

The Milman Parry Collection of Oral Literature

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When he assembled the recordings and texts that today form the core of the collection bearing his name, Milman Parry was pursuing very different goals than many, if not most, folklorists and collectors of his time. Partly, perhaps, that is because he was not himself a folklorist by profession. At the time of his death in 1935, Parry was Assistant Professor of Greek and Latin at Harvard University, specializing in the study of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. When he set out for what was then the Kingdom of Yugoslavia in the summer of 1933, he was interested above all in testing a hypothesis he had formed about the way in which the Homeric poems had been composed—a hypothesis that later became known as the “Oral-Formulaic Theory.”¹ Parry approached his task as a scientist and an experimentalist. While others might have focused on discovering previously unknown epics, Parry deliberately spent time recording multiple versions of songs he had already documented, so as to understand better the manner in which they were recomposed in performance. Of course, like any collector, Parry looked for the most knowledgeable and proficient informants he could find. But instead of always striving to record such informants at their best, Parry not infrequently devised ways of disrupting performances or asked singers to perform novel tasks (for instance, to translate a song from one language into another).² Again, his purpose was to learn how master craftsmen handle the tools of their art.

Parry nevertheless managed to create one of the most comprehensive archives of Bosnian, Croatian, and Serbian oral traditions in existence. In the course of two field campaigns—an initial survey in the summer of 1933 and an extended expedition from June 1934 through August 1935—he collected a vast number of recordings and written documents. There are 12,554

¹ For a thorough discussion of the “Oral-Formulaic Theory,” sometimes also called the “Parry-Lord Theory,” and its background in earlier scholarship, see Foley 1988. Nagy (1996:19) cautions that “It is a major misunderstanding . . . to speak of ‘the oral theory’ of Milman Parry or Albert Lord.” Nagy’s point is that Parry and Lord studied the empirical realities of living oral traditions, so “it would be more reasonable to say that Parry and Lord had various *theories* about the affinity of Homeric poetry with what we know about oral poetry” (20).

² For an account of how Parry deliberately disrupted the recitation of material by his most talented singer, Avdo Međedović, see Bynum 1980:x-xi. Kolsti (1990) provides a detailed study of Salih Ugljanin’s efforts to translate, at Parry’s request, songs from Albanian into “Bosnian,” and vice versa.

individual items in Parry's collection.³ Of these, 1,163 represent epic songs of the sort in which Parry was primarily interested. The remainder are ballads, short lyric songs, instrumental performances, and conversations with singers, which often include embedded songs or folktales. (Parry referred to these recorded conversations as *pričanja*, a word that translates roughly as "talking.") The largest single component of the Parry materials is a body of some 11,260 so-called "women's songs" (*ženske pjesme*)—the term, which has been a fixture in the classification of the region's traditions since the work of the nineteenth-century collector Vuk Stefanović Karadžić, is an umbrella for a variety of non-epic songs (ballads, shorter lyrics, ritual songs including laments, and songs tied to the agricultural cycle or household labor) that do not belong to an exclusively male repertoire.⁴ The high proportion of "women's songs" among the materials Parry collected is due to a unique set of opportunities that presented themselves in the predominantly Muslim town of Gacko, in today's Bosnia-Herzegovina, where Parry not only found reliable informants willing to assist him in the collection of texts, but was even able to record local women in a private setting in April and May of 1935.⁵

Parry collected materials by a variety of means, including dictation and the solicitation of "autograph" texts (texts written out by the singers themselves).⁶ By far the most valuable items in his collection, however, are the field recordings he made with a custom-built phonographic apparatus commissioned from the Sound Specialties Company in Waterbury, Connecticut, and built by Lincoln Thompson. Parry had experimented with a Parlograph, a dictation device that recorded onto wax cylinders, during his initial trip in 1933, but he found that the machine could not sufficiently isolate the singer's voice from the sound of musical accompaniment (Figure 1). Thompson's device, powered by battery, consisted of an electric microphone and an amplifying unit connected to two embossing machines that recorded directly onto blank, twelve-inch phonograph discs (Figure 2). Each side of a disc accommodated only about three and a half minutes, but by toggling back and forth between the two machines, Parry was able to capture continuous recordings of uninterrupted performances. (Epic performances, as one might expect, could go on for hours.) Parry eventually recorded 3,584 double-sided discs, which translates to roughly 415 hours of recorded song, dictation, and conversation, including some 270 hours of epic performance.⁷

³ This and subsequent figures on the composition of Parry's collection are taken from an unpublished document in the Milman Parry Collection of Oral Literature, titled "The Milman Parry Collection of Southslavic Texts: Publication Plan." This document, which is signed by Albert Lord and dated January 1950, indicates that of Parry's 12,554 texts, 758 were recorded and 11,796 were collected by dictation (or as "autographs," on which see below). The body of recorded texts includes 367 epics, 260 "women's songs" (see below for this designation), 115 conversations, and 16 instrumental songs. 796 epics were collected by dictation, as were 11,000 "women's songs."

⁴ On the category of "women's songs," see Lord's comments at Bartók and Lord 1951:247-48; on page 253, Lord notes that there is no standard classification recognized by the singers themselves.

⁵ For a description of the special circumstances of Parry's work in Gacko, see Bartók and Lord 1951:249-52.

⁶ On the unreliability of the "autograph" texts, see Lord 1954:8-9; Kay 1995:xvii.

⁷ Of these 3,584 discs, 2,341 document epic performances, 275 feature recordings of "women's songs," 960 contain recorded conversations with singers, and 8 record instrumental performances.



Fig. 1. Nikola Vujnović, singing for Parry's Parlograph, Dubrovnik, 1934. Photo used with the permission of the Milman Parry Collection of Oral Literature.



Fig. 2. Parry's phonograph recording apparatus in use in the village of Kijevo (Croatia). The amplifier and embossing units can be seen on the left side of the image; a singer, Ante Cicvarić, seated before the microphone, is visible in the doorway on the right. Photo used with the permission of the Milman Parry Collection of Oral Literature.

Parry intended to use his materials as the basis for a study of the nature of oral poetry.⁸ Tragically, he died some three months after returning from the field. His vast collection then passed into the care of the Harvard University Library. Responsibility for putting the thousands of recordings and texts in order fell to Albert B. Lord, who had studied under Parry as an undergraduate and worked for him as a field assistant during much of the 1934-35 expedition. Lord's 1960 book *The Singer of Tales* (a revised version of the doctoral dissertation he submitted to Harvard's Department of Comparative Literature in 1949) fulfilled Parry's ambition for a general study on the nature of oral epic poetry.⁹ Lord also conducted significant fieldwork of his own. In the autumn of 1937, traveling on foot and horseback in northern Albania, he collected by dictation over 100 Albanian epics. He returned to Yugoslavia in 1950 and '51, recording (on wire spools rather than aluminum discs) in many of the same places he had visited with Parry, as well as in a number of new locations, especially in the Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia. In 1958 and '59, equipped now with a reel-to-reel tape recorder, he collected material in Bulgaria. In the 1960's, Lord made five collecting trips to Yugoslavia with David E. Bynum as well as one on his own. Together with Parry's materials, these various collections compose the Milman Parry Collection of Oral Literature (MPCOL), which is housed in Room C of Harvard University's Widener Library; they are supplemented by assorted ancillary materials, including photographs, correspondence, and copies of important manuscripts from other archives. Room C is also home to two important collections of Greek folklore, the James A. Notopoulos Collection (recordings of Greek folk

⁸ Parry gives an account of his purposes in the first pages of a manuscript he titled *Ćor Huso* ("Blind Huso"; the name refers to a famous singer from the region of Kolašin, in Montenegro); this part of the manuscript is published in Parry 1971:439-40.

⁹ A second edition of *The Singer of Tales*, with an introduction by Stephen Mitchell and Gregory Nagy, Curators of the MPCOL, was published by Harvard University Press in 2000 (Lord 2000 [1960]). A fully electronic version, integrating digitized audio, texts, and photographs, is planned for web publication.

music and narrative poetry, as well as related manuscripts) and the Whitman/Rinvolucri Collection (audio recordings of Karagiozis shadow plays, with sundry other materials).¹⁰

Transforming this mass of material into an archive that could be easily navigated and utilized by researchers presented a significant challenge. When Lord initially assumed responsibility for Parry's collection, he had no comprehensive index, nor even a complete set of transcriptions. Many of the recordings had been transcribed in the field by Parry's Hercegovinian assistant, Nikola Vujnović, but many more had not. Lord used his 1937 trip to Albania as an opportunity to bring more discs to Dubrovnik in order to be transcribed there by Vujnović. From 1938 to 1940, Vujnović worked at Harvard to complete the task. (All of Parry's recordings, with the exception of a few songs in Albanian or Turkish, have now been transcribed, as well as many of Lord's recordings from the 1950's.) A rudimentary card catalogue was compiled in 1938-39 by John Hastings under Lord's direction.

Given the enormous volume of material, translating and publishing the collection in its entirety was out of the question. Lord planned to publish as much of Parry's material as possible in a series of paired volumes, each pair comprising one volume of transcriptions and one of translations. Some seven volumes eventually appeared, but the bulk of the material remains accessible only in the original archival documents.¹¹ Since 2002, the curatorial staff has been working to digitize the contents of the archive. To date, roughly 630 aluminum discs, 25 reel-to-reel tapes, and nearly 10,000 manuscript and typescript pages have been digitally reformatted. These digital materials are available to researchers through the MPCOL's open-access database, a link to which is provided on the Collection's website (<http://chs.harvard.edu/mpc>).¹² Additionally, a collection of approximately 750 photographs documenting the fieldwork of Parry and Lord has recently been digitized and added to the materials available through Harvard's Visual Information Access catalogue (<http://via.lib.harvard.edu>). From the VIA search page, these materials may most easily be accessed by searching for "Milman Parry Collection of Oral Literature" in the "Repository" field.

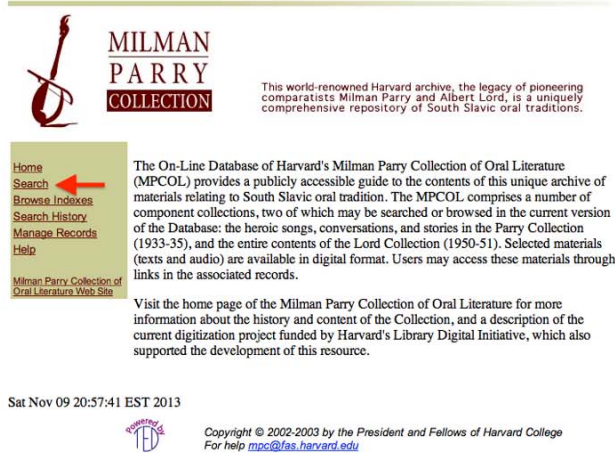
The MPCOL database (to be kept distinct from the VIA catalogue) allows users to search a subset of the Collection's audio recordings and texts by singer's name, title, date of collection, place of collection, or item number. Limiting the search by "Digital Audio" or "Digital Text" will retrieve only records containing links to digitized recordings or texts. Limiting in this manner a

¹⁰ Brief notices about these collections may be found in the pages of this journal at Beaton 1986:118. For an inventory of the contents of the Whitman/Rinvolucri Collection, see Appendix 1 of Stavrakopoulou 1994.

¹¹ Lord's original plan, as outlined in the document cited above (note 3), called for at least twenty volumes. The seven that eventually appeared, in one form or another, are Lord 1953, Lord 1954, Bynum and Lord 1974a, Bynum and Lord 1974b, Bynum 1979, Bynum 1980, Bynum 1993. The bibliography is complicated by the fact that the volumes in the series *Serbocroatian Heroic Songs* were not numbered in order of their appearance but according to a geographical scheme, so that gaps appear in the series numbers; moreover, some volumes also bear numbers in the Publications of the Milman Parry Collection, Texts and Translation Series. Bynum 1993 belongs to a different series altogether (Milman Parry Studies in Oral Tradition, published by Garland Press).

¹² From the MPCOL homepage, the database can be accessed by clicking on "Collection Database" in the sidebar. Images of manuscript pages are delivered as JPEG files through Harvard University's Page Delivery Service. Audio recordings are delivered as Real Audio files. These compressed formats are used only for deliverables; archival digital objects are stored as either TIFF (page images) or WAV (audio) files in Harvard's Digital Repository Service.

search that uses only the wildcard character (*) as a search term will return a list of all records containing links to digitized audio or texts. The following sequences of screenshots illustrate multiple ways to retrieve the recording or text of a song I discuss briefly below (PN 662, Alija Fjuljanin’s “Halil Hrnjičić i Miloš Keserdžija”).



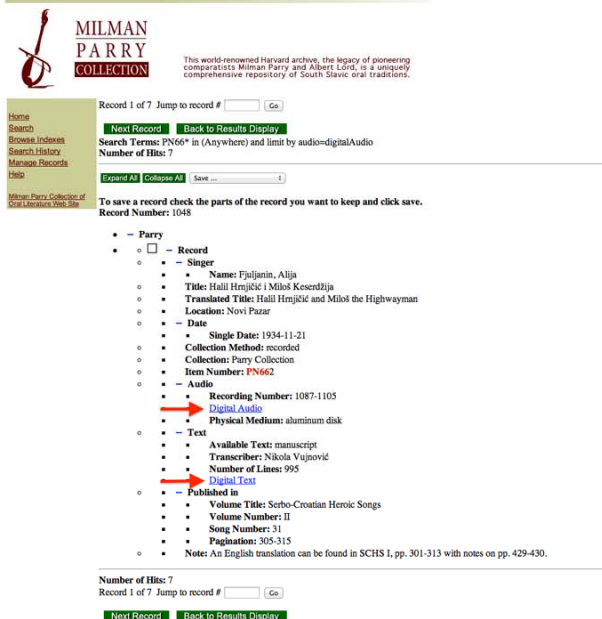
1.



2.



3.



4.

Figs. 3.1.1-4. Screenshots 1-4 above represent the first of three possible searches for PN 662, Alija Fjuljanin’s “Halil Hrnjičić i Miloš Keserdžija.”

1. Screenshot 1: Search form with fields for 'Search for', 'in', and 'Limit by Collection Method'. The search criteria are 'Fjuljanin' in 'Singer' and 'Milos' in 'Title'. The search button is highlighted with a red arrow.

2. Screenshot 2: Search results for 'Fjuljanin' and 'Milos' in the 'Singer' field. The results show 1 hit for item PN662, titled 'Halil Hrnjičić i Miloš Keserdžija' by Fjuljanin, Alija, from Novi Pazar, 1934-11-21. The 'Full Record Display' button is highlighted with a red arrow.

Figs. 3.2.1-2. Screenshots 1-2 above represent the second of three possible searches for PN 662, Alija Fjuljanin's "Halil Hrnjičić i Miloš Keserdžija."

1. Screenshot 1: Search form with fields for 'Search for', 'in', and 'Limit by Collection Method'. The search criteria are '1934-11-21' in 'Date'. The search button is highlighted with a red arrow.

2. Screenshot 2: Search results for '1934-11-21' in the 'Date' field. The results show 6 hits, with the first two items (PN661 and PN662) displayed. The 'Full Record Display' button for the first result is highlighted with a red arrow.

Figs. 3.3.1-2. Screenshots 1-2 above represent the third of three possible searches for PN 662, Alija Fjuljanin's "Halil Hrnjičić i Miloš Keserdžija."

At present the database covers only a subset of the MPCOL's holdings. It includes the data compiled by Matthew Kay for his published index of the Collection's epic materials (Kay 1995)—thus covering the epic songs recorded by Parry and conversations with the singers, but omitting, for example, the "women's songs"—as well as records for the materials collected by Lord in 1950-51. The available digital objects represent an even smaller subset of the Collection. Digitization efforts concentrated initially on those materials quoted or referenced in Lord's *The Singer of Tales* (Lord 2000 [1960]; digital audio or text is available for every archival item mentioned in Lord's book). More materials are being digitized as resources permit. The curators intend eventually to make the entire contents of the archive available through the website and database, but progress is dependent on the availability of funding and faces significant technical

challenges, particularly in connection with the aluminum discs.¹³ The translation of so much material presents challenges of a different sort. The language of the texts can present difficulties even for native speakers. The biggest problem, however, is one of scale: only by some version of “crowdsourcing” is anything more than a small part of the MPCOL’s holdings likely to be made available in translation.

I am occasionally asked whether there is anything “new” to be learned from the materials in the MPCOL. This question is usually put to me by classicists, who are really asking whether there is anything more to be added to Parry’s and Lord’s accounts of Homeric poetry on the basis of these materials. (The questioners may not actually accept those accounts, but that is beside the point.) Understood thus, the question is obviously prejudicial: it assumes that the inherent value of the materials, apart from their comparative importance, is negligible. In *Ćor Huso*, Parry admits that “it was least of all for the material itself” that he made his collection.¹⁴ And yet he would surely have insisted on the intrinsic interest and importance of the materials he gathered in the field. There are in fact many things still to be learned from the MPCOL’s holdings, both for specialists in the represented traditions and for those seeking comparative insights.

Specialists will find that there are significant subsets of the Parry materials that have never been fully explored or utilized beyond a mere fraction of their potential. The *pričanja*—conversations with singers—are perhaps the clearest example. Parry, wishing to understand how traditional songs were embedded in the lives of those who sang and listened to them, solicited lengthy biographical narratives from his informants. His Hercegovinian assistant, Nikola Vujnović, who conducted the interviews, routinely asked wide-ranging questions about the singers’ lives, customs in their communities, and so on. These conversations could provide fascinating material for a social history of the Balkans in the early twentieth century—a place and time of obvious importance to European history more generally. Only short selections from the interviews have ever been published; they await detailed and systematic investigation. The “women’s songs”—another extraordinarily rich component of the Parry archive—have received somewhat more attention. Lord collaborated with Béla Bartók on a study of 75 of these songs, mainly short lyrics; their volume includes musical transcriptions and a lengthy musical analysis by Bartók, as well as transcriptions of the texts, translations, and textual notes by Lord.¹⁵ More recently, Aida Vidan has published an illuminating monograph that includes texts and translations of 40 ballads together with selected variants, excerpts from interviews with the singers, and a detailed discussion of the material from multiple points of view (Vidan 2003).

¹³ The grooves on the aluminum discs are very shallow, averaging about 10 microns in depth. By comparison, the most common recording format of Parry’s time, the 78-rpm shellac or lacquer disc, had a typical groove depth of about 75 microns, while a modern long-playing (LP) 33¹/₃-rpm vinyl disc has grooves about 25-35 microns in depth. (I owe these figures to Carl Haber, Senior Scientist in the Physics Division at Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory.) Because of the shallow groove depth of the Parry discs, phonographic styluses tend to skip during playback, with the result that digitization often requires multiple takes and subsequent editing of the resulting audio files.

¹⁴ Parry 1971:439. Parry also indicates in the same passage that he intended his collection to be a resource to “other students of Southslavic oral literature”—that is, he recognized the value of the tradition he was studying in its own right.

¹⁵ Bartók and Lord 1951, reprinted as Bartók and Lord 1978.

Taken together, these two volumes cover just over 1% of the “women’s songs” in Parry’s collection: a vast amount of material remains untouched. Even among the epics, which have always received more attention than anything else, scholars will find that there are significant discoveries yet to be made.¹⁶ Lord’s Albanian collection, which includes some of the longest Albanian epics ever recorded but remains unpublished, stands out in this regard. An introduction that will hopefully attract much-needed attention to this remarkable corpus is planned.¹⁷ The relative under-utilization of all of the materials in the MPCOL has historically been due to the difficulties of access noted above.

Comparatists, too—and even Homerists—stand to benefit a great deal from the increased availability of the MPCOL materials, especially the recordings. As an example of what may be learned from the recordings, I hope I may be permitted to offer a project I have recently undertaken in collaboration with Anna Bonifazi. Taking for our case study a song performed by Alija Fjuljanin in November, 1934 (PN 662, “Halil Hrnjičić i Miloš Keserdžija” [“Halil Hrnjičić and Miloš the Highwayman”]), we have endeavored to understand the relationship between the musical aspects of performance (melody, rhythm, vocal timbre) and the text.¹⁸ Our investigation has underscored the extent to which music and words are both meaning-bearing components of an overarching communicative event. While there is no strict “grammar” of sound—the same musical feature may flexibly serve a variety of purposes—it is possible to identify a variety of non-verbal techniques that Fjuljanin uses to enrich the meaning of his text. Melodic and rhythmic discontinuities and manipulations of vocal timbre serve as narrative and emotional landmarks, helping to guide the listener’s experience of the tale. They also permit the singer to express implicit evaluations of the content of his narrative, as in the following excerpt in which Fjuljanin uses these techniques to convey his distaste for the morally questionable behavior of one of his female characters:¹⁹

uh kad Haljil sabra lakrdiju
 tek se stade crnjo pomerati
 vi devojke fištala je guja
 đe mu daje vino i rakiju
 ponajprije cura posrkuje 480
 pa posljenke dodaje Halji(lu)
 da je njemu slađe piti vi(no)
 i to joj se malo učinelo

¹⁶ For studies devoted to specific epics from the MPCOL, see Fisher 1990, Goldman 1990, and Kolsti 1990 (all originally Harvard dissertations advised by Albert Lord), as well as Erdely 1995 (musical transcription and analysis of recordings from Bihać) and Foley 2004.

¹⁷ A collaborative project to produce an introduction to Lord’s Albanian collection is now underway. The collaborators are John Kolsti, Zymer Neziri, and Nicola Scaldaferrri, under the general direction of Nicola Scaldaferrri.

¹⁸ We have to date published two preliminary studies (Bonifazi and Elmer 2012a, 2012b). A monograph is in preparation.

¹⁹ See the discussion of PN 669, ll. 479ff., at Bonifazi and Elmer 2012b:242-43.

kako bliže pa se primaćije
 a na krilo dupe naticu(je) 485
 od sebe je Haljil odgurkuje
 mić se curo grom te pogodijo
 mene nije do tvoga šikljan(ja)
 drugi su me jadi pogodi—lji
 a nesmijem kumstvo ištetiti 490

Oh! when Halil understood these words
 just then that black one began to move away.
 But look at the girl—may a serpent devour her—
 how she gives him wine and brandy.
 First the girl sips it, 480
 then afterward she gives it to Halil
 so that he finds the wine sweeter to drink.
 And that seemed little enough to her.
 When she moves herself closer
 and slides her bottom into his lap, 485
 Halil pushes her from him.
 “Get away, girl, may lightning strike you!
 I don’t care for your friskiness;
 other woes have afflicted me,
 and I cannot offend against my *kum*.” 490

The transcription above has been marked up with graphic signs—shading, underlining, and so on—that indicate the various non-verbal devices Fjuljanin uses to add emotional color to this section of his song.²⁰ An audio clip of this section of Fjuljanin’s performance accompanies this article.²¹

In this case of the episode I have just quoted, the emotional standpoint of the singer coincides with that of his main character, a convergence that brings me to one of the most fascinating purposes to which such techniques may be applied. Like many forms of oral narrative, Fjuljanin’s medium is one in which the voice of the narrator alternates with the quoted speech of characters. The distinction between the two is generally very carefully maintained, and it is often marked by performative features, especially manipulations of the melody. In some cases, however, these same performative features can actually blur the distinction: what is linguistically marked as the narrator’s speech is performed in a manner suggestive of the mimeticism and emotional investment typically displayed



Audio clip of Alija Fjuljanin singing “Halil Hrnjičić i Miloš Keserdžija” (“Halil Hrnjičić and Miloš the Highwayman”), November, 1934 (MPCOL, PN 662). [http://journal.oraltradition.org/issues/28ii/elmer#myGallery-picture\(11\)](http://journal.oraltradition.org/issues/28ii/elmer#myGallery-picture(11))

²⁰ For a complete description of the system of graphic signs used here, see Bonifazi and Elmer 2012b: 237-38.

²¹ The recording is used with the permission of the Milman Parry Collection of Oral Literature.

by characters' speech.²² At moments such as these, epic song achieves what some might consider its truest ambition, namely, to bridge the gap between the present of performance and the heroic past.

I should underscore the fact that Dr. Bonifazi and I are both primarily Homerists. We have undertaken this investigation of Fjuljanin's performative style in order to gain a better understanding of those aspects of Homeric performance for which the textual record provides no direct evidence. Of course, the study of a tradition such as Fjuljanin's can only ever suggest possibilities with regard to Homeric poetry—secure conclusions are beyond reach—but the possibilities themselves are illuminating. With regard to still-living traditions, the value of Parry's and Lord's recordings is even greater since insights gained from those materials about the expressive potential of non-verbal features can be tested against direct observation of performance.

It may be that the recordings in the MPCOL have an even broader range of applicability, in excess even of the study of oral poetry narrowly conceived. Parry viewed his project in the most general terms as the study of oral style; style he defined as “the form of thought.”²³ A newly emerging field—the cognitive study of oral traditions—suggests that a corpus of recorded oral song and poetry such as that represented by the MPCOL does indeed have the potential to shed a unique light on fundamental aspects of cognition. Cognitive linguistics relies on the use of “natural-speech” corpora to track the workings of the mind as made manifest by language. The MPCOL—to say nothing of other, similar archives—includes an extensive corpus of “natural poetic speech”: documentation of the use of stylized speech patterns by hundreds of language users as they recall learned material, organize their thoughts, and communicate with their audience. A recent conference on “Oral Poetics and Cognitive Science,” organized by Mihailo Antović and Cristóbal Pagán Cánovas and held at the Freiburg Institute for Advanced Study, has focused attention on the value of such a corpus for studying issues such as the relation between long-term and working memory, among others.²⁴ In their present form, of course, the Parry materials are not directly utilizable for such purposes. Complete digitization would be only the first step. The recordings must also be synchronized with the transcriptions, and the transcriptions themselves must be converted into a machine-readable format (to date, digitization of the Parry texts has meant only the capturing of digital images of the manuscripts) and marked up with the metadata necessary for linguistic research. This would be an expensive and ambitious project. But it would occupy an exciting position at the intersection of the digital humanities and the sciences, and it would open up whole new avenues of research.

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²² See Bonifazi and Elmer 2012b:244-45, where we compare the notion of “free indirect discourse” as described by theorists of written discourse.

²³ Parry 1971:441.

²⁴ Cristóbal Pagán Cánovas, *per litteras*. I regret that I was not able to attend this meeting myself. See the conference website at <http://sites.google.com/site/oralpoetcogsci/home>.

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