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Dmitry Piotrovsky

Pavlov First St. Petersburg State Medical University

THE THEME IN ORAL POETRY AS EXEMPLIFIED BY THE FAROESE

RAGNARS TÁTTUR

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The theme as well as the formula is one of two basic elements of Parry and Lord's theory. A. B. Lord defines the “themes” of oral poetry as “the groups of ideas regularly used in telling a tale in the formulaic style of traditional song”. The theme happens to be a bilateral unit having both the plane of content and the plane of expression. The presence of the plane of content is self-evident and axiomatic. The theme in oral Faroese poetry possesses also the plane of expression. The proof of this statement is the fact that the realization of the same theme or some similar themes in different ballads or within the same piece of oral poetry presupposes the use of the same units of the lower level i.e., formulas and repetitions. The theme is a bilateral unit having its proper position in the unit system of the poetic language. It boasts its own level status. From the point of view of the level structure, the theme occupies the medium place between the formulas and the whole text. The interaction of the theme and both neighboring levels may be described as whole-part relationship. To the means of formula technique, formulas and repetitions, the theme behaves as the whole; to the text it plays the role of a part. Such a hierarchical structure creates the effect that the features of some units within this system influence the features of other units.

Keywords: theme, oral poetry, Faroese ballads, formula, formula technique.

The theme as well as the formula is one of the two basic elements of the Parry Lord theory. Following M. Parry, A. B. Lord defines the “themes” of oral poetry as “the groups of ideas regularly used in telling a tale in the formulaic style of traditional song” [Lord, 1960, p. 68]. The first impression of this definition might be that the theme of oral poetry does

not differ at all from the everyday concept of the same word. The theme is normally regarded as something existing only in the plane of content.

However, the key words in Lord's definition are "in the formulaic style". The theme presupposes the use of special formula technique¹. This means that the theme finds its place in the system of units within the so-called poetic language. The idea that the poetic language is not a metaphor is central to Yuri Kleiner's approach [cf. Kleiner, 2010, p. 11; Kleiner, 2020, p. 111]. In this case, the poetic language represents a hierarchically organized system of units. The specific poetic units of the lower level are formulas and the unit of the upper level is the theme. The conclusion is obvious: a theme consists of formulas. Made up of words, the formula is a two-planed unit possessing both the plane of content and the plane of expression. The latter means that a formula is material. The whole consisting of material parts is also material by definition.

The material aspect of the theme manifests itself at least in two ways: externally and internally. The external manifestation, probably among other features, lies in the fact that the theme has its own combinatory characteristics². The present article deals with the internal structure of the theme, that is how the theme is constructed using the means of the formulaic technique. The main source of examples is the Faroese ballad *Ragnars Táttur*, other Faroese examples being used as comparative material. Most Faroese citations are from Hammershaimb's edition of Sigurd's songs [Hammershaimb, 1851]. *Ragnars Táttur* relates some episodes of *Ragnar Lodbrók's* (Leather Trousers) story, also present in the Icelandic *Ragnars saga loðbrókar ok sona hans* (Ragnar Lodbrók's and his sons' saga). In the Faroese version, Ragnar's two marriages are described. First, he marries Tóra Borgarhjörtur (Heart of Castle). To become Tóra's husband, Ragnar has to kill a dragon. The marriage does not last long, Tóra dies on their wedding-night³. Following this, Ragnar Lodbrók marries Ásla the daughter of Sigurd and Brynhild. This marriage justifies the inclusion of *Ragnars Táttur* into the so-called Sigurd's cycle.

Ragnars Táttur consists of several themes. The study of its precise thematic structure goes beyond the purpose of the present article. The

¹ Formula technique includes not only formulas as such but also repetitions (for more details, see [Piotrovskii, 2020, p. 271–289]).

² The combinatory characteristics of the theme in Faroese ballads were discussed in [Piotrovskii, 2018, p. 144–149].

³ Unlike the Icelandic version where Tóra gives birth to two sons before she dies.

themes have parallels in other ballads or in this one and compare their formulaic filling.

Both in *Ragnars Táttur* and in *Regin Smiður* ‘Regin the Smith’, which is the first ballad of Sigurd’s cycle, the theme of fighting the dragon appears. The description of the moment when the hero first sees the dragon includes a formula:

*Ragnar gongur í grasagarði,
sum ormurin firi lá*

‘Ragnar goes to the garden
where the dragon lay’ (RT 124–125).

*Tríati favnar var fossurin,
íð ormurin undir lá*

‘Thirty ells high was the waterfall
under which the dragon lay’ (RS 433–434).

Here the expression *sum ormurin firi lá* / *íð ormurin undir lá* provides a prototypic example of the formula (in the mathematical sense of the word) consisting of the permanent (in bold) and the variable part. The formula occupies one line, which is also a feature of a “good” formula.

The fighting scenes are also parallel in both ballads:

*Ragnar hjó so stórt eitt högg,
tað var mikið undur,
hann hjó tann hunn fræna orm
af í miðju sundir.*

‘Ragnar gave so hard a blow,
that was a great wonder,
he split the glittering dragon
in the middle asunder’ (RT 136–139).

*Sjúrdur gav so vænt eitt högg,
tað öllum tókti undur,
tá skalv bæði leyv og lund
og allar vörildar grundir.*

‘Sigurd gave so strong a blow,
it seemed everybody a wonder,
he hewed leaves, forest
and all grounds of the world’ (RS 441–444).

Here it is a repetition, rather than a formula, and it is longer than one line. The length of the element repeated might be interpreted differently. If only the coincidence of the same word *högg* / *högg*, *undur* / *undur* is taken into consideration, the length of the repetition is two lines; if the use of synonyms *hjó* / *skalv* is also taken as the means of formula technique (which is preferable), the whole stanza should be regarded as the repetition. But there is no impenetrable boundary between the repetitions and formulas. The size (one line / more than one line) is important but not decisive. Much more essential is the fact that both formulas and repetitions consist of permanent and variable elements, which allows them both to be united as the formula technique.

The end of the dragon-fighting scene in *Ragnars Táttur* has a formula also found in the refrain of the *Regin Smiður* and *Brinhild* (the second ballad of Sigurd's cycle):

Ragnar vann af orminum

Sjúrdur vann af orminum

'Ragnar beat the dragon' (RT 140).

'Sigurd beat the dragon' (RS 7, B 8).

Here, only the names of the heroes differ.

One more parallel theme is the hero's arrival at the beach, which is found in *Ragnars Táttur* and in *Högni* (the third ballad of Sigurd's cycle):

*Hegar ið hans snekkja
kendi fagurt land,
kastar hann sínum akkerum
á so hvítan sand.*

*Tá ið teirra snekkjan
kendi fagurt land,
kasta teir sínum akkerum
á tann hvíta sand.*

*Kasta hann sínum akkerum
á so hvítan sand,
firstur steig tá Ragnar kongur
sínum fótum á land.*

*Kasta teir sínum akkerum
á tann hvíta sand,
firstur steig Gunnar Júkason
sínum fótum á land.*

'Then his ship
recognized a beautiful land,
he casts his anchor
into the white sand.

'Then their ship
recognized a beautiful land,
they cast their anchor
into the white sand.

He casts his anchor
into the white sand,
first Ragnar the king puts
his foot onto the land' (RT 220–227).

They cast their anchor
into the white sand,
first Gunnar Júkason puts
his foot onto the land' (H 281–288).

The length of this repetition is two stanzas and it is not the maximum known. In *Regin Smiður* there are two coinciding fragments having the length of five stanzas (RS 257–276 and 313–332). The repetition is close to verbatim. Only the heroes' names and grammatical numbers are different. An ordinary formula is hardly possible here as this is a prototype repetition. However, the repetition is built using the formula technique: stable elements are combined with changeable ones.

The death of an individual is another example of the theme in oral poetry. In *Ragnars Táttur*, it is Tora, Ragnar's first wife, who dies, while in *Regin Smiður* it is Sigurd's father Sigmund.

*Tað er enn, sum ofta firr,
tað kom á so brátt:
ung var hon á aldrinum,
tá ið hon fekk helsótt.*

‘It is so as often before
it happened everywhere:
she was young of the age,
when she found death’ (RT 248–251).

*Tað var tá sum oftun enn,
tað kom á so brátt
kongin sokti helsott
á teirri somu nátt.*

‘It is so as often after
it happened everywhere:
the king found death
the same night’ (RS 97–100).

A fact of crucial importance is that there exists another version of *Ragnars Táttur* recorded by H. Chr. Lyngbye [Lyngbye, 1822, p. 308–345]. In this version, the text is closer to *Regin Smiður*:

*Tað er enn, sum ofta firr,
tað kom á so brátt:
frúnna sokti helsótt
hesa somu nátt⁴.*

‘It is so as often before
it happened everywhere:
the woman found death
this same night’ (Lyngbye, 1822, p. 330).

*Tað var tá sum oftun enn,
tað kom á so brátt
kongin sokti helsott
á teirri somu nátt.*

‘It is so as often after
it happened everywhere:
the king found death
the same night’ (RS 97–100).

The existence of different variants of the same fragment proves that in both cases it is the same unit, but the unit is variable. The variability of formulas and repetitions is an essential characteristic of oral poetry, and this will have far-reaching implications for the whole theory. The variability of lower level units leads to the changeability of higher units — themes. The final result is the multi-formed character of the whole text as opposed to the fixed text.

The theme of funeral is characterized by repeating passages in *Ragnars Táttur* and *Regin Smiður*:

⁴ The text is given in Hammershaimb’s orthography which is traditional and based on the Icelandic alphabet; Lyngbye, whose edition is 29 years older, uses phonetic spelling:

*Teâ eer inn, sum ofta firr,
Teâ koom tiil so braat,
Frygvín sökti Helsot
Hesa seâmu Naat.*

*Eystantil undir heyginum
sum dreingir reika á fold,
gróvu teir tað ljósa lík
niður í dökka mold.*

*Árla var um morgunin,
ið dreingir eiga tal:
dimmur er hesin dökki dagur
niður í mold at fara.*

‘Eastward to the hill
warriors go on the ground,
they put this bright cadaver
down into the dark soil.

It was early in the morning,
when warriors have a speech:
grim is this dark day
to be brought down into the soil’
(RT 272–279).

*Eystantil undir heyginum,
ið dreingir reika á fold,
har gróvu teir tað ljósa lík
niður í dökka mold.*

*Eystantil undir heyginum,
ið dreingir reika at tala:
dimmur er hesin dapri dagur
niður í mold at fara.*

‘Eastward to the hill
warriors go on the ground,
there they put this bright cadaver
down into the dark soil.

Eastward to the hill,
warriors go to say:
grim is this dark day
to be brought down into the soil’
(RS 109–116).

The repetition here is again close to verbatim, and it is yet another example of a prototype repetition.

Sometimes the same theme is repeated several times within one ballad. Examples of this can be found in *Ragnars Táttur*.

Ragnar was not the first who wanted to kill the dragon and marry Tóra. Before him, an unidentified earl had made a similar attempt. The moment when the earl and then Ragnar learn about the reward for the prospective heroic deed may be interpreted as two realizations of the same theme:

*Hetta frætti greivin
suður til sína landa:
ormurin ringdur um moyonna sal
eykar fljóði vanda.*

‘This knew the earl
who lived in his land in the south:
the dragon put rings around the maids’
room
and made women’s horror greater’
(RT 64–67).

*Enntá frætti Ragnar kongur,
sonur Sjúrdar Ring:
ormur er ringdur um moyonna sal,
hann ber mers ikring.*

‘Then knew Ragnar the king,
Sigurd the Ring’s son:
the dragon put rings around
the maids’ room,
he bore them around’ (RT 88–91).

The first line is a wide-spread formula. The verb form *frætti* ‘knew’ is the stable part whereas the character’s name is variable. At the same time, impair lines constitute the stable part of the stanza, which might be regarded as a repetition, pair lines form the variable part.

The arrival of the pretenders yields two parallel themes:

*Lótu teir af lunnum ganga
eina glastriskeið,
ormin hoyrdu teir blása hátt,
tá ið skamt var komið á leið.*

‘They let go down rolls
a glass ship,
the dragon heard them whistle loud,
when they were coming quickly’
(RT 72–75).

*Vundu upp síni silkisegl
útaf glastriskeið,
ormin hoyrdu teir blása,
tá ið teir komu mitt á leið.*

‘They lifted their silk sail
on a glass ship,
the dragon heard them whistle
when they were half coming’
(RT 104–107).

The fragments are closer to each other than in the previous case.

Ragnar’s second marriage is depicted as a series of repeated events. The arrival of Ragnar and his men to the place where Ásla lived with her father is described twice:

*Sveinar ríða í landið upp,
ið breyðið skuldu baka:
Haki hat sá, firi ráddi,
hann átti dottur spaka.*

‘Boys go to the land
they had to bake bread:
Haki was the man, he was the house
owner,
he had a beautiful daughter’
(RT 288–291).

*Sveinar ríða í landið upp,
ið breyðið skuldu baka,
Haki hat sá, ið firi ráddi,
hann átti dottur spaka.*

‘Boys go to the land
they had to bake bread:
Haki was the man, who was the house
owner,
he had a beautiful daughter’
(RT 312–315).

The repetition is nearly verbatim.

The following example shows that repetitions may be part not only of different realizations of the same theme, as in the previous cases, but also of similar themes which are not identical. First Ragnar gives instructions to his people, then they fulfill the instructions:

*Bið hana koma til skips ímorgin,
hava við sar svein,
hava tann svein, sum ikki er svein
og koma so búgvín heim.*

*Bið hana koma til skips ímorgin,
hava við sar klæði,
vera klædd og ikki klædd,
og koma so búgvín bæði.*

‘Ask her to come to the ship tomorrow,
have a man with her,
have a man with her, who is not a man
and come prepared this way.

Ask her to come to the ship tomorrow,
have clothes with her,
be dressed and undressed
and come prepared this way’
(RT 304–311).

*Hann bað teg koma til skips ímorgin,
hava við tar svein,
hava tann svein, sum ikki er svein
og koma so búgvín heim.*

*Hann bað teg koma til skips ímorgin,
hava við tar klæði,
vera klædd og ikki klædd,
og koma so búgvín bæði.*

‘He asks you to come to the ship tomorrow,
have a man with you,
have a man with you, who is not a man
and come prepared this way.

He asks you to come to the ship tomorrow,
have clothes with you,
be dressed and undressed
and come prepared this way’
(RT 316–323).

In the two passages, only the grammatical person differs.

The examples provided demonstrate that the theme in oral Faroese poetry does possess the plane of expression. The proof of this statement is the fact that the realization of the same theme or some similar themes in different ballads or within the same piece of oral poetry presupposes the use of the same units of the lower level i.e., formulas and repetitions. The theme happens to be a bilateral unit having both the plane of content and the plane of expression. The presence of the plane of content is self-evident and axiomatic. Here the theme is regarded as a bilateral unit having its proper position in the unit system of the poetic language. From the point of view of the level structure, the theme occupies the place between the formulas and the whole text. The interaction of the theme and both neighboring levels may be described as whole-part relationship. Such a hierarchical structure creates the effect that the features of some units within this system influence the features of other units. Previously [Piotrovskii, 2020, p.275], the set of four essential features for formulas was determined: metrical conditions, usefulness, variability of form and stability of meaning. Metrical conditions relate to formulas only due to the themes being “too large” to match the cadency. Usefulness characterizes the formula in respect to performance (the singer). The same quality can likely be ascribed to the theme, but in terms of usefulness the formula and the theme act independently. The variability

of the formula directly influences the variability of the theme and further continuation of the text. The text of oral poetry is multi-formed by definition. As to the stability of meaning, the direction of dependance is opposite from the theme to the formula. The poetic language being a language [Kleiner, 1999, p.22–25] illustrates the same directions of dependances among the levels. In the area of formal parameters, lower-level units influence the units of higher levels; in the area of semantics, control moves in the opposite direction.

The main conclusion of the present article is that the theme in oral poetry is a bilateral unit having in addition to the plane of content, which is obvious, also the plane of expression.

ABBREVIATIONS

B = Brinhild

H = Högni

RS = Regin Smiður

RT = Ragnars Táttur

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Дмитрий Пиотровский

*Первый Санкт-Петербургский государственный
медицинский университет им. акад. И. П. Павлова*

ТЕМА В УСТНОЙ ПОЭЗИИ НА ПРИМЕРЕ ФАРЕРСКОЙ ПРЯДИ О РАГНАРЕ

Для цитирования: *Piotrovsky D. The theme in oral poetry as exemplified by the Faroese *Ragnars Tättur* // Скандинавская филология. 2021. Т. 19. Вып. 1. С. 61–70. <https://doi.org/10.21638/11701/spbu21.2021.104>*

Тема наряду с формулой является одной из двух основных единиц теории Пэрри-Лорда. А. Б. Лорд определяет темы как «группы идей, регулярно используемые при передаче сюжета в формульном стиле традиционной песни». Тема оказывается двусторонней единицей, обладающей планом содержания и планом выражения. Наличие плана содержания не требует доказательств. В устной поэзии тема также обладает планом выражения. Доказательством этого является тот факт, что реализация одной и той же темы или нескольких сходных тем в разных балладах или внутри одного устного поэтического произведения предполагает использование одних и тех же единиц более низкого уровня, а именно формул и повторов. Тема является двусторонней единицей, имеющей свое собственное место в системе единиц поэтического языка. Она обладает уровневым статусом. С точки зрения урвневой структуры тема занимает место между формулами и целым текстом. Взаимодействие темы с соседними уровнями может быть описано как отношение части и целого. По отношению к средствам формульной техники, формулам и повторам тема ведет себя как целое, по отношению к тексту она играет роль части. Такая иерархическая структура приводит к тому, что свойства одних единиц внутри системы влияют на свойства других.

Ключевые слова: тема, устная поэзия, фарерские баллады, формула, формульная техника.

Dmitry Piotrovsky

PhD in Philology, Associate Professor,
Pavlov First St. Petersburg State Medical University,
6–8, ul. Lva Tolstogo, St. Petersburg, 197022, Russian Federation
E-mail: dimapiotrovsky@hotmail.com

Пиотровский Дмитрий Дмитриевич

кандидат филологических наук, доцент,
Первый Санкт-Петербургский государственный
медицинский университет им. акад. И. П. Павлова,
Российская Федерация, 197022, Санкт-Петербург, ул. Льва Толстого, 6–8
E-mail: dimapiotrovsky@hotmail.com

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