Afterword: Performing through the Past: Ethnophilology and Oral Tradition
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AFTERWORD

Performing through the Past

_Ethnophilology and Oral Tradition_¹

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They say I’m overrated, musicians really hate it
My name is Run, I’m number one, It’s very complicated
It’s Tricky to rock a rhyme, to rock a rhyme that’s right on time
It’s Tricky . . . It’s Tricky, Tricky, Tricky, Tricky

_Run D.M.C._

_Vask árvaks,_
_bark ond saman_
_méð málþjóns_
_morginverkum,_
_hlóðk lofköst_
_panns længi stendar_
_óbrogtjarn_
_í bragi túni._

[So I rise up early
to erect my rhyme,
My tongue toils,
A servant at his task;
I pile the praise stones,
The poem rises,
My labour is not lost,
Long may my words live.]

_Egil Skallagrímsson²_

During the past three decades, folklorists have focused considerable attention on the study of traditional performance, proposing that an understanding of folk expressions derive in large part from an

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understanding of the emergent nature of traditional expression in
dynamic performative contexts (Lord 1960; Bauman 1977; Hymes 1962
and 1975; Toelken 1969). The underlying idea of what might be called
a “performance centered” approach to the study of tradition is that the
meanings for performer and audiences alike are created dynamically,
and arise during performance. Meaning, accordingly, is contingent and
neither predetermined nor absolute. The important theoretical
advances in the study of traditional expression attendant this emphasis
on performance have led to significant changes in the way in which we
understanding variation and persistence (Lord 1960; Foley 1990), and
the ways in which we consider genre (Dégh 1962; Holbek 1987); they
have allowed us to explore aspects of memory (Rubin 1995; Siikala
1990), and have helped us address the role of local and global political
considerations that often inform traditional expression (Mills 1990;
Reynolds 1995; Bendix 1997). In this model, traditional expression
becomes rightfully linked to the historically situated performers and
audiences—tradition does not exist outside of the tradition partici-
pants—and our studies now acknowledge more than ever the embed-
dedness of traditional expressions in their performative contexts.

This emphasis on performance context, however, unfortunately led
some folklorists to conclude that this approach precluded the study of
earlier traditional expressions since, in many cases, these early records
were not linked in any way to descriptions of performance contexts, nor
did there appear to be much ancillary evidence concerning the meth-
ods and contexts for performance. Furthermore the dating and prove-
nance of these early texts was at times quite muddled. For some of these
“performance oriented” scholars, everything from classical and
medieval texts based in part on oral traditions through the great folklore
collections of the nineteenth century became suspect. This intellectual
development was somewhat surprising, since many of the early advances
in the study of performance were initiated by scholars primarily inter-
est in earlier traditions.

In addition to questions about the usefulness of earlier collections,
concerns were raised about the traditional nature of many of these early
texts and their relationship to oral tradition—for instance, since the
only records of the presumed performances were these literary ones,
did these texts truly reflect oral performance? One need only think of
Saxo the Grammarian’s twelfth century rewriting of Nordic legends to
recognize some of the difficulties confronting scholars of early tradi-
tions in light of the importance of performance studies. Not only did
Yet many likely extreme Philpotts's position, Saxo as on ers the latter either performance)-a based leading unfortunate among one accrue seem other performance.

At first glance, the difficulties confronting medieval, classical and other historically oriented scholars for recovering lost performances seem almost overwhelming. And because of these complexities that accrue to the study of early texts, the answer to the question of whether one could explore the dynamics of folk performance in earlier cultures through the study of the textual record was apparently “no.” This unfortunate conclusion, which gained considerable acceptance among many young folklorists in the 1980s and 1990s, led to a division—at least among students and at times among their teachers—between those who emphasized texts (read the past) and those who emphasized performance (read the present and the future). The study of performance was, of course, seen to be a far sexier enterprise than the study of old manuscripts.

Yet, the state of affairs is not nearly as bleak as some may have it, and the scholars who focus primarily on texts do have an opportunity to be sexy as well. Indeed, there exist numerous possibilities for the reconstructive enterprise of tracing aspects of performance in older texts. Of course, the division between text and performance was primarily an unfortunate misunderstanding of both the study of texts and the study of performances. This hypothetical division was premised on two misleading suppositions, namely that the study of performance was not based ultimately on a study of texts (the ethnographic recording of a performance)—a position that the writings of Clifford, Marcus and others should have dispelled (1986)—and that texts do not contain hints to either their own performance or to the performance of the expressions on which the texts are based. Perhaps one of the best refutations of this latter point is Terry Gunnell’s impressive rehabilitation of Bertha Philpotts’s ideas concerning the dramatic performance of Eddic poems as scripts for monologic or dialogic theatrical performance (Gunnell
1995; Phillpotts 1920). While Gunnell’s conclusions may not convince everyone, he does provide a model for using philological evidence coupled to an understanding of performance derived in large part from the study of contemporary traditions to propose a framework for the recovery of lost performances based on historical, cultural, philological and other textual evidence. This approach, dubbed “ethnopalaeography” by Dennis Tedlock, ethnoarchaeology by others, and reconsidered as “ethnophilology” by Joseph Harris is one of the promising ways in which the clues of earlier performative traditions can be read through texts like the Eddic corpus (Harris, this volume).

Indeed, as the essays in this volume attest, despite the lack of clear ethnographic field data describing how, when and where something may have been performed, and despite the accretion of literary devices that would apparently reduce the discussion of medieval performance to something akin to idle speculation, a rigorous methodology can be derived that allows us to animate performances from long ago. One of the keys to this process of reanimation of the textual remnants of once vibrant traditions is a clear understanding of contemporary performances. This very type of approach informed the works of Milman Parry and Albert Lord: their earliest forays into the field, collecting the now well-known epics of Serbian and Croatian singers was motivated in part by their questions concerning Homeric epic and its performance (Lord 1960).

A similar ethnophilological approach informs many of the papers in this current volume, where explorations of contemporary performances of analogous traditions help develop an analytical matrix for the understanding of earlier texts. As Niles points out, “One has to be able to imagine a past that is not there, not only gazing at the material traces of former civilizations but also using the methods of ethnoarchaeology to make reasonable inferences regarding past cultural patterns by extrapolating from living phenomena” (Niles, this volume). For example, Reichl uses Turkic oral poetic performance as an analogous counterpart to the singing of Middle English popular romance, Toelken looks at more recent performative contexts of popular ballads for explaining ellipsis in early collected variants, while Harris rereads the eighteenth century discussions of Eddic singing, as a means to comment on a potential performative model for this verse (and a strong alternative—or perhaps coperformative mode—to the dramatic performance suggested by Gunnell 1995). By understanding the performance of analogous expressions in contemporary traditions, one can reread the earlier texts, and make surmises about the performance of these texts, which can then be
checked against other similar texts from the same or other traditions. Of course, as with archaeology, this type of ethnophilology is still speculative—but it is an informed speculation. As Martin notes in his essay, these models “do not ‘prove’ anything about the texts in question, but might provide better hypotheses” (Martin, this volume).

At the same time as we acknowledge the usefulness of illuminating earlier performances with the spotlight of contemporary traditions, it is important for us to recognize that this use of analogous traditions from different historical periods to inform our hypotheses is not a one-way street. It seems prudent to me that students of contemporary performance should also explore the findings of their more historically oriented colleagues as a means for understanding the performance of contemporary traditions. So, as an obvious example, Parry and Lord’s understanding of the Serbian and Croatian epic singers was as much informed by their explorations of the Classical epic, as their understanding of the Classical epic was informed by their explorations of the contemporary tradition. We can and must use contemporary performative traditions to understand earlier traditional performances, but at the same time we can and must use our advances in the study of earlier traditions to understand those same contemporary traditions.

While I may seem to be begging the question, the dynamics of tradition itself seem to warrant this position. Although there are great continuities in traditional expression and performance across time, there are also intriguing differences. The epigrammatic pairing of a scaldic verse and a recent rap song at the beginning of this short afterword is not solely a humorous gesture toward popular culture. Rather it seems likely that an understanding of contemporary expression may well help us hypothesize about earlier performative contexts, just as an understanding of the historical and cultural exigencies that informed the composition of a medieval poem may help inform our understanding of similar contemporary phenomena (Halama 1996). So when the rapper and the scald boast about their poetic prowess, and the difficulties of their art, they may be performing a duet across the centuries.

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NOTES
1. I use the term “ethnophilology” here, following the lead taken by Joseph Harris in his article included in this volume.

WORKS CITED


