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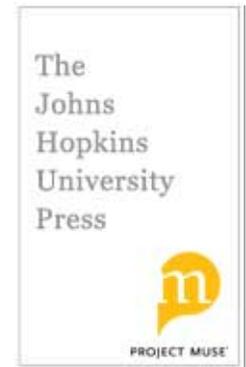
Who Is Speaking in Traditional Texts? On the Distributed
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Who Is Speaking in Traditional Texts? On the *Distributed Author* of the Sagas of Icelanders and Serbian Epic Poetry*

Slavica Ranković

I. Of Story-Lovers and Their Narrative Allegiances

IN THE OPENING CHAPTER OF HIS *Matter of the North*, Torfi Tulinius tells a charming story about an Icelandic farmer from the beginning of the twentieth century who was accustomed to having *Grettis saga* read to him once a year. He would listen to it quietly, without reaction, “except at two or three moments in the story when he would exclaim: . . . ‘you would have been better off not doing that, my dear Grettir—then you would still be alive!’”¹ A famous Bosnian writer, Branko Ćopić, relates a similar anecdote from his childhood in the late 1920s and 30s about an ancient yet boisterous school-warden (and an ex-member of the last of the outlaw bands that regularly engaged in skirmishes with the Turks), Đurađ Karabardaković. Once a year, on All Souls’ Day, Đurađ would buy the biggest candle available, go to a church, and light it for the soul of the hero famous throughout the Balkans and the favorite among the Serbs—Marko Kraljević. Seeing him upset, the concerned villagers would approach and ask him what the matter was.

— Marko died! — says Đurađ crying.

— Marko who? — people ask again.

— What do you mean, who? Marko Kraljević of course, my dear Marko — complains the old man. — Alas me, such a hero he was!²

Đurađ would then go to a local tavern to drink for the peace and rest of Marko’s departed soul and soon after have the village sexton read him of his hero’s feats, issuing the following warning: “Mind well how you read, Gliša. Don’t let Marko end up in a dungeon by any chance, or you’ll see my staff here at work” (230).

* I would like to thank my former supervisors, Professor Judith Jesch and Dr. David Norris of the University of Nottingham, UK, for having read and commented on previous versions of this paper.

These two very different characters—a quiet, composed farmer and a spirited old outlaw—nevertheless show a similar passion for their favorite heroes and a degree of involvement that blurs the boundaries between fictional and corporeal worlds. Indeed, Torfi Tulinius uses his anecdote precisely to illustrate that “to read a story, or hear it read is to live it” (31).

To any reader, the notion is familiar enough—from the sweet anxiety at whether (or more often, how) “Jack shall have his Jill” by the end of a romance, over sharing in the trials and tribulations of Brontë’s “plain Jane,” or Balzac’s Eugène de Rastignac bent on conquering the tired old world (a haunted Mr. Rochester/a decadent Paris) with their youthful energies; to desperately clinging to the redeeming qualities of likable rogues and wishing thousands of violent deaths upon the proven and incorrigible villains. That, of course, goes on smoothly only by invitation; otherwise, we are likely to find ourselves being barred from the characters, reminded of their separate, fiction-bound existence, and so forced into a cool evaluative distance. But even as invited partakers in the fates of our heroes, we will hardly go and light a candle for the soul of Père Goriot, or shout warnings at Jane Eyre (“There’s a mad woman in the attic, and it isn’t a drunken seamstress!”), although we might shed an odd tear at the sight of Jack prostrated over a hospital bed, clutching the knees of the dead Jill. This is not simply due to our being more sophisticated readers than the Icelandic farmer or Đurađ (the two are hardly readers as such: the latter is illiterate, and, whether literate or not, the former is being read to), but to the fact that, unlike their allegiance to Grettir and Marko, ours to Jane or Eugène is overridden by (subjected to) another—the allegiance to the one issuing the invitations into (or, as it sometimes happens, denying an unrestricted access to) the lives of characters: “the abducted author.”³ This allegiance with the projected authorial figure (often, but not always, through the most common of authorial effigies—the narrator) provides us with a privileged (“above”) perspective in respect to the characters, puts us always a step ahead of them and so equips us with anything potentially worth shouting at them about. While this perspective makes us care about what happens to the characters, it at the same time creates enough distance between us, the distance that usually prevents us from *actually* shouting out warnings and instructions at our heroes. The sense of familiarity the Icelandic farmer had with Grettir the Strong and the Bosnian school-warden with Marko Kraljević is, on the other hand, more immediate, primary; the closeness to the characters does not come as a result of (or, at the price of) mediation by an author figure. Then again, unlike Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* or Balzac’s *Le Père Goriot*, stories of Marko and Grettir’s adventures come before their tellers—in other words, they are different kinds of narratives, traditional narratives.

II. Of Stories That “Tell Themselves”

Even though they do not necessarily feel compelled to address Grettir directly, or light a candle for Marko’s soul, critics still share some common ground with our farmer and Þurad in recognizing the primacy of the reader’s/listener’s relationship with the characters in traditional narratives, and acknowledge that somehow mediation by an authorial figure seems circumvented in these texts. So for example, Einar Ól. Sveinsson notes that in *Íslendingasögur* “it is as if the reader or listener witnesses the events himself, and as if there is no author, no one between these events and the reader,”⁴ and Robert Kellogg expresses a similar sentiment: “The heroic ego of the high artist, with whom we collaborate as readers, is replaced in traditional art by the heroic egos of characters alone. Their fates, their meaning are no less significant to us than those of the characters in high art. *But they are beyond our control, or that of any human agent, in a truly autonomous world of story that suffers no mediation between its relentless energies and our ‘retirement’ as audience.*”⁵ This intuition is, while voiced, still largely left unexplored, even bracketed off by the very scholars voicing it. Hence Sveinsson hastens to add to the above observation that the perceived lack of mediation is in fact a calculated effect of the genius author, who “takes pains to say neither too much nor too little” (116), while (sadly but understandably, considering the scope and general direction of his article) Kellogg does not engage any further with the possible causes nor with the aesthetic implications of the immediacy with which characters and events emerge from traditional narratives. This is perhaps not so surprising, given critics’ literary training, reminding them that “since the text is a spoken or written discourse, it implies someone who speaks or writes it.”⁶ The assumption is very common indeed. In his article, “Narrative Voice: The Case of Chaucer’s *Man of Law’s Tale*,” Anthony C. Spearing quotes similar views from narratologists on both sides of the Atlantic: from Robert Scholes and Kellogg who state that “by definition, narrative art requires a story and a storyteller,” and from Roland Barthes who asserts that “there can be no narrative without a narrator.”⁷

Nowadays, however, scholars working with traditional texts (oral and orally derived) as well as medieval texts that were most commonly written with a view to being performed orally are beginning to acknowledge more and more the poverty of the available narratological vocabulary, the inability of the existing interpretative tools (best suited to post-Gutenbergian texts) to support the interpretation that would take the oral aspect of traditional texts into account. In the above article, as well as his recent lecture, “The Medieval Textual I,” Spearing has voiced a profound dissatisfaction with the category of the narrator when it comes to the question of who is speaking in medieval texts.⁸ The narrator,

he argues, is a necessary construct of a text well embedded in literary tradition (printed text), a figure created to fulfil the function that is in oral situations obviated by the presence of a corporeal person relating the story—someone you can threaten with a bloody nose if he gets things wrong (as we have seen Đurađ do, happily oblivious to/ignoring the story's transposition from the medium in which it existed fluid and malleable, to another where it was captured, made unalterable). Medieval texts, Spearing further suggests, have no narrators—the story is “telling itself:”

in the medieval period—an age of stories and of that oral storytelling which Chaucer represents in the *Canterbury Tales*—the normal assumption seems to have been not that every story expresses an individual human consciousness but that stories have a kind of autonomous existence in a realm of their own. In medieval culture stories are generally imagined as without origin, and the role of the poet can be somewhat like that of the merchant from whom we are told that the Man of Law learned his story . . . —not a producer but a trafficker in products that always already exist. (728)

Spearing's immediate concern is Chaucerian texts, but the same applies to the sagas of Icelanders and Serbian epics; even more so, one could argue, considering that they come from traditions where denial of authorship plays a major part in the creative process, while with Chaucer such practice slowly wanes.⁹ Epic singers, and saga writers/scribes did not consider themselves the originators of songs or stories but rather “stewards of tradition.”¹⁰ Even when they produce a new piece referring to a contemporary event (such as, for example, songs of the nineteenth-century Serbian insurrections against the Turks composed by an illiterate singer, Filip Višnjić), they would sooner say they heard it from others than take the credit for it.¹¹ As the famous nineteenth-century folklorist Vuk Karadžić testifies for Serbian epics: “Among the common folk no one thinks it any kind of a mastery or glory to compose a new poem; and not only that no one boasts about it, but each (even precisely the one who did compose it) denies this and says that he has heard it from another.”¹² Claiming that the poem is heard from another is not a sign of humility; rather, it is a gesture that places the authority of the whole collective behind the singer in terms both of the veracity of the account related and of its aesthetic value. In an oral situation (with no possibility of recourse to a text materialized on paper) attention is a precious commodity, and only the worthwhile song survives the censure of the collective at any one time and over an extended period. However “cunning” this move (a move that is itself inherited, traditional, rather than personal) on the part of the singer/storyteller might seem, it is important to keep in sight that its ultimate beneficiary is still the story, not the one relating it.

III. On How Stories Precede Their Tellers

Of course, simply denying ownership is not the same as actually not owning something. What takes the singers' and traditional storytellers' disclaimer, their notion that the story does not belong to them (and ours that the story "tells itself"), beyond metaphor is the fact that even in the rare recorded cases of newly created works relating to the contemporary events such as *The Beginning of the Revolt Against the Dahijas*¹³ (this song is known to have been composed by the already mentioned Filip Višnjić), the singer/storyteller is still very much a "trafficker of a story that always already exists." With its reliance on the formula, standard narrative, and stylistic devices, the above mentioned *Višnjić's* song still belongs to the tradition: its coming into being ultimately depends on those fifty different songs (Karadžić's estimate)—songs that are the part of the singer's artistic inheritance (the themes, patterns, and rhythms deeply embedded in the consciousness) and enables singers to compose these "new" ones. This could also be said about the saga writers, who, like Višnjić, create something that does not exactly exist anywhere else in the particular form they had given it on the vellum, yet it very much *does* exist because it is grounded upon the traditional idiomatic structures that each saga writer inherited in those "fifty" different sagas, *þattir*, skaldic verses, and other lore he absorbed as he grew up, and because this particular vellum realization of the narrative remains in constant dialogue with its versions (or versions of its parts in case of longer sagas) that are spread in parallel orally.¹⁴ Furthermore, after the moment of writing, the saga does not become a safely stored, definable entity, but rather continues to undergo changes, becoming an instance of its distributed self. The saga scribes are hardly anything like human typewriters. Rather, much like oral performers, they treat their written "template(s)"¹⁵ with freedom, simultaneously "checking" written accounts against the existing oral tradition, and bringing them up to date,¹⁶ whether this concerns the spelling, or "setting the record straight" (or askew, depending on the perspective) about a person or an event. And so the saga continues its oral-like existence in the new medium, with writers and scribes slowly discovering both the potential of that medium (for example, referring the reader to other written works and so writing a succinct yet complete/true account) and responding to the yet unmet pressures that it brings (for example, the need for chronological narration). Whether newly composed or re-performed, each realization of a traditional narrative (saga/epic poem) is an instance of its immanent self, and as such constitutes what Alfred B. Lord refers to as "a unique event," "an original" ascribable to a single author (regardless of whether we can name him/her or not); but traditional narratives also exist beyond any particular instances,

and so they are at the same time products that have “no ‘author’ but a multiplicity of authors.”¹⁷

The danger inherent in Lord’s term “multiplicity” is that authorship of traditional texts would be conceived of in terms of mere adage, that is, it brings to mind a tidy string of individuals each making a definable contribution in this “Chinese whisper” chain stretching back into the murky depths of unrecorded history. Theoretically, all one would need in order to get to the first, well-concealed link in the chain (*the* author?) is some sort of “good flashlight” to penetrate the darkness—a time machine, for example. But, as Lord was probably aware, such a contraption would hardly be of any use because “the authors” engaged in creating a poem are not connected in such a linear fashion. For example, if we considered tracing the origins of Višnjić’s song¹⁸ that I just mentioned, at its very first line, “Dear God! What great wonder!”¹⁹ what we hoped to be a “string” (something one can actually follow) would immediately start splitting at its tip, shooting innumerable threads both horizontally/synchronously toward other singers, Višnjić’s contemporaries who employed the same line (in the extant corpus it makes an appearance in a significant number of songs); and vertically/diachronically, as each of our horizontal stoppage points (particular singers) would sprout further innumerable filaments towards their predecessors (conscious or unwitting “teachers”) who contributed to the development of their craft, the process of horizontal and vertical sprouting continuing *ad infinitum* at each of the subsequent stoppage points, or nodes, in what more and more resembles an ever-widening web, a network.

The texture of this network is hardly as regular as that of a fishing net, or a sweater: there is no way of telling how many filaments each singer-node will sprout and of what thickness these will be, that is, not all relationships between the nodes/singers will carry the same weight, some will be more important/influential than others. There is no regularity in the way of sprouting, or the intervals in the progression of branching: the threads would not always depart from one another—some would occasionally merge into one and the same point (for example, two different singers shared the same “teacher”), some would also have to loop back into the point from which they started (such would be the ones relating to a particular singer’s own applications of the same line in other songs from his repertoire, that is, he has also learned the usage of the line from himself, placing it in different contexts), while some would still split further, at different speeds, entwining, converging and diverging, entering ever more complex interrelationships. Our authorial network becomes even more entangled if, among these author-nodes, we include not only the actual performers, but audience members, too. As Lord observes, composition, reception, and transmission are in traditional art

inseparable, at most they are “different facets of the same process” (5). The audience actively participates in shaping the tradition by rewarding some and discouraging other performances, thus increasing/decreasing the chance of expressions such as “Dear God! What great wonder!” to replicate themselves and evolve further, that is, to be taken up by other singers. The fact that fishing and football nets, sweaters, and even such intricate webs that spiders make are all inadequate analogues for our network does not mean that such analogues do not exist. Indeed, along with brains, organisms, ecosystems, societies, economic markets, and so forth, our authorial web constitutes in fact an excellent example of a neural network. We shall return to this shortly, but notice that we are still engaged with merely the first line of “Višnjić’s” poem; what of other such formulaic lines that appear throughout *The Beginning of the Revolt Against the Dahijas* (for example, the “before dawn and the white day,” “he drew the sabre, he cut off his head”), or themes and motifs (for example, gathering of a council, consulting books of olden times to foretell the future, putting the worthiest man at the lowliest place at the table, and so forth)?

IV. Enter the Distributed Author

The reader will be relieved to learn that I shall not attempt to trace these any further; the point of the above imaginary journey was to show that the origins of a traditional narrative (or indeed any piece of traditional art) are obscured not simply by the lack of an adequate historical record, but by the complex process of its coming into being, the process in which singers (and by extension, the saga writers) never start from a “clean slate/sheet.” Being distributed across the networks of minds at any one time (synchronically), and across generations of minds over extensive periods of time (diachronically), a Serbian epic song or an Icelandic saga constitutes what Alfred Gell terms “a *distributed object*,” each of its particular instances (oral or manuscript realizations) resonating with other such instances and corresponding to all other artworks in the system/tradition.²⁰ This dynamic that renders any search for origins meaningless is in the sciences that deal with neural networks (sciences of complex adaptive systems such as artificial intelligence, evolutionary computation, cognitive psychology) known as *distributed representation*: “A distributed representation is one in which meaning is not captured by a single symbolic unit, but rather *arises* from the interaction of a set of units, normally in a network of some sort.”²¹ As we have seen above, a piece of traditional art arises precisely from such networks of interrelated “units” (singers, saga tellers/writers), each of these units making a local

(in our case also a creative, sometimes even unique) contribution, but none in particular being responsible for the development of the whole: this creativity irreducibly occurs at a level beyond the individual, the level I propose to call the *distributed author*.

It needs to be said that “distributed author” already appears as a critical term and is used to describe collaborative literary efforts on the Internet. However, the use of this modern term is not only unnecessarily limited in this modern context, but is in some respects rather superficial too, as it often merely relates to projects where many (named or anonymous) individuals contribute their discrete entries to create a composite, complicated, but not necessarily a complex, evolved form, a form with genuinely intractable origins. Such is for example the project known as the “noon quilt,” consisting of an ever-expanding patchwork of descriptions of what people see through their window at noon.²² This indeed is more like a product of the “multiplicity of authors” than the distributed author in that the relation between the contributors is that of adage: there are no complex ways of interacting, meddling free in each other’s texts, risking the deletion of a contribution, meshing and clashing, negotiating perspectives. This does not mean that the project ends up being a mere sum of its parts: to be sure, the aesthetics of the work as a whole is being negotiated between the separate texts, with each gaining “a new relevance by being embedded within the texts they could not foresee or refer to.”²³ At the same time the entire project (the unforeseeability of relationships and all) is a piece of conceptual (and in that sense very much foreseen) art, so the authorship becomes ultimately assigned to the individual with whom the concept originates, that is, the creator of the website, the one who puts things into motion.

Here, the purposefully oxymoronic expression “distributed author” is chosen to account for both the process of distributed representation that is taking place in traditional art, and the simultaneous narrative coherence, the absence of the collage or patchwork forms. The term is also particularly suited to traditional narratives: unlike the coherence of other objects that might also be considered distributed, either the above “noon quilt” or a china dinner-set, which owe their distributed oneness to a “prior design” of a “central executive organization” (that is, the conceptual Web-artist, or Wedgwood designers), the coherence of a distributed traditional work of art comes about “only by historical accretion (and deletion)” in other words—by evolution.²⁴

V. How Stories Tell Themselves (or the Blind Storyteller)

Other than the question-begging,²⁵ theological explanations, the only other kind of account we have of the “stories that tell themselves,” or

of the “text that writes itself,” or the structure that organizes itself in general, is the Darwinian kind—one or the other implementation of the “generate-and-test” principle (or the variation-and-selection mechanism) of evolutionary computation. And the only kind of organizational architecture that seems capable of evolutionary computation (homing in on solutions rather than envisaging/foreseeing them) is that of a network of relationships. Finally, the representational nature of such systems turns out not to be really representational at all. Rather, any “representation” there is the outcome of a process we earlier called distributed representation. The “essential nature” of distributed representation is that of blindness, for it is only a representation *in effect*. The (fore)seeing here is process-led, that is, does not come before the storytelling, but is “thought-of-through-doing.”

This may be a relatively new vocabulary of concepts, but to an artist of any age it would not be that surprising, for much of it has already been intuited throughout the history of art (practice). Poets, musicians, visual artists of various periods have often confessed to (even worshipped) this kind of blindness, indicating that the artiness of an artwork is hardly all due to a talented human agent. To suspend for the moment structuralist and poststructuralist theories that effectively destabilize the absolute authority of the author (for example, those of Barthes, Foucault, Derrida²⁶), the most successful of artists have themselves professed that at some point(s) during the creative process their work tends to “take over,” that they feel themselves “out of control,” or that they miraculously managed to achieve more than they are actually capable of, the instances also lurking behind the critics’ folklore about Dostoevsky the Novelist or T. S. Eliot the Poet, for example, being “greater” than Dostoevsky or T. S. Eliot the Man. Writers through the ages have, using the knowledge and terminology of their time, ascribed this feeling to muses, divine inspiration, genius, the unconscious, and so forth, only to be accused by their successors of transcendentalism and mysticism. But there is, according to the sciences of complex adaptive systems, a kind of transcendence that is quite of this world, demystified through modeling and experimentation,²⁷ and at the same time the kind we all have an intuitive experience of: “We know that our universe obeys simple low-level rules. . . . We also know that life behaves in ways that do not seem to be built explicitly into those rules. . . ; life seems to transcend the rigidity of its physical origins. This kind of transcendence is called ‘emergence.’”²⁸ Evidently, emergence and also distributed representation—an emergent phenomenon that is, as we have seen, particularly pertinent to this inquiry—represent potent concepts to explore, and the prospect of a fruitful cross-fertilization of the studies of complex systems with the humanities has already excited the interest of some literary theorists²⁹ and philosophers.³⁰ Paradoxically, studies of oral and orally derived literature that stand to benefit most

from such cross-fertilization represent an area of academic endeavour where such prospects are least explored.³¹

The reason I think studies of oral verbal art and orally derived narratives stand to benefit most from the sciences of complexity is based on the fact that the chances of the emergent phenomena (such as the story “taking over,” or “telling itself”) occurring without being channeled away by a centralizing factor are significantly amplified in traditional rather than in author-generated,³² Gutenbergian texts. The latter, where the creative process involves a single author, is much more akin to building or construction—it is a process of a significantly shorter duration (limited to a human lifetime at the very most, but more often quite a bit shorter than that) and, most importantly, something with a more defined trajectory, being under the scrutiny (if not total control) of a single mind. In other words, the process has an overseer/a foreseer that tames it. By contrast, in traditional narratives such an overseer does not exist, or if it does or at least looks like it, in that the stories are far from being chaotic, then it is the blind evolutionary watchmaker (as Richard Dawkins has named it³³) not the Watchmaker (Author-God) of the Laplacian clockwork universe.

Crediting the very mechanics (brute mechanics?) of narrative production with the kind of artistic accomplishment that we are used to associating with painstaking genius raises an anxiety. Yet both premises—that there is something inherently brute (that is, not creative) in mechanisms and that creativity is the sole property of humans—are flawed. The latter is little more than “a piece of snobbery” (261) that rests upon a myth³⁴ about beings forming a ladder, or a scale, with the “higher” (the most creative) ones occupying higher, and the “lower” ones lower perches. The former, on the other hand, rests on the likewise dated notion of the mechanism. For, there are mechanisms and *mechanisms*. It is the inherited image of a nineteenth-century machine (with its levers, cogs, and boilers) that so desperately fails to impress as anything like life, let alone as capable of creativity. So if we merely update our conception of the mechanism based on the machines of our own day, some blurring of the mechanical-creative divide will already be inevitable, for some of our machines do seem to be learning, adapting, and solving problems creatively (for example, there is an entire scientific discipline that studies simulations of life, whether “earthbound” or merely possible or lifelike;³⁵ appropriately, it is called “a-life”). This more contemporary notion is still machine-informed, and so seems embarrassingly clunky in comparison with our prime model of creative mechanism—biological evolution. Creativity itself (as life, learning, and even genius³⁶) is now increasingly explored in terms of evolutionary mechanics.³⁷

There also exists an anxiety as to what happens to the individuality of individuals within a network. Being a unit/node of an evolving network

is nothing like being a cog in a totalitarian regime: in the latter it is the centralizing power invested in Big Brother that divests one of his/her uniqueness (oneness) through drastically reducing the effect of one's actions. As a result the whole (social) network becomes stultified, its ability to adapt becomes crippled. By contrast, as we have noted, evolving networks have no such centers; they create individuality and are in turn created by it. The Saussurean model of language (an evolving system with the architecture of a network) is a perfect case in point: "individuality" of units in a language is only created in relation to other such units: they have no essences, no identities apart from those arbitrarily assigned within the network. In turn, language can only function because of the differences between the units. The relationships between the units within the neural network are not all the same either, some carry more weight than others (which ones get to be weightier, and at what time, is, again, arbitrary): without the dynamic of differences, complex systems would not exist. As Paul Cilliers observes, "equilibrium is another word for death."³⁸

That traditional narratives such as the Icelandic sagas and Serbian epics evolve does not diminish the importance of either the individuality or the talent of particular singers or saga writers. If a singer or saga author is talented like Filip Višnjić or the writer of *Njáls saga*, their particular renderings stand a better chance of "survival" or replication, that is, they stand a better chance of being accepted by other singers/scribes and transmitted further.³⁹ But this in itself is far from being enough, because what it precisely means to be talented or successful varies; it depends on an intractable number of factors in the environment (social environment in our case). There are no means of telling which singer's or saga teller's/writer's/scribe's contribution will prove successful in the long run, or in what way it will be successful: as in all evolutionary processes, success/failure is always something that only can be speculated on *a posteriori*.

While the individual singers and saga writers invest in their renderings all their individuality, all their intellectual, emotional, and creative powers, all their ideology, their small-mindedness and generosity of spirit (in this they do not differ from modern-day authors), these investments remain local in respect to the development of the story itself that was, and continues to be, subject to evolutionary "accretions and deletions." In this process no particular agent gets an upper hand and whatever bias (an attempt at foresight) there is, it eventually gets overridden—challenged from within by the inherited perspectives, and swamped with the ones to come. Of course, the texts with which we are dealing are not those immanent, never fully realized entities in living traditions, but evolutionary snapshots, narratives arrested in their development. In these the stamp of the last contributor is (in respect to his/her predecessors) always more

keenly felt, yet we must be careful not to overemphasize it. As (in a quite literal sense) s/he never creates from a blank page, the impact of the incidental last singer/storyteller/scribe⁴⁰ is also cushioned in many ways: a recorded traditional narrative still retains the complex texture gained during its development, and through its evolved formulaic structure it remains in constant and close dialogue with other recordings of its kind. This makes a traditional piece of art a product of an “evolutionary” rather than personal aesthetic. With no one granted the power to mediate and, by extension, manipulate us/pull a world over our eyes (in this world we are witnesses, or better still, voyeurs, for we are ourselves not observed/addressed), narratives such as the sagas of Icelanders and Serbian epic poetry often carry an aura of the documentary.

This, of course, happens under more or less ideal conditions. It should be said that although all traditional narratives are products of distributed representation, the *distributed author*, there still are ways of channeling their distributedness: the centralizing (or, in Bakhtin’s terms, “monologizing”) overseer/foreseer function is actually regularly imposed on evolutionary processes—not by an individual, but by the strong, enduring social institutions (for example, centralized state, kingship, church) that manage to exert (and sustain) their influence on art production over extensive periods of time, even in the so-called oral societies.⁴¹ The overall effect that narratives produced under the influence of these “centripetal forces” leave is that of a directedness that is very much akin to the authorial agency of an individual.

In contrast to most of medieval Europe, in post-Ottoman-conquest Serbia⁴² and medieval Iceland such centralizing factors are noted by their weakness.⁴³ As both literatures developed in rudimentary democracies (with no particular class that would control, or have a stake in, their production), and as they were predominantly enjoyed in the “milieu of the family,”⁴⁴ their distributed author suffered no significant ideological, political, or indeed structural, cleansing of Bakhtinian *heteroglossia*. In fact, the multilocal, decentralized production of the sagas of Icelanders and Serbian epic songs supported the centrifugality of the traditional medium, allowing the perspectives on past events and characters, accrued through time, to meet, compete, and negotiate. As a result, Grettir and Marko with whom we began this discussion, appear unrepresented, unmediated—they simply emerge.

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NOTES

1 Torfi H. Tulinius, *The Matter of the North: The Rise of Literary Fiction in Thirteenth-Century Iceland* (Odense: Odense Univ. Press, 2002), 31 (hereafter cited in text).

- 2 Branko Ćopić, *Bašta sljuzove boje* (Belgrade: Srpska književna zadruga, 1975), 230, my translation (hereafter cited in text).
- 3 “Abducted author” replaces Booth’s *implied author* (see Wayne C. Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction* [Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1969], especially 70–76) to emphasise the mechanism that (“illegally”) constructs such a figure, rather than assume it as some positive presence *within* the text. The term relates to the Peircian notion of abduction, the kind of reasoning that Charles Peirce describes in his “Prolegomena of an Apology to Pragmatism” as a “process of thought capable of producing no conclusion more definite than a conjecture.” Mats Bergman and Sami Paavola, eds., *The Commens Dictionary of Peirce’s Terms: Peirce’s Terminology in His Own Words*, <http://www.helsinki.fi/science/commens/dictionary.html>.
- 4 Einar Ól. Sveinsson, *Dating the Icelandic Sagas: An Essay in Method* (London: Viking Society for Northern Research, 1958), 116 (hereafter cited in text).
- 5 Robert Kellogg, “Varieties of Tradition in Medieval Narrative,” in *Medieval Narrative: A Symposium*, ed. Hans Bekker-Nielsen (Odense: Odense Univ. Press, 1979) 127, my emphasis.
- 6 Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan, *Narrative Fiction: Contemporary Poetics* (London: Methuen, 1983), 3.
- 7 Anthony C. Spearing, “Narrative Voice: The Case of Chaucer’s *Man of Law’s Tale*,” *New Literary History* 32, no. 3 (2001): 728.
- 8 Spearing, “The Medieval Textual I” (lecture, 40th Medieval Congress, Western Michigan Univ., Kalamazoo, MI, May 7, 2005).
- 9 Spearing is well aware of this, but stresses that Chaucer’s interest in the connection between the stories and their tellers was in “early, exploratory stages of the development that he was only beginning” and cautions fellow medievalists against making an assumption that “Chaucer in the late fourteenth century could leap immediately into the world of the dramatic monologue (or would have wished to do so).” Spearing, “Narrative Voice,” 729.
- 10 Preben Meulengracht Sørensen, *Saga and Society: An Introduction to Old Norse Literature* (Odense: Odense Univ. Press, 1993), 76.
- 11 For more on individual techniques and styles of nineteenth-century Serbian singers, see Svetozar Koljević, *The Epic in the Making* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1980).
- 12 Vuk Stefanović Karadžić, *Srpske narodne pjesme* (Belgrade: Prosveta, 1976), 1:536, my translation.
- 13 What makes this case extremely rare is not the failure of singers to engage with contemporary (not only past) historical events—this is what makes an oral tradition living—but for a literate collector to be present at such a moment.
- 14 Carol Clover, “The Long Prose Form,” *Arkiv för nordisk filologi* 101 (1986): 35.
- 15 Sometimes they are looking at more than one manuscript—be that a couple of renderings of the same saga, or the sagas that refer to the same event as the one they are copying, or not a saga at all, but a variant of a historiographical piece such as *Landnámabók*, and so on.
- 16 The past needs to fit the present, not only the other way around. As Walter J. Ong points out: “oral societies live very much in a present which keeps itself in equilibrium or homeostasis by sloughing off memories which no longer have present relevance.” See Ong, *Orality and Literacy: Technologizing of the Word* (London: Routledge, 1982), 46; for some recorded examples of this, see 48.
- 17 Albert Bates Lord, *The Singer of Tales* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 1960), 102 (hereafter cited in text).
- 18 With negligible adjustments, the above thought experiment (the search for the origins of Višnjić’s *The Beginning of the Revolt Against the Dahijas*) is applicable to sagas as well as any other traditional narrative/work of art. Višnjić’s case provides a good example because it is well-documented.

- 19 Vuk Stefanović Karadžić, *Srpske narodne pjesme* (Belgrade: Prosveta, 1976), 4:100, my translation.
- 20 Alfred Gell, *Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1998), in particular 220–23.
- 21 *Philosophy of Mind Dictionary*, <http://philosophy.uwaterloo.ca/MindDict/distributed-representation.html>, my emphasis.
- 22 See Christiane Heibach, “The Distributed Author: Creativity in the Age of Computer Networks,” *Dichtung-digital* [2000], 13, www.dichtung-digital.de/2000/Heibach/23-Aug.
- 23 Heibach, “Distributed Author,” 6.
- 24 Gell, *Art and Agency*, 221.
- 25 Who is the Author/Origin of the Author? And the Author of the Author of the Author?
... .
- 26 See Roland Barthes, “The Death of the Author,” in *Authorship: From Plato to the Postmodern: A Reader*, ed. Seán Burke (Edinburgh: Edinburgh Univ. Press, 2000), 125–30; Michel Foucault, “What is an Author?” in *Modern Criticism and Theory: A Reader*, ed. David Lodge (London: Longman, 1988), 197–210; Jacques Derrida, “Signature, Event, Context,” in *Margins of Philosophy* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1982), 309–30.
- 27 Nowadays scientists routinely implement neural networks and evolutionary algorithms, cellular automata and other non-linear parallel-processing systems for experimental and modelling purposes. John Conway’s “Game of Life” (or “Life”) is probably one of the most famous cellular automata that, for all the simplicity of the rules that define its dynamic, is nevertheless capable of emulating arbitrarily complex behavior often featuring emergent structures that in no obvious way relate to the design of the game. The complete dynamic of “Life” is captured in three sentences that specify what is equivalent to the laws of elementary physics of this artificial universe, and yet, when played out, a bewildering array of forms and behavior emerge that mirror some of the familiar behavior of our world (that is, there are forms that eat other forms, that reproduce and die, escape “predators,” act as parasites, and so on). For more detail, or even to have a go at playing with “Life,” see Paul Callahan, “What is the Game of Life?” (2000), <http://www.math.com/students/wonders/life/life.html>.
- 28 Ian Stewart, *Life’s Other Secret: The New Mathematics of the Living World* (London: Allen Lane, 1998), 7.
- 29 See, for example, Joseph Carroll, *Evolution and Literary Theory* (Columbia: Univ. of Missouri Press, 1995); Katherine Hayles, *Chaos and Order: Complex Dynamics in Literature and Science* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1991).
- 30 For example, Paul Cilliers, *Complexity and Postmodernism: Understanding Complex Systems* (London: Routledge, 2000).
- 31 This relationship would truly be reciprocal: while the studies of oral and orally derived texts would in the sciences of complexity find apt concepts to refresh the existing theoretical vocabulary, the sciences of complexity would in traditional texts find good case studies on which to test their premises.
- 32 By “author-generated” text I mean nothing more than a text written by one person in the age of print.
- 33 Richard Dawkins, *The Blind Watchmaker* (London: Longman, 1986) (hereafter cited in text).
- 34 Like any other myth this one too is not a mere fabrication. From various (human) aspects humans can indeed be considered the most successful (the “highest” of species) and when it comes to their impact on the planet, only certain kinds of bacteria provide a matching contestant. It is, however, important to recognize that humans win in the ladder game only when human criteria for forming the ladder are applied: when it comes to navigating in the dark, bats and whales are the “highest species,” as are ants when the desired goal is carrying seven times one’s own body weight, and when it comes to surviving nuclear holocausts, apparently, rats and beetles are second to none.

- 35 For an introductory survey of interesting experiments (for example, Fritz Vollrath's cyberspiders, Craig Reynolds's study of flocking behavior of birds on virtual creatures he devised—"boids," and so on), see Stewart, *Life's Other Secret*, especially 195–212.
- 36 See Dean Keith Simonton, *Origins of Genius: Darwinian Perspectives on Creativity* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1999).
- 37 See Margaret Boden, *The Creative Mind: Myths and Mechanisms* (London: Routledge, 2004).
- 38 Cilliers, *Complexity and Postmodernism*, 4.
- 39 A more thorough discussion of this is offered in Slavica Ranković, *The Distributed Author and the Poetics of Complexity: A Comparative Study of the Sagas of Icelanders and Serbian Epic Poetry* (Ph.D. thesis, University of Nottingham, 2005), 42–44, 61–62, and 105.
- 40 When considering texts of the sagas that we normally study, we might also include here the editors of the critical editions in which, in order to offer the fullest version of the saga, material is combined from different manuscripts. For example, the *Íslenzk fornrit* edition of *Egils saga* is generally based on the text from the *Modruvallabók* compilation (A redaction), but Egill's poem *Sonatorrek* is taken from *Ketilsbækur* (C redaction), since this is the only place where the poem is preserved in its entirety. While probably objectionable from the point of view of manuscript studies where each separate rendering has its special value, the editors' approach is not in itself fraudulent—it does not much differ from the attitudes of storytellers and scribes themselves.
- 41 Mikhail M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination* (Austin: Univ. of Texas Press, 1981), 270–72.
- 42 This is also true of nineteenth-century Serbia, when oral lore was systematically collected for the first time by Vuk Stefanović Karadžić.
- 43 A more detailed analysis of the similarity of the two cultures' sociopolitical and historical circumstances and their effects on production of the sagas of Icelanders and Serbian epic poetry is offered in Ranković, *The Distributed Author*, 13–23; also 133–39.
- 44 How differences in milieus of production and reception in two otherwise very closely related oral traditions (Serbo-Croatian Muslim and Serbo-Croatian Christian) can lead to two profoundly different kinds of epic is discussed in John Miles Foley, *Immanent Art: From Structure to Meaning in Traditional Oral Epic* (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1991).