

## **“A True Pioneer”: Matija Murko’s Influence on Milman Parry and Albert Lord**

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This article<sup>1</sup> looks at the relationship between Matija Murko (1861-1952)<sup>2</sup> and the two well known Harvard scholars, Milman Parry (1902-35) and Albert Lord (1912-91). Much connects these researchers: they were interested in South Slavic oral tradition, recorded *guslari*, used similar fieldwork methods, and all three compared South Slavic epic poetry to Homer. Parry’s and Lord’s research is well known to those interested in orality and oral literature and so is M. Murko’s proverbial influence on their work.<sup>3</sup> Some research has even been done to explain how M. Murko’s work theoretically compares to and connects with the work of the two Harvard scholars,<sup>4</sup> but no one has looked closely at the historical circumstances that enabled this exchange and its broader implications for the development of oral theory. In this article, I contextualize M. Murko’s influence on Parry, Lord, and early oral theory by investigating archival materials and M. Murko’s lesser known publications.<sup>5</sup> I show that the narrative about M. Murko as “a true pioneer” was invented by Parry and Lord, whose work shaped subsequent attempts to understand the development of oral theory. Consequently, M. Murko’s influence on Parry is presently overstated at the expense of other, similar projects, while the significance of M. Murko’s later research, unavailable to Parry, is mostly overlooked. By examining personal correspondence between Lord and M. Murko’s son, Vladimir Murko, I show that Lord was more interested in and far better acquainted with M. Murko’s research. I conclude by suggesting that M. Murko’s contribution to oral theory can only be understood if we move away from the myth of a “true pioneer” and seriously consider what Lord and later scholars learned from him.

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<sup>2</sup> Also known as Matthias Murko. Throughout the paper I use the initials M. and V. to distinguish between Matija Murko and his son, Vladimir Murko.

<sup>3</sup> For example, Lord 1953, 1960, and 1991; Lesky 1963:32; A. Parry 1971; Foley 1985:13; Merritt Sale 1996; Mitchell and Nagy 2000; Garbrah 2000; Nagy 2001 and 2003:61; de Vet 2005; Tate 2011; Hall 2008:20-21; Saussy 2016; Ready 2018; McMurray 2019; Kanigel 2021:129. While this list is not exhaustive, it reflects the continuity of the claim that M. Murko was Parry’s predecessor.

<sup>4</sup> For example, A. Parry 1971; Foley 1985; Buturović 1992 and 1999; Garbrah 2000; Tate 2011; Fischerová 2014; Zabel 2020.

<sup>5</sup> Bibliography of M. Murko is available in M. Murko 1951a.

### Matija Murko's Acquaintance with Homeric Scholarship

So, who was Matija Murko and why was his work important? M. Murko was a linguist, an anthropologist, and a literary scholar specializing in Slavic studies. Born in Styria in the village Drstelja, now part of Slovenia, he spent most of his life in Vienna (1897-1902), Graz (1902-17), Leipzig (1917-20), and Prague (1920-52), where he held prominent academic positions. His research encompassed various disciplines and topics, among which his work on the Slovenian language, the history of different Slavic literatures, and Slavic folklore was most influential.<sup>6</sup> To classicists, he is known first and foremost for his work on South Slavic oral traditions and for occasionally comparing them to Homer.<sup>7</sup> Since this comparative approach needs to be considered if one is to understand his influence on Parry and Lord, I shall first outline what M. Murko knew about Homer.

Classicists may be surprised to learn that M. Murko was not particularly fond of Homer and indeed wary of classical studies altogether. In his memoirs, he remembered how disappointed he was when first reading Homer as a high school student (M. Murko 1951a:29), which perhaps influenced his later conviction that classical philology was unjustifiably valued above other national philologies. As a student at the University of Vienna, he insisted that his doctoral exam (*rigorosum*) in "Germanistik" include Slavic philology instead of the then mandatory classical philology, which required the university to change its rules (M. Murko 1951a:49). In his later academic career, too, he objected to the prevalence of classics in departments of Linguistics (see Gantar 2020). At the University of Leipzig, for example, he opposed the suggested appointment of Paul Kretschmer<sup>8</sup> to the chair of comparative philology, which resulted in a long lasting dispute with the rector of the university, Erich Bethe (M. Murko 1951a:165-66). All these episodes paint a picture of a man who wholeheartedly cherished Slavic philology and objected to the privileged position of classical studies in academia.

Nevertheless, aversion does not equal ignorance. M. Murko knew ancient Greek and Latin well, read ancient literature, studied the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, and, as I show here, was relatively well acquainted with concurrent Homeric scholarship—at least for someone not working in the field (see Zabel 2023). This becomes clear upon inspecting M. Murko's personal papers, containing around thirty folios of notes about Homeric epic and Homeric scholarship,

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<sup>6</sup> See for example, Čubelić 1961; Förster 1988; Gutschmidt 1988; Foley 1988:1-18; Kozak 2000; Bošnjak 2002; Žele 2003; Kunej et. al 2020.

<sup>7</sup> John Miles Foley was one of the first scholars to look seriously into M. Murko's writing on Homer (for example, Foley 1985) and translated some of his work (M. Murko 1990). Others followed in his path (see, for example, Garbrah 2000; Tate 2011; Fischerová 2014; Talam 2014 and 2015; Elmer 2025).

<sup>8</sup> Paul Kretschmer (1866-1956) was at the time widely known for his work on pre-Greek elements in ancient Greek.

now archived in Ljubljana.<sup>9</sup> The notes are hard to read, the hand rather cryptic, and the collection is clearly fragmentary,<sup>10</sup> but it is clear that they are personal study notes on Homer and Homeric scholarship. Some folios also include transcriptions of specific verses from Homer, and two folios contain a comparison of the number of verses from the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* (for each book separately) with what are presumably (no titles are given) numbers of verses from several South Slavic epic poems.<sup>11</sup>

The extant study notes concern several publications on Homer. The most extensive collection (ten folios in MS 1392, III.7) is about Erich Bethe's *Homer: Dichtung und Sage* (1914-1927), one of the most influential contributions to the so-called “analysis school” of Homeric scholarship (Tsagalis 2020:130). In this three-volume work, Bethe advanced Gottfried Hermann's argument that at the kernel of the *Iliad* lies an original poem about the wrath of Achilles by adding to it the idea that the poem must have been heavily expanded by a sixth-century redactor. He also argued that ancient Greek folksongs must have been incorporated into the *Iliad* in the process. The ten folios reveal that M. Murko devoted utmost attention to this book, outlining Bethe's argument page by page.

Another batch of personal notes, probably from an earlier period (Ms 1392, III.4), contains notes on another representative of the analysis school, Georg Finsler, and his two-volume work, *Homer*. M. Murko clearly read at least the first part, subtitled “Der Dichter und Sein Welt” (1913). There, Finsler argued that Homer was the author of the *Iliad* only, and that the poem was later reworked. M. Murko also took study notes from Engelbert Drerup's *Homer* (1915), a well-known contribution to the “unitarian school,” which criticized the analytic approach and argued for the unity of the two Homeric epics (see West 2012). The two scholars were evidently in academic dialogue: Drerup commented on M. Murko's phonographic recordings<sup>12</sup> of South Slavic epic (see Drerup 1920:265-70 and 1921:48-57), and M. Murko occasionally responded to Drerup's research in his own publications (for example, M. Murko 1919:280, 283-84, 292, and 296). Finally, M. Murko took notes from Thaddaeus Zielinski's substantial article, “Die Behandlung gleichzeitiger Ereignisse im antiken Epos” (1901), in which the author presented what has come to be known as “Zielinski's law.” As is well known, the applicability of Zielinski's law, which “states that Homeric narrative always moves forward and so cannot depict two simultaneous actions,” has been heatedly discussed in oral literature research (Scodel 2008:107; cf. de Jong 2007 and Danek 1998).

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<sup>9</sup> M. Murko, Personal Papers, MS 1392. The materials about Homer are located under III.4, “Concepts and Excerpts,” and III.7, “Materials about Homer” in the archival records. Throughout this article, abbreviated citations of unpublished manuscripts (labeled “MS”) are provided in the footnotes, followed by full citations in the bibliography.

<sup>10</sup> Since most of the notes were numbered by M. Murko himself, it can be concluded that only a few folios were preserved.

<sup>11</sup> M. Murko also compared the length of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* with particular *guslar* performances in his publications (see M. Murko 1929a:14-15).

<sup>12</sup> M. Murko's recordings from his early expeditions (1912-13) were published on compact discs. See M. Murko 2017.

These study notes were probably taken as part of M. Murko's preparation for the research of South Slavic oral traditions, where he regularly compared South Slavic epic with Homer and even speculated about the oral social context of Homeric society. Such comparisons featured prominently in "Neues über südslavische Volksepik" (1919), in which he mentioned both Drerup and Bethe, *La poésie populaire épique en Yougoslavie au début du XXe siècle* (1929),<sup>13</sup> and *Tragom srpsko-hrvatske narodne epike: putovanja u godinama 1930 do 1932* (1951), but appeared also in other publications, such as "Die serbokroatische Volkspoesie in der deutschen Literatur" (1906) and "Kod Meštrovića i njegovih: Ivan Meštrović kao pjevač epskih narodnih pjesama" (1933a).

Lastly, M. Murko's familiarity with the work of Parry and Lord should be considered before I discuss their acquaintance with his work. M. Murko was present for Parry's *soutenance* in 1928 (see below), but, as I will show, he learned of Parry's and Lord's research on South Slavic epic song only in 1951, a year before his death. He never cited either scholar in his own work, nor does he appear to have read any of their publications. This can be seen, for example, in *Tragom*, where he wrote that "it is a pity that no one has collected folk song in the Novi Pazar region," even though Parry and Lord extensively recorded in the area (M. Murko 1951b:282; cf. Fischerová 2014:88).

### Matija Murko and Milman Parry

Milman Parry's relationship with scholarship on South Slavic oral epic, including the work of Matija Murko, is complicated. Before Parry decided to look closer at the tradition as part of his research on Homer, South Slavic epic had been studied for more than two centuries. As a thorough scholar, Parry of course read some of the existing work on the topic: he studied Vuk Karadžić's collections; he became acquainted with the collection of songs by *Matica Hrvatska*; he studied Gerhard Gesemann's work; and he read some of the work by Luka Marjanović on Mehmed Kolaković.<sup>14</sup>

Parry also read the work of Matija Murko, who made the biggest impression. Here is the often quoted passage in which Parry pays his respects (1971:439):

My first studies were on the style of the Homeric poems and led me to understand that so highly formulaic a style could be only traditional. I failed, however, at the time to understand as fully as I should have that a style such as that of Homer must not only be traditional but also must be oral. It was largely due to the remarks of my teacher M. Antoine Meillet that I came to see, dimly at first, that a true understanding of the Homeric poems could only come with a full understanding of the nature of oral poetry. It happened that a week or so before I defended my theses for the doctorate at the Sorbonne Professor Mathias Murko of the University of Prague delivered in Paris the series

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<sup>13</sup> A good half of *La poésie populaire épique en Yougoslavie au début du XXe siècle* (1929) is in fact a revised translation of "Neues über südslavische Volksepik" (1919).

<sup>14</sup> Parry mentions the Croatian ethnographer Luka Marjanović and the singer Mehmed Kolaković in *Ćor Huso*, a transcription of a dictation he recorded in Dubrovnik. See Milman Parry, *Ćor Huso* (MS), pp. 1.16-1.17. The part of the manuscript which mentions Kolaković was not published in Parry 1971.

of conferences which later appeared as his book *La poésie populaire épique en Yougoslavie au début du XXe siècle*. I had seen the poster for these lectures but at the time I saw in them no great meaning for myself. However, Professor Murko, doubtless due to some remark of M. Meillet, was present at my *soutenance* and at that time M. Meillet as a member of my jury pointed out with his usual ease and clarity this failing in my two books. It was the writings of Professor Murko more than those of any other which in the following years led me to the study of oral poetry in itself and to the heroic poems of the South Slavs.

As a review of the literature reveals,<sup>15</sup> this passage determined most later attempts at characterizing M. Murko's role in the development of oral theory, constructing him as the first inventor of oral theory. Two decades later, Lord would repeat this claim by writing that M. Murko was “a true pioneer” (1960:208). Nevertheless, to understand how M. Murko really influenced Parry and Lord requires unpacking this narrative somewhat.

For that, one needs to do some historical digging. First of all, Parry and M. Murko undoubtedly met in 1928. At the time, M. Murko was visiting the Sorbonne on the invitation of the Society for Slavic Studies, presided over by Antoine Meillet (see Mazon 1936), which also explains why Meillet invited M. Murko to Parry's defense. During his stay in Paris, M. Murko held a series of three lectures on South Slavic epic tradition,<sup>16</sup> for which Parry later remembered seeing advertisements. These lectures were published a year later as *La poésie populaire épique en Yougoslavie au début du XXe siècle* (1929). Parry undoubtedly read this work, for he often referred to it in his writings.<sup>17</sup> It is also clear that several theses about South Slavic poetry which Parry did not observe himself were taken from this work (Tate 2011:330-34).

Despite Parry's own narrative, I believe that he was more or less unaware of M. Murko's research until his second expedition to the Kingdom of Yugoslavia in 1934; I would even suggest that M. Murko was but a marginal motivation for his decision to undertake fieldwork. Before traveling to Dubrovnik, Parry knew only *La poésie* and “Neues über südslavische Volksepik” (see Parry 1971:335). This is evident from the fact that in all of his writings he referred only to these two publications, even though M. Murko wrote numerous other articles on South Slavic oral poetry, including some which mention Homer. Moreover, Parry also did not know of M. Murko's fieldwork in the twenties and thirties. This is to be inferred from his application for funding for his second expedition, in which he wrote:

I was the first person of any sort who had ever come to Stolac for the poetry; the only person who had preceded me at Nevesinje and Gacko was Murko in the brief trip he made in 1913, in which he collected no texts.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> See footnote 3, above.

<sup>16</sup> According to M. Murko's own account in Murko 1929a:1. At least one lecture was part of the Society's seminar series where Meillet was “president de séance” (Mazon 1928). For M. Murko's relationship with the Parisian Society for Slavic studies, see Zelenka 2020.

<sup>17</sup> See Parry 1971:330, 335, 336, 347, 361, 439-40, 458, and 468.

<sup>18</sup> Milman Parry, Project for a Study of Yugoslavian Popular Oral Poetry (MS), p. 4.

That Parry referred only to M. Murko's research in 1912 and 1913—published in *La poésie*—and did not mention his several research trips through the Balkans between 1927 and 1932, seems to indicate that he was as yet unaware of M. Murko's expeditions after 1927. This is because Parry's statement is not consistent with the fact that during these later expeditions, M. Murko gathered several recordings, texts, and interviews from and around Stolac, Nevesinje, and Gacko.<sup>19</sup>

By the time Parry wrote the application, M. Murko had already published several reports on these later expeditions: for example, in the newspaper *Prager Presse*.<sup>20</sup> More academic were the two longer articles in *Československo-jihoslovanská revue* (see M. Murko 1930-31a and 1930-31b; a German translation was published in *Slavische Rundschau*, M. Murko 1931a) and an article in *Ročenka slovanského ústavu*, which culminated in the better known “Nouvelles observations sur l'état actuels de la poésie épique en Yougoslavie” published in *Revue des études slaves* (M. Murko 1933b). Had Parry known about M. Murko's post-1927 research, he probably would have read at least some of these publications.

So, to understand why Parry wrote that “it was the writings of Professor Murko” that impressed him most, one should consider the context in which these later words were written. First of all, the above quoted passage comes from Parry's personal notes entitled *Ćor Huso*, which were probably meant to culminate in a book on the two expeditions. According to Lord, they were dictated while Parry was still in Dubrovnik “in the winter and spring of 1935” (1991:3). Considering that Parry conducted fieldwork in the same area as M. Murko had a few years earlier, and since they both interviewed and recorded some of the same singers, Parry might have learned about M. Murko's expeditions between 1930 and 1932. For example, he could have heard about them from *guslari* that both scholars met. One such singer was Salih Ugljanin, with whom Parry recorded several songs and a long interview in 1934, and with whom M. Murko recorded three songs in 1930 (M. Murko 1951b:94). Other *guslari* that both researchers met, listened to, interviewed, or recorded were Ahmet Mušović, Milutin Bakić, Drago Drljević, Osman Lizde, Vukale Marković, Simo Milić, Joko Radonjić, Nikola Ružić, and Antonije Četković.<sup>21</sup> Field recording was at the time relatively rare, and since both scholars were well known in the area, it is hard to imagine that at least one of the many singers would not have mentioned M. Murko to Parry.

Moreover, Parry systematically collected works on South Slavic poetry during his time in the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, and he might have come across some of the other publications by M. Murko. Parry's own estimate of the total amount spent on “books” (a “collection,” as he

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<sup>19</sup> For example, in Nikšići, he recorded the *guslar* Sava Zurovec from Nevesinje (M. Murko 1951b:136, 542); in Metkovići he listened to Mitar Puhalo from Stolac; and in Čaplina and in Domanocići, villages close to Stolac, he met several singers and listened to different songs (M. Murko 1951b:126).

<sup>20</sup> For example, “Ein montenegrinischer Guslar” (January 1, 1928), “Im slavischen Süden” (October 19, 1930), “Modene jugoslavische Guslaren” (December 25, 1931), and “Ivan Meštrović als Rhapsode: Der ‘Klaggesang von der edlen Frauen des Asan-Aga’ in einer neuen Version” (April 17, 1932).

<sup>21</sup> This provisional list can be deduced by comparing the recordings and transcripts kept in the Milman Parry Collection of Oral Literature (Kay 1995) and the list of singers published in *Tragom* (M. Murko 1951b:926-37).

called it) was \$562.52, a hefty amount at the time,<sup>22</sup> and he even spent “a week at Zagreb for the repairing of the sound apparatus and the purchase of the books.”<sup>23</sup> With this money he “tried to obtain all the printed texts of the songs as well as those books of an historical nature which bear directly on the background of the poetry. . . . The collection, however, is already, I believe, a unique one for America, and when finished should be very valuable.”<sup>24</sup> At the end of the expedition, he shipped the books back to Cambridge, Massachusetts, where he kept them in his private library; and after his death, his wife Marian donated most of them to Widener Library at Harvard University.<sup>25</sup> As acquisition records reveal, the library received 202 books and 303 pamphlets on January 3, 1936.<sup>26</sup> Some of these books are still to be found in the library, accompanied by the following dedicatory note: “Harvard College Library. From the Estate of Milman Parry, Assistant Professor of Greek and Latin. Received January 10, 1936.” Apparently, no list of the donated books exists—if it was ever made—but it is quite possible that during his stay in the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, Parry obtained some of M. Murko’s work.<sup>27</sup>

Parry’s words in *Ćor Huso* hence need to be read in this context, that is, as written after he travelled some of the same paths as M. Murko had a few years before. While he was probably not aware of M. Murko’s contemporary fieldwork before he left Cambridge, he must have soon realized that he talked to, collected songs from, and recorded the same singers. Whether he subsequently obtained more of M. Murko’s publications is as yet uncertain, but quite possible. Parry’s narrative, which consequently installed M. Murko as his predecessor and as a proponent of “proto-oral theory,” was mediated through a particular moment in time. This narrative further determined later reception of M. Murko’s research, generating an increased interest in his early expeditions (1909-13) and subsequent publications (for example, Murko 1913a, 1913b, 1915a, 1915b, and 1929a) that supposedly influenced Parry despite the lack of any explicit evidence.

At the same time, this narrative created a blind spot for considering other inspirations for Parry’s research. One such overlooked example is the fieldwork of John and Alan Lomax, whose project of collecting “American folk song” began a year before Parry started recording *guslari*, with preparations starting as early as 1931. In fact, their project resembled Parry’s much more than M. Murko’s fieldwork: it had an archival scope and ambition; the Lomaxes, like Parry, focused on processes of oral composition; and they used a similar recording technology that was powered by a car battery (see Bulger 2006:11). Parry also knew John and Alan Lomax much

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<sup>22</sup> Milman Parry, Project for a Study of Yugoslavian Popular Oral Poetry (MS), p. 6.

<sup>23</sup> Milman Parry, Project for a Study of Yugoslavian Popular Oral Poetry (MS), p. 1.

<sup>24</sup> Milman Parry, Project for a Study of Yugoslavian Popular Oral Poetry (MS), p. 10.

<sup>25</sup> Some of the books, mostly valuable critical editions, Marian sent to Parry’s friends. Details are found in Milman Parry et al., Letters to Milman Parry and His Wife, Marian Thanhouser Parry, 1914-1936 (MS).

<sup>26</sup> Harvard Donation Records, UAIII 50.15, January, 1936 (MS).

<sup>27</sup> This was confirmed to me by the archival specialists of the Harvard University Archives. I personally looked over some of the books on South Slavic epic that are kept in the library, and while many come from Parry’s estate, the two publications by M. Murko cited by Parry come from older collections or donations. I have not, however, looked at all of M. Murko’s publications in the library. It is also possible that the library disposed of duplicates, which was at the time a standard practice.

better than M. Murko,<sup>28</sup> and, in *Ćor Huso*, he mentioned discussing his findings with them.<sup>29</sup> Here is hence an example of one thread which is still left unexplored due to Parry's own narrative about M. Murko.

### Matija Murko and Albert Lord

In the previous section I suggested that Parry met M. Murko only once and that he was, at least until 1933, acquainted with only two of his publications. When Parry died in 1935, all recordings and documents he gathered remained in Widener Library and, after the war, Albert Lord started studying the materials for his doctoral project.<sup>30</sup> Since Lord was the person who, in the aftermath of Parry's death, most intensively studied his work and promoted the research of South Slavic oral traditions, one can understand M. Murko's role in the development of oral-formulaic theory only by considering his influence on Lord.

Unlike Parry, Albert Lord never met M. Murko in person, but Lord was nevertheless far better acquainted with his work than his mentor. This can be ascertained on the grounds of his personal correspondence with M. Murko's son, Vladimir Murko (1906-1986), who assisted his father with fieldwork in the thirties. V. Murko later became a professor of financial law at the University of Ljubljana, but he continued to promote his father's heritage throughout his life.<sup>31</sup> The two scholars' correspondence is preserved in the University Archives at Harvard University,<sup>32</sup> comprising eight letters sent by V. Murko to Lord and four transcripts of letters sent by Lord to V. Murko. The collection is clearly fragmentary, as not all of the correspondence was archived. Unfortunately, there are no letters from or to Lord in V. Murko's personal archives in Ljubljana, but the archive does contain letters addressed to other people (mostly relatives), in which V. Murko mentions his correspondence with Lord.<sup>33</sup> This confirms that V. Murko and Lord communicated quite regularly, at least throughout the fifties and sixties.<sup>34</sup> To better understand Lord's interest in M. Murko's research on South Slavic oral poetry, I here present a short outline

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<sup>28</sup> Alan Lomax was a visiting student at Harvard in 1931, and John Lomax often visited Cambridge due to his friendship with George Lyman Kittredge (see Szwed 2010:22-30).

<sup>29</sup> “. . . what the Lomax's have told me about variations in the same song by the same singer among the southern Negroes would indicate that certain ballads in that poetry exist in a far more fluid state than is ever to be found in the case of the Southslavic” (Parry 1971:445).

<sup>30</sup> Lord obtained his Ph.D. from Harvard University in 1949.

<sup>31</sup> For V. Murko's life and work see Kambič 1991b. V. Murko also wrote articles on his father's work; see V. Murko 1953, 1958, 1963, and 1967. Cf. Kambič 1991a.

<sup>32</sup> See the folder entitled “Murko, Vladimir” (MS), among the Papers of Albert Bates Lord.

<sup>33</sup> The two archives that contain the surviving correspondence of Vladimir Murko are the Archive of the Republic of Slovenia (SI AS 1250) and the Manuscript Collection at the National and University Library in Ljubljana, Slovenia (Ms 1986).

<sup>34</sup> See also Vladimir Murko's short comments on their correspondence in V. Murko 1953:81, 1958:473, 1963:116, 119, and 1967:183.



of the preserved correspondence, focusing on those topics that help contextualize Lord's reception of M. Murko's work.

The oldest letter in the archive is dated June 9, 1951, and was sent by V. Murko to Lord.<sup>35</sup> It is the only letter written by V. Murko in English (with numerous errors for which the author apologizes).<sup>36</sup> V. Murko sent the letter to introduce himself and to inquire about the “important book on the history of epical poetry, based also on the study of the yugoslav epical poesy.” Moreover, he wrote that he is sending two publications by or about his father, hoping that they could help Lord in his preparation of the “important book.” Those were a newspaper article under the headline “Prof. Matijo Murko,” published in honor of M. Murko's ninetieth birthday in *Tovariš* (February 1, 1951, p. 57), and M. Murko's hefty essay “Velika zbirka slovenskih narodnih pesmi z melodijami” (“A Great Collection of Slovenian National Songs with Music”), published in 1929 in the Slovenian journal *Etnolog* (Murko 1929b). The newspaper item in *Tovariš* was aimed at the general public and included some excerpts from Matija Murko's memoirs, not yet available in Slovenian, but the article “Velika zbirka” was still one of the most detailed overviews of the history of folkloristic research in Slovenia and the broader region.<sup>37</sup>

In the letter, V. Murko also announced that he was editing a Slovenian translation of his father's *Spomini* (*Memoirs*), previously published in Czech as *Paměti* (1949). He stressed that he would prepare M. Murko's full bibliography, which was not included in the Czech original, and expressed his hopes that this would be of interest to Lord. He further mentioned that his sister Jelka Arneri (born Murko) recently translated *Tragom srpsko-hrvatske narodne epike: putovanja u godinama 1930 do 1932* from the original Czech manuscript into Serbo-Croatian, and that the translation would be published in Zagreb. Lastly, V. Murko sent his father's Prague address, but warned Lord that “because of his feebleness I cannot guarantee you will receive an answer from him.” As later correspondence reveals, all communication between Lord and M. Murko henceforth went through V. Murko as an intermediary, except for a package of goods that Lord sent to Prague.<sup>38</sup>

Because this letter started a years-long correspondence between the two scholars, the question arises as to why V. Murko first decided to contact Lord and inquire about an “important book.” V. Murko had probably heard about Lord from a local newspaper. Sylva Fischerová found a typescript of a newspaper article in M. Murko's archive in Litoměřice entitled “Američki učenjak o Jugoslavenskim narodnim pjesmama” (“American Scholar about Yugoslavian Folk Poems”), which reported on Lord's lecture for the Archaeological Institute of America in New

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<sup>35</sup> “Letter from Vladimir Murko to Albert Lord, June 9, 1951” (MS), Papers of Albert Bates Lord.

<sup>36</sup> V. Murko wrote: “I beg you to excuse my English but I hope you will understand my letter.”

<sup>37</sup> It also described a proposed project of publishing folk songs of different languages within the Austro-Hungarian Empire, by which M. Murko meant the local material gathered as part of the broader project *Das Volkslied in Österreich*. Interestingly, this state-financed project was initially coordinated by Wilhelm August Ritter von Hartel, a professor of classics at the University of Vienna and an influential Homeric scholar.

<sup>38</sup> In the manner of Homeric gift exchange, sending a package of goods that were unavailable behind the iron curtain was seen as a great service that could be repaid by, for example, sending books. After much encouragement, Lord managed to send one package to Matija Murko, but he failed to send any to Ljubljana despite several requests by Vladimir.

York on April 22, 1951.<sup>39</sup> The article reported on Parry and Lord's travels to Yugoslavia, the collection of recordings at Harvard, and the relevance of fieldwork research for Homeric scholarship; it concluded with Lord's announcement of a book project: "Professor Lord . . . is now working on a book, in which he would use the example of South Slavic epic poems in order to explain a currently less known and poorly researched topic—the system of the formation of epics in various nations."<sup>40</sup> I have traced the original article to the April 23, 1951, issue of the newspaper *Borba*, which was at the time unavailable in Prague due to political reasons. I therefore assume that someone (possibly V. Murko or his sister, Jelka Arneri) copied the article and sent it to M. Murko.<sup>41</sup>

This would also explain why V. Murko asked Lord about his "book." Since the letter was sent in 1951, it is uncertain which book was announced in the lecture described in *Borba*. Lord could have been referring to *Serbo-Croatian Folk Songs*, which he wrote in collaboration with Béla Bartók and published in the same year, or he could have referred to *Serbocroatian Heroic Songs* (1953)—in neither book is any of M. Murko's work mentioned in detail.<sup>42</sup> But if Lord's lecture at the Archaeological Institute of America in New York was at all similar to his lectures at the *American Philological Association* or the *International Folk Music Council* the year before, then the announced book was *The Singer of Tales*.<sup>43</sup>

At the time the first letter was sent, Lord was already preparing to leave for Yugoslavia for fieldwork, which lasted one month in August, 1951.<sup>44</sup> During this trip, Lord and his wife visited Ljubljana,<sup>45</sup> where they personally met with V. Murko. This is confirmed by the second

<sup>39</sup> See Fischerová 2014:88.

<sup>40</sup> "Profesor Lord je obavijestio prisutne učenjake da sada radi na djelu u kome će na primjeru jugoslavenskih epskih pjesama objasniti dosad malo poznatu i slabo obrađenu temu—sistem postajanja eposa kod raznih naroda" ("Američki Učenjak" 1951).

<sup>41</sup> Fischerová (2014:88) argues that M. Murko himself copied the article. I believe, however, that someone sent the article to him, mainly because the same document also contains the crossed out beginning of a letter dated "5. V. [May 5], 1951, Zagreb." M. Murko did not visit Zagreb in 1951 as he was not fit enough to travel, so I believe that the folio must have originally belonged to someone else.

<sup>42</sup> There are no references to M. Murko in *Serbo-Croatian Folk Songs* (1951). In the introduction to *Serbocroatian Heroic Songs*, Lord quotes Parry's memory of the *soutenance*, briefly compares M. Murko's and Parry's method of recording (1953:3), and refers twice to *Tragom* (329 and 416).

<sup>43</sup> Lord presented a similar paper in 1950 at the two annual meetings. In both papers (1951a and 1951b), he announced that he was preparing a book entitled *The Singer of Tales*, which would be published in the Harvard Studies in Comparative Literature series (1960).

<sup>44</sup> His two early research trips were carried out May-June, 1950, and in August, 1951 (Lord 1953:xii).

<sup>45</sup> Lord's main incentive to travel to Ljubljana was probably to meet the anthropologist Božo Škerlj, with whom he collaborated on Alan Lomax's project, *World Library of Folk and Primitive Music* (See "Letter from Albert Lord to Alan Lomax (transcript), July 16, 1952" (MS), Papers of Albert Bates Lord). This project published song recordings from Yugoslavia, recorded in 1951 by Peter Kennedy. Lord contributed an introduction, texts, and notes for the songs, and Škerlj assisted with transcribing and commenting upon Slovenian folksongs. In Ljubljana, Lord also met with Dragotin Cvetko from the Department of Musicology (see "Letter from Vladimir Murko to Albert Lord, December 31, 1951" (MS), Papers of Albert Bates Lord). Cvetko later wrote an article in the newspaper *Primorski dnevnik*, in which he briefly described Parry and Lord's work and introduced *Serbocroatian Heroic Songs* (see Cvetko 1952). Interestingly, this article was published together with an excerpt from M. Murko's memoirs.

letter V. Murko sent to Lord on September 12, 1951, this time written in Serbo-Croatian.<sup>46</sup> V. Murko started the letter by confirming that he relayed to his father Lord's wish for the publication of M. Murko's unpublished recordings, transcripts, and personal notes, and he expressed optimism that M. Murko would gladly accept the offer. V. Murko also reported that *Spomini* was in print and described in detail the additional materials that were not included in the previously published Czech edition: fieldwork photographs, M. Murko's full bibliography, and his biographic data. He further reported on other topics that fall outside the scope of this paper, but it needs to be mentioned that this letter established an outline that V. Murko would follow in further correspondence<sup>47</sup>: he would always begin with news about his father and his work (after 1952, about posthumous publications); continue with new publications in the field of South Slavic poetry; report on new publications about Slovenian literature and on cultural events in Slovenia<sup>48</sup>; and conclude with information about his work in law and finance, concurrent events at the University of Ljubljana, and his personal life.

The archive also holds a copy of Lord's response from September 15, 1951. In a letter written in English, Lord thanked V. Murko for his hospitality in Ljubljana and for the publications he sent with the first letter in June.<sup>49</sup> He repeated his wish that M. Murko's transcriptions and notes, “even if only fragments, should certainly be published.” This did not come to fruition: on October 20, 1951, V. Murko sent a letter to report that his father was delighted with Lord's work, seeing in him a successor whom he could not find among his own students, but that he was unable to provide him with recordings, transcripts, and notes. The recordings—V. Murko conveyed his father's message—were too fragile to be moved, while the notes were much too substantial to be published in whole. He did point out, however, that several transcriptions of songs were already published in various publications. V. Murko also asked Lord to pass his father's regards to Roman Jakobson.

These initial letters and a meeting in Ljubljana started a long-lasting communication between the two scholars. Perhaps the most important contribution to Lord's own research was V. Murko's steady stream of letters about M. Murko's publications. On October 20, 1951, for example, V. Murko reported that *Spomini* had been published, and on November 17, 1951, he sent Lord a copy together with M. Murko's *Die Bedeutung der Reformation und*

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<sup>46</sup> See “Letter from Vladimir Murko to Albert Lord, September 12, 1951” (MS), Papers of Albert Bates Lord.

<sup>47</sup> See letters (MSS) from V. Murko to Lord dated September 12, 1951; October 10, 1951; November 17, 1951; December 31, 1951; May 19, 1952; December 19, 1954; and December 21, 1958 (Papers of Albert Bates Lord).

<sup>48</sup> V. Murko's reports on Slovenian literature and its scholarship were included due to Albert Lord's interest in Slovenian literature, about which he made several inquiries during his time in Ljubljana. In Ljubljana, Lord also met with Mirko Rupelj from the National and University Library in order to acquire Slovenian books. In a letter to Mirko Rupelj, he later wrote: “I have so few Slovenian books at the present time that I am eager to increase my collection and my understanding of Slovenian literature” (“Letter from Albert Lord to Mirko Rupelj (transcript), September 15, 1951” (MS), Papers of Albert Bates Lord). Lord's interest in Slovenian literature was not completely novel. Milman Parry was also interested in Slovenian folk literature, obtaining an edition of Slovenian songs with texts and melodies (Aljaž 1923).

<sup>49</sup> “Letter from Albert Lord to Vladimir Murko (transcript), September 15, 1951” (MS), Papers of Albert Bates Lord. It is clear from this letter that Lord never replied to the first letter V. Murko sent on June 9, 1951.

*Gegenreformation für das geistige Leben der Südslaven* (1927).<sup>50</sup> He regularly reported on the development of the publication process of *Tragom*, writing, for example, that his father did not include all of his findings in this publication and that many observations still remain in his personal notes.<sup>51</sup>

In a letter sent on May 19, 1952, V. Murko announced his father's death.<sup>52</sup> He reported that Matija Murko passed away calmly but had received neither *Spomini* nor *Tragom* before his death:

Unfortunately, he did not live to see the published edition of the *Memoirs* in Slovenian, which the courier brought from Belgrade a day after his death. Even less so the edition of *Tragom srpsko-hrvatske narodne epike*, which I sent to you on April 25 and which costs 1533 dinars in the bookstore.<sup>53</sup>

As is apparent from this passage, V. Murko sent Lord both volumes of *Tragom* a few weeks earlier, not failing to mention that the edition was pricey. In the letter sent after he shipped the books, he further speculated about the future of M. Murko's unpublished work, especially the project *Velika zbirka slovenskih narodnih pesmi*, a large collection of unpublished Slovenian folksongs.<sup>54</sup> V. Murko also listed those unpublished documents by M. Murko which he deemed worth publishing: his personal notebooks, correspondence, and postcards from various travels. The letter concluded with an inquiry about Lord's planned visit to Yugoslavia in the summer of 1952.

Lord responded on May 30, 1952. His short letter was a eulogy to the dead scholar, praising M. Murko's research and stressing the influence it had on Parry and his own work:

You well know Professor Parry [*sic*] and my own deep debt to him [Matija Murko] for the inspiration of his courageous and pioneering field work in collecting and studying the Yugoslav epic. He blazed the path and pointed the way for us to go, and made our own work the easier by his acuteness and perspicacity. I shall never forget when I was a senior in college reading particularly his *La poésie populaire épique en Yougoslavie au début du XXe siècle*. It opened up a new world for me. It was most fitting that the two volumes of his *Tragom srpsko-hrvatske narodne epike* arrived just before your letter. It is a great pity that your father did not see the finished books

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<sup>50</sup> Lord thanked V. Murko for receiving both publications in a letter dated December 10. See "Letter from Albert Lord to Vladimir Murko (transcript), December 10, 1951" (MS), Papers of Albert Bates Lord.

<sup>51</sup> "Letter from Vladimir Murko to Albert Lord, May 19, 1952" (MS), Papers of Albert Bates Lord.

<sup>52</sup> "Letter from Vladimir Murko to Albert Lord, May 19, 1952" (MS), Papers of Albert Bates Lord. Matija Murko died on February 11, 1952, a date which Vladimir notes in his letter. Cf. Mazon et al. 1953.

<sup>53</sup> "Na žalost nije više dočekaao ni izdanja slovenačkih Spomina koja mu je doneo kurir iz Beograda dan posle smrti, a još manje Putovanje tragom srpskohrvatske epike narodne koju sam Vam poslao 25-IV te koje u knjižari vredi 1533 dinara." ("Letter from Vladimir Murko to Albert Lord, May 19, 1952" (MS), Papers of Albert Bates Lord.)

<sup>54</sup> Many remain unpublished. For the afterlife of this collection, see Golež Kaučič 2005.

before his death. They mark a milestone of incalculable importance in the history of epic scholarship, and I am most deeply indebted to you for sending them.<sup>55</sup>

Apparent from this passage is Lord's praise of M. Murko's "pioneering field work," a phrase that would later find its way into *The Singer of Tales*, where M. Murko is described as "a true pioneer" (1960:208). Lord also mentioned *La poésie populaire épique* and *Tragom srpsko-hrvatske narodne epike* as the two most important publications in the field, a claim that is still repeated in contemporary scholarship about oral poetry.

Three more letters dated after 1952 are preserved in the archive: two letters from V. Murko and a transcript of a letter from Lord.<sup>56</sup> V. Murko's letters are dated December 19, 1954, and December 21, 1958, making it apparent that Lord and V. Murko continued communicating and exchanging academic publications. The last transcript of a letter sent by Albert Lord is dated February 3, 1961. In the letter, this time written in Serbo-Croatian, Lord reported that he is sending a copy of his *The Singer of Tales*, "in which I speak a bit about your father."<sup>57</sup> He also wrote that M. Murko was "undoubtedly the best researcher of Serbo-Croatian national song in this century—as well as the past century." The latest preserved clue<sup>58</sup> that points towards correspondence between the two scholars is V. Murko's article, "Sudbina literarne ostavštine i fonografskih snimaka srpskohrvatskih epskih pjesama Matije Murka" ("The Fate of Matija Murko's Literary Legacy and His Phonographic Recordings of Serbo-Croatian Epic Poems"), published in 1963. It is kept in Lord's archive, together with an envelope signed by V. Murko, but without a letter.<sup>59</sup>

From the correspondence between the two peers, it is possible to infer something about the role M. Murko's research had for Lord. V. Murko first contacted Lord because he heard about his work on South Slavic oral poetry. In August, 1951, V. Murko and Lord met in Ljubljana. This meeting resulted in a productive correspondence between both scholars which lasted for a decade at least, and possibly longer. V. Murko became an important local informant on Slovenian academia and on Slovenian literature; most importantly, he supplied Lord with information about M. Murko and sent him publications on South Slavic oral tradition, including Murko's *magnum opus*, *Tragom srpsko-hrvatske narodne epike*. The increasing acquaintance with M. Murko's research throughout the fifties and sixties is reflected in Lord's publications, as well: from its absence in *Serbo-Croatian Folk Songs* and the early papers, to brief mentions in *Serbocroatian Heroic Songs*, to the remark in *The Singer of Tales* that the "wisest accounts of singing and of

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<sup>55</sup> "Letter from Albert Lord to Vladimir Murko (transcript), May 30, 1952" (MS), Papers of Albert Bates Lord.

<sup>56</sup> "Letter from Vladimir Murko to Albert Lord, December 19, 1954" (MS), "Letter from Vladimir Murko to Albert Lord, December 21, 1958" (MS), and "Letter from Albert Lord to Vladimir Murko (transcript), February 3, 1961" (MS), Papers of Albert Bates Lord.

<sup>57</sup> ". . . u kojoj nešto govorim o Vašem ocu." ("Letter from Albert Lord to Vladimir Murko (transcript), February 3, 1961" (MS), Papers of Albert Bates Lord.)

<sup>58</sup> It should also be noted that Lord visited the sixth International Congress of Folklorists that was organized in Bled, Slovenia, September 14-17, 1959 (Zupančič 1960). Perhaps both scholars met again at that time.

<sup>59</sup> See the folder entitled, "Murko, Matthias," among the Papers of Albert Bates Lord.

field work are to be found in the writings of Matija Murko,” illustrated by a short bibliography of his work on the topic (Lord 1960:280-81). The acquaintance with M. Murko’s research is hence largely due to V. Murko’s regular correspondence with Lord.

## Conclusions

The historical evidence surrounding Matija Murko, Milman Parry, and Albert Lord presents a different view of M. Murko’s contribution to oral theory than the one currently held by most scholars. In this paper, I have argued that M. Murko was at least partially acquainted with contemporary Homeric scholarship; that Parry had a limited knowledge of M. Murko’s work before 1934, and was perhaps more interested in the work of other scholars such as John and Alan Lomax; and, finally, that Lord acquired publications by and about M. Murko through his son Vladimir, who was, I suggest, Lord’s most important source of information on M. Murko’s life and work.

Nevertheless, M. Murko has been persistently described as someone who worked before Parry and is relevant for oral theory only as a forerunner. Lord’s short note that I found stored among his other personal papers is especially telling in this regard:

While Murko noted some of the same things that Parry did, Murko’s lessons were not learned by scholars in other disciplines. Homerists did not read Murko, because he was not a classicist, but they were soon to read Parry.<sup>60</sup>

The statement confirms the narrative proposed above, in which M. Murko came to similar conclusions as Parry but, because he was not a classicist, became a lesser known “pioneer.” Parry, on the other hand, was a classicist at Harvard and so his radical ideas about Homer and South Slavic epic revolutionized classical scholarship and literary studies more generally.<sup>61</sup> Ironically, M. Murko fought such disciplinary inequality throughout his career and was therefore wary of classical philology, even if he was acquainted with Homeric scholarship and made some impact on the “analyst-unitarian” debate.<sup>62</sup> More than anything else, then, Lord’s note seems to suggest that M. Murko’s arguments about oral literature were merely an inspiration for Parry’s big idea about Homer.

What Lord failed to mention, however, was that it was his own work, and especially *The Singer of Tales*, that put Parry on the map of literary scholarship—along with M. Murko, as his predecessor. As Robert Kanigel recently wrote, it was “Albert Lord, saddled with all those aluminum discs in 1935, who would further establish Parry’s reputation and fix him in the mind of the scholarly world” (2021:11). He studied the materials gathered by Parry, further developed

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<sup>60</sup> Written on a small piece of paper in the folder entitled, “Murko, Matthias,” among the Papers of Albert Bates Lord.

<sup>61</sup> The influence was such that the comparativist Claudio Guillén later called “Parry-Lord theory” its own field within comparative literature (1993:173-79).

<sup>62</sup> See the discussion of Murko and Drerup in the first section of the article.

his ideas about oral poetry and Homer, made additional research trips, and promoted Parry's work to scholars in classics, comparative literature, Slavic studies, and other disciplines. Along the way, he also replicated the story about M. Murko which he picked up from *Ćor Huso*. So he wrote about M. Murko's pioneering work, how he inspired Parry, and at times even described “some of the same things” that he noted about oral poetry. With that, he established a scholarly genealogy from M. Murko to Parry to himself.

Consequently, scholars today tend to believe that M. Murko was merely a forerunner to Parry. They therefore exclusively consider the early work (in German and French) that supposedly influenced Parry, if they consider his work at all. Although M. Murko was a generation older than Parry, it is not especially productive to look for his arguments in Parry's work, not least since he worked out his most significant theses about oral literature after Parry's death. To understand his contribution to oral theory, his status as a “pioneer” should be reassessed, and more attention should be paid to what later scholars learned from him. For example, historical evidence I have analyzed in this paper suggests that Lord was well acquainted with M. Murko's late publications; was aware of his vast *oeuvre*; brought it into consideration when writing *The Singer of Tales*; tried to obtain his personal documents; and personally knew his son, V. Murko, with whom he regularly exchanged literature. Clearly, Lord benefitted from the work of “Parry's predecessor” more than Parry himself; however, because he reproduced his teacher's narrative about M. Murko and underplayed his own involvement in the advancement of oral theory, this has hitherto passed by unnoticed. If we were henceforth to turn to M. Murko's later studies (in Czech, Slovenian, and Serbo-Croatian) and to the reception of his research by Lord, a different picture might emerge: one in which his contribution to the development of oral theory might be more important than previously thought.

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