Leading Character" (p. 139). This may be true of most oral narrative--certainly of the Märchen, which is usually brief in its European manifestation--but some of the Yugoslavian heroic songs are more complicated.<sup>3</sup> In any event, nearly all written narrative focuses on a leading character and one is hard put to find exceptions, such as War and Peace. But even then, in view of Olrik's assertion that Hamlet is so concentrated ("with his folly and his father-revenge . . . in spite of his verbosity . . ." p. 139), we must take his observation as relative. Is King Lear, with its subplots, concentrated? We could cite a number of folktales that are rather diffuse: one example (because of its ready availability) is the narrative combining "The Twins," "The Hunter," and "The Dragon-Slayer" in The Folktales of Germany.<sup>4</sup>

This same folktale, collected by Schönwerth in Bavaria (date, place, and informant unknown), also calls into question Olrik's comment that folk narrative is always "single-stranded," einsträngig (p. 137). "The Three Brothers" certainly interweaves the threads of various plots. But Olrik does not appear to imply by this Law a narrative simplicity, because within the same paragraph he seems to be saying, rather, that the chronology of the Sage is always progressive: "It [folk narrative] does not go back in order to fill in the missing details. If such previous background information is necessary, then it will be given in dialogue" (p. 137). The observation is valid enough; but is the issue really single-strandedness (or even chronology), or an insight into a tendency of oral performers? Although Olrik also argues that "each attribute of a person or thing must be expressed in actions" (p. 137), he also notes that a great deal of information is presented through dialogue. Should we consider that to be "action"?

It would be descriptive to do so, for oral narrative--more than most literature, which tends more toward authorial description and revelation--likes to enrich the story's gestalt through informational dialogue. People talking are doing something, and that is a kind of action. If Olrik cites Siegfried in this connection, I feel free to drag in Beowulf: the past is recalled more than a dozen times and always in conversation. Upon his return home, Beowulf's retelling of his encounter with the Grendel family is so lengthy that it is argued that it was at one time a separate, short heroic lay. Beowulf might well be used to demonstrate Olrik's point about filling in missing details, but only by allowing a great liberty in his meaning of "Handlung" and "einsträngig."

I have suggested above that in using threes for dramatic effectiveness, the Sage--but particularly the Märchen--is an efficient form. Morphological analysis implies it strongly. Hence, we are anxious to accept Olrik's Law of Patterning (die Schematisierung, pp. 137-38): "Everything superfluous is suppressed and only the essential stands out salient and striking." But Olrik never went beyond the observation that such "stylizing of life" has its own esthetic value. Recently his insight has been developed further, and we have learned enough about oral literature to understand why such repetition is appealing to tradition-oriented auditors (perhaps in the wake of the Parry-Lord findings). And not until even more recently has a great deal of attention been paid to the performance, rather than the text, of oral narrative. Olrik correctly identified a folktale trait; later generations have made sense of it, but only by studying the psychology of the audience. The superorganic attributes of orality have their basis in the commonality of the psyche.

But with the Law of Patterning we leave those observations which are at all useful in describing exclusively the oral performance. For instance, the Law of Logik contends that "the themes which are presented must exert an influence upon the plot, and moreover, an influence in proportion to their extent and weight in

the narrative" (p. 138). But this certainly is true of literature as well. We expect--we demand--that literature and drama present us with data as action within episodes that reveal character and advance the narrative toward its predetermined conclusion. Everything is purposeful and, we assume, has been carefully weighted for its role within the entire economy of our narrative. This distinction between life and fiction--the randomness of the former and the methodical purpose of art--has long been observed. Olrik is not wrong in bringing logic in narrative art to our attention; he is merely misleading us by implying that it is a characteristic of folk narrative alone.

So too with the related comments on Unity of Plot (die Einheit der Handlung, pp. 138-39) and its corollary, epic unity (epische Einheit). Olrik wrote that the latter was "such that each narrative element works within it so as to create an event, the possibility of which the listener had seen right from the beginning and which he never lost sight of" (pp. 138-39). Wayne Booth makes a similar statement:

. . . our entire experience in reading fiction is based, as Jean-Louis Curtis says in his brilliant reply to Sartre, on a tacit contract with the novelist, a contract granting him the right to know what he is writing about. It is this contract which makes fiction possible. To deny it would not only destroy all fiction, but all literature, since art presupposes the artist's choice. . . . In short, once I have surrendered to an omniscient narrator, I am no more inclined . . . to separate the narrator's judgment from the thing or character judged than I am inclined to question James' conventions once I am well into one of his novels. He signs an agreement with me not to know everything. He reminds me, from time to time, that he cannot, in this particular instance 'go behind,' because of the convention he has adopted.<sup>5</sup>

Like Olrik, what Booth is describing is the well-made narrative, written or oral.

And when the laws of Unity, Epic Unity, and Logic are taken together, they sound very much like Aristotle's proscriptions for narrative. Olrik had at least some training in the classics, but that is almost beside the point: every educated person in the West has read the Poetics. Even this is almost beside the point: Olrik could well have conceived these Laws independently, and he could well have been writing an essay on literary criticism. I do not mean to be overly critical of him for this, for what Olrik has given us is an important introduction into the nature of narrative itself.

Narrative may well be, as Aristotle defined it, a representation of the events of men's lives; but that representation is artfully fabricated. Character and events must be developed episodically (unless our narrative is to be an isomorph of that life), and besides having significance for the structure of the plot entity, each must carry along the reader's/ listener's interest within itself. Nearly every writer in the great tradition of our literature has realized his characters and his plot through human interaction. One is hard put to find exceptions; James Joyce (whose "events" are interior) is an obvious one, and William Faulkner especially has usurped much of the verbiage from his characters. Nevertheless, they are acting; they are in motion, though they are talking less about it.

To anyone who has thought at all about the way narratives are constructed, Olrik's Law of Tableau Scenes (Hauptsituationen plastischer Art) is hardly a surprise. Narratives--and not only Sagen--do rise to peaks in one or more such scenes in which the actors draw near to each other. Drama presents too obvious an example. But to take just one literary example familiar to everyone, Chaucer's Troilus and Criseyde are shown to develop through tableau scenes: Pandarus convinces Troilus that Criseyde is not unattainable, and then persuades her that the prince loves her. The two lovers are brought together in Pandarus' home

and then drift apart, pulsatingly, in a montage of tableaux alternating between the Greek camp and Troy. Character does not change during each scene, but during the interstices, so that when the narrator returns us to each one alternately, we immediately note the change because we know how differently the characters (particularly Criseyde) have just acted. In nearly all discursive narrative, the attributes of people and things are expressed in action, not only in oral narratives. Again, Olrik is not wrong here; he simply is too restrictive.

For centuries we have customarily said of the epic, for instance, that it does not begin in medias res. Although seldom given as esthetic, the reasons are ultimately just that, and hence psychological in their foundation. We cannot move at once from our lives outside the frame of the narrative performance, with its machinery of "the willful suspension of disbelief," into the frame of art.<sup>6</sup> The transition must be gradual; we must have some time to persuade ourselves that the actors on "stage," whom we are hearing or reading about, are not merely fictions. The performer/artist must win us to his side within the frame of each work, and that is not an immediate realization. Should a moment of high drama be presented immediately at the outset of any performance it would most likely be lost on the audience, literate or aural.

Once again, therefore, Olrik does not surprise us when he postulates his Law of Opening (das Gesetz des Einganges) and Law of Closing (das Gesetz des Abschlusses):

The Sage begins by moving from calm to excitement, and after the concluding event, in which a principal character frequently has a catastrophe, the Sage ends by moving from excitement to calm (p. 132).

Hamlet does not end at the moment of the hero's death, but with the entrance of Fortinbras' army and the removal of the bodies; Othello does not end with

Desdemona's murder, but with the Moor's apologia and partial self-discovery speech; Lear does not conclude at the moment of Lear's expiration, but only after several minutes' speeches are given about the lamentable state of affairs, Burgundy's defeat in the recent battle, and Kent's decision to join his master.

. . . the epos cannot end with the last breath of Roland. Before ending, it needs to relax the clenched fist of the sword-hand; it needs the burial of the hero, the revenge, the death through grief of the beloved, and the execution of the traitor (p. 132).

I am not sure whether it is significant that the Chanson de Roland has come down to us through a manuscript and is thus to be treated as literature, however long its provenience in oral currency. That Olrik treats it as an example of the Sage is unintentionally important for the point I have been trying to establish: that the esthetic which informs the Sage is not very different from that of narrative prepared for print. What links stories presented in either mode is the psychology of the audience, which, as Kenneth Burke has shown, is the form of literature.<sup>7</sup>

To me, one of Olrik's most astute observations is framed in his Law of Contrast (p. 135), which is one of the earliest comments on the tendency of narrators to polarize characters, events, and plots. Olrik's insight has been almost universally slighted (he himself calls Concentration of a Leading Character the "greatest Law"). He argues, for instance, "that a strong Thor requires a wise Odin or a cunning Loki next to him; a rich Peter Krämer, a poor Paul Schmeid . . . the Danish King Rolf who is so celebrated in our heroic sagas because of his generosity . . . thus requires a stingy opponent. However, in this example, the identity of the opponent changes. Now it is a Skolding: Rörik; now it is a Swede: Adisl. . . . Some types of plot action correspond exactly to the Lae Law of Contrast. (1) The hero meets his death through the murderous act of a villain . . . (2) the great king has an insignificant and short-reigning



successor . . ." (p. 135).

Though the idea of contrast was au current at the turn of the century<sup>8</sup>--indeed, it has been with us at least since Aristotle--and so we should not unduly credit Olrik with conceiving it solely, it does anticipate much that is current today in the work of Lévi-Strauss. But it also describes nearly all literature. When Olrik writes that "this very basic opposition is a major rule of epic composition: young and old, large and small, man and monster, good and evil," he is not talking about Sagen alone, but about all narrative. The Law of Contrast is so much a foundation of the fictive imagination that one is hard pressed to identify much narrative that is not so formed.

Whether the thrust of characters, events, and entire plots toward contrast and polarization is a fundamental of human cognition cannot be determined in this paper. I have no brief for the number two, but I do find it the simplest and most efficient form of analysis. It works; it is useful. Cognitive psychologists describe the process by which input is classified and stored as being a series of often complicated comparisons with extant trace systems and schemata. In effect, we say "yes" or "no" when newly perceived data is relegated to memory cells, which are largely based on attribute structures already formed. As the number of attributes of the input increases, so do the number of decisions necessary for classification.<sup>9</sup>

Yet whether cognitive psychologists are right, whether Lévi-Strauss is right, or whether the structuralists are right is almost beside the point; we barely can imagine any dramatic or narrative form without conflict. Hamlet is not realized for us unless he struggles--with himself, with his mother, with his father's ghost, with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, with Claudius. Those conflicts and contrasts define his character for us; those struggles comprise the play. Troilus' helpless love-longing in Book I is sharply set off by Pandarus' playful manipulation of him. Both men

contrast with Criseyde at the beginning of the action, as they will in quite different ways in Book V. There Troilus' nobility emerges all the more in contrast with Pandarus' frustrations and sometimes ignoble suggestions. Beowulf is established as the man of action largely through his flyting with Unferth, after which Hrothgar's thegn is silenced for the remainder of the poem. (Significantly, Unferth is the man of idle words.) Throughout this, our oldest English epic, the scop recalls numerous rulers of former days--weak kings, strong-headed kings, feuding kings, and timid kings. When we reach the end of the hero's life, we have a full and detailed understanding of the ideal of kingship in the early Middle Ages. We also have a very specific, though idealized, idea of the character Beowulf.

As an attempt to provide a "biology of the Sage," Olrik's "Epic Laws" have miscarried. We know now that genres such as myths, songs, heroic sagas, and local legends (if we can even speak any longer of genres) have baffled our attempts at synthesis. What Olrik has described in the main is narrative--not local legends, probably not myth, but oral and written narrative. As we have seen, Olrik used the example of Roland to illustrate the Laws of Opening and Closing; to illustrate the employment of threes, he shows us Hector and Achilles in their race around Troy; for Contrast (in addition to Roland), Olrik used the Hrolfssaga Kraka and the Volsunga Saga; and elsewhere the Nibelungenlied, Greek myth (known only in manuscript), the Old Testament, and Hamlet are cited. So for Olrik, "Volksdichtung" encompasses more than folktales of the kind collected by the Grimms and classified by Aarne. He has cast his nets far wider than he realized, but in so doing he has for the better gone beyond merely oral narrative and into the realm of narrative per se. The "Epic Laws" are not major contributions; to be useful at all they must be seen in conjunction with our understanding of performance theory, dramatic framing, and the psychology of form. To use one final example, there is nothing essentially oral about the "Law of Initial and Final Position" (p. 136):

". . . coming last, though, will be the person for whom the particular narrative arouses sympathy." Like

nearly all of the other "Laws," that is simply the best way to tell the story, recited or printed. "The disease of literacy," to use Albert Lord's infectious phrase, doesn't change that aspect of our imaginations.

## NOTES

1. (Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice-Hall, 1965), pp. 129-41. All citations of Olrik in this paper are from this edition.
2. Dundes, The Study of Folklore, editor's note, pp. 140-41. Dundes subsequently published an essay on the subject in his Every Man His Way (Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: 1968).
3. Albert B. Lord and Milman Parry, eds., Serbo-croatian Heroic Songs, I (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1954); for example, see "The Captivity of Bulic Ibrahim," "The Song of Bagdad," and "Halil Hrnjić and Captain Belos."
4. Kurt Ranke, ed., The Folktales of Germany (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966) pp. 53-59, tale no. 29.
5. Wayne C. Booth, The Rhetoric of Fiction (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967), pp. 52-53.
6. Many useful distinctions and the vocabulary for dealing with them are found in Erving Goffman, Frame Analysis (New York: Harper and Row, 1974), especially pp. 124-55.
7. "Psychology and Form," in Counter-Statements (Berkeley: University of California Press 1968), pp. 29-44.
8. Among many others, Gabriel Tarde, L'opposition universelle (Paris: F. Alcan, 1897) deals with this idea. A detailed discussion can be found in Ludwig Fischer, The Structure of Thought, trans. W. H. Johnson (London: G. Allen and Unwin, Ltd., 1931). A brief summary introduces C. K. Ogden, Opposition (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1967).
9. The literature on this subject is, of course, extensive; any of a number of introductory texts will state the theory. I used Michael I. Posner, Cognition: An Introduction (Glenview, Ill.: Scott, Foresman and Co., 1973).