One of the fruits of research in oral art during recent decades has been the recognition of the “return song” as a distinct sub-class of epics.¹ It was Albert Lord who first suggested that the Odyssey was merely the lone survivor of a tradition of return songs current in the Homeric age.² In the same work, Lord laid the foundations of a comparative methodology by identifying a parallel tradition among the Serbo-Croatian epic singers of this century, extensive records of whose performances are preserved in the Milman Parry Collection of Oral Literature at Harvard University. Subsequent research by Lord³ and others has illuminated various facets of the return song; especially important in this connection was a 1969 article in which Lord described the “theme of the withdrawn hero” in terms of five major elements: absence, devastation, return, retribution, and wedding.⁴ All of this seminal work has opened broad methodological avenues in the interpretation of oral literature.

The present study will concern itself with one aspect of the return song: the character of the hero and his establishment as a narrative presence. The fundamental problem which the hero of the return song faces is what might be called his loss of generic selfhood. Scholars have long recognized the generic

¹An earlier version of this study was presented to the Slavic II section of the Midwest Modern Language Association on 8 November 1979 in Indianapolis, Indiana.


³A complete review of all Lord’s published work appears in Foley, “The Oral Theory in Context.”

character of human representation in ancient art; the typological nature of characters in Homer, for example, becomes swiftly apparent when one compares them with the men and women of modern and non-traditional authors. Of course, each tradition and performance will introduce degrees of particularization in the representation of human types; yet the basic structural events in each tale occur along the axis of the generic and not the particular. This article will try to show that in return songs the hero's identity is defined by his relation to a particular generic form. His "development" in the course of the tale consists in a movement from generic non-fulfillment to generic fulfillment, from a condition of loss of identity to the successful realization of himself in the typological role that awaits him from the start.

Thus the hero's task involves the re-creation of an identity. This re-creation is accomplished through his fulfillment of certain action patterns. Deep structural paradigms underlie and govern the hero's labors throughout the story; through their actualization he establishes himself as a generic presence. Thus his movement from generic non-identity to identity is effected on the narrative level. This aesthetic principle I term the narrative generation of the hero's identity.

The following argument has two parts. In the first, after a brief review of certain theoretical concerns, I will discuss the concept of the generic character in the Odyssey and analyze a particular narrative structure, the guest-host exchange with the "identification theme" at its center, as this structure appears in various stages of elaboration throughout the poem. The second part will transpose the same methodology to a selection of Serbo-Croatian return songs in which there recurs a comparable unit, different from the Odyssean in its specific form but much the same in its narrative function. The comparison will, I hope, disclose some basic features of the return song as a genre and may suggest certain general principles of oral narrative.

Before we begin to analyze the Odyssey in specific terms, certain general observations on the ritual nature of the oral performance should be made. Space here forbids anything more than a cursory review of a subject that has been studied in more depth elsewhere. Though these comments are intended to introduce my analysis of the Odyssey, several of them, as we shall see, are relevant to the Serbo-Croatian material as well.

Any study in the poetic expression of an oral culture is incomplete if it does not take into account the oral context as a major determinant in the very nature of such art. The collectivity of the creation process is an important