La Chanson de Roland: An Oral Poem?

The provenience of La Chanson de Roland has long been problematic,¹ and in recent years scholars have inquired whether the poem was composed orally.² While few would not admit the influence of an oral tradition upon the extant texts of the chansons de geste, or that the poems were intended for oral delivery, it is questionable whether these texts were mere transcripts of oral performances. After all, the texts are extant in written form, and the burden of proof must fall upon those who argue that they were not all composed in writing.

Much of the evidence offered in support of oral composition concerns analogous developments in other literatures. As early as 1924, Menéndez Pidal argued, "lo que yo sostengo es que los estados arcaicos conservados por la literatura española debieron por fuerza de existir en épocas más antiguas de la literatura francesa."³ More recently, critical attention has shifted to the formulaic style of the chansons de geste,⁴ in light of

¹The history of scholarly speculation concerning the origins of the chansons de geste may conveniently be summarized in terms of the struggle between the "traditionalists" and "individualists" and the attempts to resolve this conflict. For bibliographies and summaries of the scholarship, see, for example, Ramon Menéndez Pidal, La Chanson de Roland et la tradition épique des Francs, 2nd édition entièrement refondue avec le concours de R. Louis, trans. I. M. Cluzel (Paris: Picard, 1960), and Joseph J. Duggan, The Song of Roland: Formulaic Style and Poetic Craft (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973).


³Ramón Menéndez Pidal, Poesía juglaresca y juglares: Aspectos de la historia literaria y cultural de España, Publicaciones de la "Revista de Filología Española," No. 7 (Madrid, 1924), p. 326.

Milman Parry's and Albert B. Lord's discovery that the live oral performances of the Yugoslav guslari are characterized by formulaic style. On the basis of this research, Parry and Lord, among others, have posited a rigid stylistic distinction between oral and written verse.

However, it is difficult to accept the notion that the Yugoslav tradition is relevant and even determinative for our study of the Old French epic. Apart from the fact that the Yugoslav oral poets compose in non-asonanced decasyllables that are not divided into laisses, the existence of universally valid laws of oral poetics has not been demonstrated. This argument is based on an implicit assumption of an invariable "human nature." Comparative literature must, in the absence of irrefutable evidence of influence, compare but not equate different traditions; the results may be suggestive, but are by no means conclusive in the case at hand.

Even if, for purposes of argument, we admit the possible relevance of other traditions, the results are anything but certain. Larry Benson has argued persuasively that the Anglo-Saxon poetic corpus includes poetry written in conscious imitation of the oral style. More strikingly, Jeffrey Opland has found written compositions among the Xhosa tribesmen of South Africa that successfully imitate the local oral tradition. Thus we find in both the Old English and Xhosa traditions what have come to be referred to as "transitional" texts. As Opland has suggested, Serbo-Croatian literature must be unique if it preserves a rigid stylistic distinction.


9This is an unfortunate and potentially misleading term. Such texts are not transitional from oral to written literature, for, as Lord has pointed out ("Homer," passim), oral and written poetry may coexist for centuries. For the purposes of this paper, a transitional text is, in effect, one whose provenience cannot be distinguished by means of formulaic style alone.
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between oral and written poetry. In other words, the oral-formulaic theory rests entirely upon the evidence provided by Yugoslav examples.

If the argument depends upon the Yugoslav tradition, but if that tradition admits of so-called "transitional" texts composed in writing in conscious imitation of oral tradition, then the same development could account for the provenience of the chansons de geste. I have had opportunities to study the Yugoslav oral tradition first-hand and have examined a number of Serbo-Croatian literary texts as well. I have concentrated on the Razgovor Ugodni Naroda Slovinskoga [The Pleasant Discourse of the Illyrian People], by Andrija Kačić-Miošić. Lord has mentioned this text repeatedly, and rightly so, since it is known to be of written provenience, yet it is demonstrably formulaic. If it can be shown to be just as formulaic as the chansons de geste, or more so, then the argument that the latter were necessarily composed orally collapses. In point of fact, the Razgovor is, at least in part, considerably more formulaic than the chansons de geste.

More importantly for our purposes, given the limitations of the comparative approach noted above, the samples I examined are just as formulaic as the sample of Yugoslav oral poetry upon which Lord's argument is based. With the aid of a computer-generated concordance to 2315 lines of Kačić's poetry, I have analyzed several passages from the work, and they have all proven to be highly formulaic. I have chosen what I take to be a passage fairly representative of the work for detailed analysis in Chart One. The passage is presented here in terms of the conventional notation of formulaic analysis, with the evidence gathered below the chart. Solid underlining indicates a word-foreword repetition of the phrase elsewhere in Kačić's work. Broken underlining indicates that the phrase belongs to a formulaic system—a repeated, lexically- and metrically-related pattern.

10During the academic year 1971-72, I was a Fulbright fellow at the University of Zagreb; in the summer of 1975, I did further field work in Yugoslavia under the auspices of the Cornell Center for International Studies and a grant from the Cornell Humanities Faculty Research Grants Committee, with the cooperation of the National Museum of Bosnia and Herzegovina in Sarajevo.


13Lord, Singer, pp. 45 ff.

14This material was first presented in a paper read before the Old English Group of the MLA in Chicago on December 27, 1973. I am indebted to the chairman of that group, Professor John F. Leyerle of the University of Toronto, to Professors R. E. Kaske, Alice Colby-Hall and Thomas D. Hill of Cornell, and to others too numerous to mention for the subsequent development of this paper.
Unfortunately, there has been a great deal of argument over what constitutes a formulaic system and nearly as many answers to the question as there have been practitioners of formulaic analysis. Because this study is intended for comparison with Albert Lord's analysis of orally-composed poetry, I have conformed to his practice in his doctoral dissertation and its published version, *The Singer of Tales*.15

In analyzing the passage I made use of what is known as a "key word in context," or KWIC concordance,16 which Jess Bessinger has pointed out, "dramatically displays together many formulaic sequences in a text."17 Chart Two is taken from my concordance. It shows the variety of ways in which the single formula glave odsicaše may be employed; the example taken from Chart One is marked with a star. Reading horizontally, each line of poetry is preceded and followed by the lines that precede and follow it in the text; citations are to page number and line number. The underlined expressions in Chart Two each recur at least once within the chart alone.

As the two charts suggest, this material is as formulaic as orally-composed poetry. The sample in Chart One includes 44 per cent formulas (phrases repeated verbatim elsewhere in the poetry), well above the various thresholds of 20 or 30 per cent proposed by Duggan and Lord, respectively,18 as indicative of oral composition. Moreover, my sample, like Lord's sample of oral poetry, is 100 per cent formulaic, i.e., composed entirely either of formulas or of phrases belonging to "formulaic systems."

The provenience of the Razgovor, however, is unambiguous: it was written in verse alternating with prose by a Franciscan monk on the Dalmatian coast in the 1750's. As Lord has pointed out in discussing Kačić, rhyme and stanzaic form are not characteristic of Parry's oral samples; they are restricted to written poetry.19 Yet some of Kačić's poetry, while remaining formulaic, is written in four-line stanzas of rhymed couplets.

What we see in Kačić is the conjunction of two traditions: the native formulaic style and ultimately foreign models of rhyme and stanzaic form; this is a "transitional" text. Portions of the Razgovor, however, are

15Lord's chart appears on page 46 of *The Singer of Tales*; the supporting evidence for his analysis may be found in his doctoral dissertation in the Archives of Harvard University.

16I owe many thanks to Professors Stephen M. Parrish and Joseph E. Grimes of Cornell University, to Philip H. Smith, Jr., of the University of Waterloo, Ontario, and to Peter Shames, formerly of the Office of Computing Services, Cornell, for advice and consultation on the preparation of my concordance. The project could not have been completed without the aid of a grant from the Cornell College of Arts and Sciences.


unrhymed but still formulaic, like the passage in Chart One, and are thus practically indistinguishable from oral verse. It is clear that "formulaic style by itself is a poor indicator of the compositional mode of a text. Even in the Yugoslav tradition upon which the oral-formulaic theory is based, there is no necessary connection between formulaic style and oral composition.

Of course, Joseph Duggan has rightly criticized Lord's method of analyzing only a short passage from a text and has chosen to examine complete texts. I have, for the purposes of this paper, eschewed Duggan's methodology because I wished to address myself directly to Lord's work, which has been the foundation of the oral-formulaic hypothesis. While I could not agree more that longer samples, e.g., complete texts, provide a better basis for formulaic analysis, such studies of Old French epic can only establish more accurately the degree to which the chansons de geste are formulaic and do not prove that they were orally composed. Until better analyses of both the Yugoslav oral poetry and Serbo-Croatian "transitional" texts have been made, we cannot precisely define the differences between oral and written poetry and therefore cannot say with certainty to what extent the formulaic style of Old French epic represents a debt to oral tradition, much less that it proves that they were composed orally.

We must also be very careful not to compare whole texts of unequal length, because the longer the text, the greater the statistical probability of repetition, i.e., that we will find a phrase to be a formula, as both Duggan and John R. Allen have warned. Other words, probably only samples of equal length ought to be compared. I must reiterate, however, that until the formulaic character of Yugoslav poetry has been fully re-examined, no amount of attention to statistical methodology will suffice to demonstrate the oral provenience of Old French texts.

A further problem with the application of Milman Parry's oral-formulaic hypothesis to the chansons de geste is the scant attention which has been paid to Parry's notion of "economy," or "thrift." For Parry, a necessary characteristic of oral poetry is that the poetic repertoire generally supply only one formula for a given combination of lexical and metrical requirements; to this, Lord would add phonological and other contexts.

20Duggan, *Roland*, pp. 19-20. However, Duggan avoids the difficult question of defining formulaic systems, especially when comparing the very different Yugoslav and Old French metrical systems, by restricting his analyses to formulas, that is, phrases repeated more or less verbatim.

21I am currently working on this problem; moreover, Lord mentions in "Perspectives," p. 189, that Kenneth Goldman is analyzing Yugoslav oral poetry, using the statistical methods Duggan has suggested.


23Lord, Singer, pp. 50 ff.
The notion of economy is the raison d'être of formulaic style for the oral poet. The lack of ambiguity in the choice of a phrase to fill out a given line enables the oral poet to think ahead under the immense pressures of oral composition. Economy is thus a consequence not only of the exigencies of the metrical scheme, but of the very nature of oral composition. Thus, if a formulaic poem lacks economy, as does La Chanson de Roland, then it is unlikely that the poem could have been composed orally.

The notion of economy has contributed to the assertion that close reading is an inappropriate critical approach to a formulaic text. After all, if only one formula can fit a given lexical and metrical context, then the poet cannot have sought for le mot juste. On the other hand, in a written formulaic text that lacks economy, the poet was able to choose freely and intentionally among a variety of expressions to suit a given context. Thus, even apart from the question of oral composition, the widely recognized lack of economy in the chansons de geste leaves us free to interpret the poems according to much the same canons as we would apply to works of undisputed written provenience.

An excellent case in point is the use of irony. No authentic oral poem with which I am familiar employs a formula ironically. Since irony often involves a disjunction between a phrase and its context, the principle of economy theoretically precludes this uniquely literary device. An example from the Prise d'Orange, the most formulaic of the chansons de geste analyzed by Duggan, illustrates the rich possibilities open to a literate poet who has the leisure to manipulate at will the traditional diction lent him by oral poetry. In line 670, Guillaume, obviously very upset by his encounter with the fabulously beautiful Orable, greets her with the formulaic phrase, "Cil Dex vos saut." Almost as if she were correcting him, Orable replies, "Mahom vos saut" (v. 672). It is no wonder that after the disguised Guillaume has said Dex three times and Guïelin has said it once that Orable asks them where they are from! She must suspect that they are Christians, and although she plays along with the ruse, in character as a ferme fatale, she does not ask about her husband, even pro forma, despite the fact that Guillaume and his companions claim to have come from him. The subtlety and sophistication of the characterization of Orable, enhanced here by the ironic use of formula, is reminiscent more of romance than of epic. The poet goes on to describe Guillaume's words as "les estranges

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24 Duggan has pointed this out in Roland, p. 201, although his interpretation of this fact differs from mine.

25 Perhaps the most influential article expressing this critical stance is F. M. Combellack, "Milman Parry and Homeric Artistry," Comparative Literature, 11 (1965), pp. 193-208, but he is by no means alone in taking this position.

26 Duggan, Roland, p. 25.

mesaige" (v. 719), and Orable answers, "bien sai vostre langaige. / Quiex hom est dont Guillemes Fierebrace?" (vv. 721-722) If I am right about how much Orable knows and the extent to which she is playing along with Guillaume, then the poet is fully exploiting the potential for double entendre in these lines. This is a far cry from the techniques of the oral poetry with which I am familiar.

Duggan has called attention to a similar manipulation of formula for purposes of characterization in the *Chanson de Roland*.28 Blanchandrin addresses Charlemagne politely in the latter's own religious terms: "Salvet seiez de Deu" (v. 123).29 When he addresses his own pagan monarch Marsile, he says: "Sals seiez de Mahun" (v. 416). Ganelon, however, uses the wrong formula, doubtless contributing to Marsile's rage later on: "Salvez seiez de Deu" (v. 428). Unlike Guillaume, Ganelon knows exactly what he is doing and deliberately insults Marsile.

Duggan goes on to suggest that the style of the *Roland* is distinctive, in that it juxtaposes formulas rather than individual words to produce literary effects. The style thus seems to be genuinely transitional, in that literary effects, such as irony, that are impossible for the authentic oral poet, are achieved by the manipulation of traditional formulas, rather than of individual words in the more distinctively literate style of the romances.

Finally, the literate nature of the *Chanson de Roland* is perhaps most apparent in the evidence that the poet was learned. The Latinisms of the poem are pointed out by Le Gentil: "On a constaté que declinet aurait alors son sens habituel et qu’il est bien rendu par un présent. Dernière remarque: la forme latine Turoldus ne doit pas surprendre autant qu’on l’a dit, associée qu’elle est à un mot d’école comme declinet. Il y a bien d’autres latinismes dans le poème, en particulier dans la dernière prière de Roland."30

Moreover, at least one of the literary commonplaces described by E. R. Curtius, the *locus amœnus*, is found in the *Roland*. "Its minimal ingredients comprise a tree (or several trees), a meadow, and a spring or brook."31 The hill on which Roland dies is described by the phrases "Mult halt les arbres" (v. 2271), "desuz un pin" (v. 2375), "l’erbe verte" (v. 2273), and "un’ ewe curant" (v. 2225). Thus, the earthly location of Roland's entry into Paradise is described in the conventional literary terms of the *locus amœnus*, often associated with the earthly Paradise.

28 Duggan, Roland, pp. 115-116.
The religious themes of the poem have often led critics to posit a clerical poet, or at least redactor, of the Roland. The formulaic style of the poem may be accounted for in terms of a core of archaic traditional oral narrative, which a literate redactor has adapted to his own literary ends. This conception of the poem is strongly supported by Robert A. Hall, Jr.'s discovery of linguistic strata of different ages within the poem. He suggests that "the linguistic evidence . . . characterizes the Oxford version as a rifacemento of an earlier work . . . . The task of the last redactor . . . must have been that of a re-worker, and especially of a provider of alternative laisses, containing a different approach and affording a different basis for the events narrated."  

Although Hall does not deal directly with the issue of oral influences, the archaic assonances which he discerns in the poem might well have been preserved by oral transmission and taken up by the learned and literate redactor. Thus the last poet's technique shows a high degree of consistency: just as he achieves striking literary effects through the juxtaposition of formulas in ways not possible for the oral poets, he creates or borrows younger alternative laisses in order to create special effects through juxtaposition on a larger scale. Indeed, Duggan's strong case that the Baligant episode was originally a distinct poem leads one to suspect that here, too, the poet applied the technique of juxtaposition as a structural principle on a grand scale. I will explore the literary consequences of this conception of the laisses similaires and of the poem as a whole in a later essay. 

I have attempted to show that Serbo-Croatian poetry, like other literature, resists rigid categorization. There is no more a clear and unambiguous stylistic distinction between oral and written composition in Serbo-Croatian literature than there is in Old English, in Xhosa, or in Old French. The literate poet of the chanson de geste, then, writes formulaic poetry because the poetic vocabulary, or formulary, is at hand, and the expectations of his audience are conditioned by oral poetry. But literate composition adds new dimensions to formulaic technique. Unlike the oral poet, who is relatively restricted by the very principle of economy in diction without which he could not compose at all, the literate poet makes deliberate use of a given formula in a particular context. His work can thus admit of a close reading.

Rudy S. Spraycar  
Cornell University

33Duggan, Roland, p. 103 et passim.
If you will not believe me, let me tell of [the heroes] by name: the first, Ivan Grčić, one of the gallants from the borderland of Sinj, who chased the Turks around the river Cetina and cut off their heads and put them on the wall of Sinj, let him have praise and glory among lords and knights.


Supporting Evidence

1Cf. p. 9, v. 151 (ako li je napisati ne ćeš) and 15.81 (ako li ji ti poslati ne ćeš).

2Cf. note 1 and 17.159 (Kamo li mi); 128.65, 18.61, 16.102, 131.125, 6.9, and 18.68 (kada li se); 22.115 (i tako mi); 22.114 and 20.18 (Ah, tako mi), and 9.167 (A kad li se).

3Cf. note 1 and 15.79 and 16.124 (obraniti ne ćeš).

4Cf. 42.44 (Nije ono po imenu Zeče), 15.82 (gola ću te po vojsci voditi), and 22.129 (sve ćemo ji pod mač okrenuti).
5Cf. note 4 and 105.33 (ne bi ti ji), 105.60 (sve ćeš ti ji), 156.108 (evo tebe), 9.152 (evo tebi), and 11.79 (Evo, care).

6See 38.45: cf. note 4 and 42.13 (po Cetini tira); 105.36, 105.58, and 43.76 (po imenu zvati); and 19.91 (po podnevu bilo).

7Cf. 44.46 (A treći je Paviću dom Jure).

8See 43.15; cf. note 7.

9Cf. note 7 and 38.48 (Sorić don Stipana).

10Cf. 42.52 (od krajine silni arambaša), and 38.77 and 38.46 (od Kotara mlada kavalira).

11See 42.52; cf. 18.21 (od galija), 11.73 (od Epira), 38.36 (od Karina); 38.77, 38.46, 38.71, and 105.38 (od Kotara); 38.23 (od Mostara), 38.22 (od Vrgorca), and 43.33 (od Neretve).

12Cf. note 10.

13Cf. 42.46 (koji Turke po Cetini tuče); 41.14, 38.40, and 38.51 (koji Turke pod mač okrećaše); 43.7 (koji rada iz gore aždaje); cf. also 42.24 (siče Turke po Cetini ravnoj).

14See note 13, and 40.14, 41.27, 38.57, 42.50, 40.34, 46.77, 42.5, 39.108, 42.56, and 44.5.

15Cf. notes 6 and 13 and 42.46 (po Cetini tuče); cf. also 42.24 (po Cetini ravnoj).

16See 43.10.

17See note 16.

18See note 16 and 39.92, 41.34, 45.22, 38.72, 41.5, 39.109, 17.179, 41.51, 38.65, 45.44, 45.47, 42.6, 38.47, 7.70, 41.41, 45.59; see also Chart Two.

19Cf. 45.23 (ter ji meće gradu na bedene), 16.130 (ter ga meće gradu na bedene), and 15.62 (ter ji meću gradu na bedene).

20See note 19; cf. 150.122 (ter se biše) and 40.42 (ter ga slave).

21Cf. note 19 and 14.12 (gradu na bedene); cf. also 146.48 and 150.121 (junak na junaka), 13.186 and 146.47 (konjik na konjika), and 157.50 and 44.60 (pisma na poštene).

22Cf. 156.125 (povrati mu krunu i kraljestvo), 149.94 (već mu šalje mite i darove), and 155.59 (ljubiju mu skuta i kolina); cf. also 9.149 (Nek mi dade Kroju u Epiru).
23 Cf. note 22 and 10.25 (kako mu je), 21.54 (Ali mu je), and 38.26 (bila mu je); cf. also 149.59 (neki ti dade).

24 See 43.65 and 40.10; cf. also note 22.

25 Cf. 18.21 (od gali i od galiča), 18.22 (od demija i od ormanica), and 21.101 (od bubanja i od tambalasa); cf. also 16.142 (i pod puškom i pod britkim čordam).

26 Cf. 40.15 (i gospoda) and 146.33 (Kad gospoda).

27 Cf. note 25 and 7.79 (i brez kralja).
CHART TWO

silni vitez Močivuna biše, / često turske glave odsicaše. / Veseli se kotarska krajin, koji s Radom u četu idaše, / često turske glave odsicaše:/ on bijaše roda Ravlijića, po imenu Ivu Vujićića, / i on turske glave odsicaše,/ k Vrgorcu ji gradu donašaše. Često Turkom na mejdan idaahu/ i ruse jim glave odsicaahu/ umeću se s ramena kamenom òko Turkome po Cetini tira/ i ruse jim glave odsicaše:/ umeću se s ramena kamenom *

koji Turkom po Cetini tira/ i ruse jim glave odsicaše/ ter ji meće Sinju na bedene, po imenu Marketić Antuna, / koji turske glave odsicaše/ ter ji meće gradu na bedene. po imenu Tintor barjakta, / koji turske glave odsicaše/ Beča grada rata žestokoga, u Petrovu polju odgojena, / koji turske glave odsicaše/ i carevu zemlju porobiše: od Kotara po izbor konjica, / koji turske glave odsicaše/ velikoga rata od Kandije. po imenu Nakiću Matiju, / koji turske glave odsicaše./ I odgoli zmaja žestokoga


do Turkom rane zadadoše, / na mejdanu glave odsicaše, / kadune jim u rod odpraviše, koji Turkom rane zadadoše, / na mejdanu glave odsicaše. / Jedan serdar Pavasović biše koji često na međan idaše, / na mejdanu glave odsicaše. / Šinju grade, gnizdo sokolovo

Oprostite, od Sinja levente, / koji turske glave odsicaše, / Melovan je teško ostario, Oprostite, kotarske levente, / koji turske glave odsicaše, / sve vas želim zvati po imenu, i njegovi mladi vitezovi, / mnoge oni glave odsikoše/ ter ji meću gradu na bedene.

koji Turkom rane zadadoše, / na mejdanu glave odsicaše, / kadune jim u rod odpraviše, koji Turkom rane zadadoše, / na mejdanu glave odsicaše. / Jedan serdar Pavasović biše koji često na međan idaše, / na mejdanu glave odsicaše. / Šinju grade, gnizdo sokolovo