



ORAL TRADITION

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Oral Tradition seeks to provide a comparative and interdisciplinary focus for studies in oral literature and related fields by publishing research and scholarship on the creation, transmission, and interpretation of all forms of oral traditional expression. As well as essays treating certifiably oral traditions, *OT* presents investigations of the relationships between oral and written traditions, as well as brief accounts of important fieldwork, a Symposium section (in which scholars may reply at some length to prior essays), review articles, occasional transcriptions and translations of oral texts, a digest of work in progress, and a regular column for notices of conferences and other matters of interest. In addition, occasional issues will include an ongoing annotated bibliography of relevant research and the annual Albert Lord and Milman Parry Lectures on Oral Tradition. *OT* welcomes contributions on all oral literatures, on all literatures directly influenced by oral traditions, and on non-literary oral traditions. Submissions must follow the list-of-reference format (style sheet available on request) and must be accompanied by a stamped, self-addressed envelope for return or for mailing of proofs; all quotations of primary materials must be made in the original language(s) with following English translations. Authors should submit two copies of all manuscripts. Most contributions will be reviewed by at least one specialist reader and one member of the editorial board before a final decision is reached. Review essays, announcements, and contributions to the Symposium section will be evaluated by the editor in consultation with the board.

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Editor's Column

With the present issue *Oral Tradition* begins its sixth year of publication, with a number of new developments on the horizon. Upcoming contents will include a special issue on the oral traditions of Yugoslavia guest-edited by John Miletich (6, ii-iii). This collection of essays will present noted Yugoslav scholars describing and analyzing the many oral genres that constitute that tradition; while some of the articles treat the most familiar poetic type—the epic, this issue will also contain essays on the lyric, ballad, legend, and prose narrative. For the first time, then, native scholars will present a comprehensive picture of Yugoslav oral traditions to an English-speaking audience.

Oral Tradition will also be featuring an “epistolary symposium” on the topic of “Orality, Literacy, and Contemporary Critical Theory” beginning in 1992. A significant new section of *Oral Tradition*, this exchange will be edited by Ellie Ragland-Sullivan, and will provide scholars with an opportunity for a meaningful exchange of ideas and theories on this timely subject. Interested individuals should correspond with the special editor (c/o Center for Studies in Oral Tradition, University of Missouri, 301 Read Hall, Columbia, MO 65211) before submitting a 510 page “letter” for consideration.

In this issue of *OT* we present a miscellany of essays on oral traditions from ancient Greece and medieval Europe to modern New Zealand, from the language of epic to the orality of dialogue in the novel and short story, and from linguistic and textual inquiry to biological correlation between art and psyche. Svetozar Koljević opens the discussion with an eye- (or ear-) opening illustration of the poetic value of formulaic phraseology in the Serbo-Croatian narrative poetry. Especially because the mechanism-versus-aesthetics debate over repetitive language has raged so long, his remarks on the traditional resonance of certain phrases will certainly open new vistas for specialists in numerous oral traditions. From the poems of the nineteenth-century Serbian collector Vuk Karadžić, Koenraad Kuiper takes us out to the racetrack in Christ Church, New Zealand, and to the oral genre of calling horseraces. He demonstrates the extent to which a series of callers employ a formulaic idiom to learn and maintain the fluency of expression necessary to their task, and also how this tradition has evolved over time from one informant to another. William Sayers' essay on “Serial Defamation in Two Medieval Tales” follows. Surveying Old Norse and Old Irish narrative, he locates five comparable movements in example tales from the two traditions—the last of them involving “projection of the traditional speech-craft of an oral culture . . . into a literate medium.”

Ryan Bishop continues the proceedings with a consideration of just

what it is that makes dialogue “sound” natural in a literary text; writing from an anthropologist’s perspective, he conducts an analysis of how such facsimile passages function in a variety of works from James Joyce to Samuel Beckett. From Bishop’s modern focus, Jeffrey Alan Mazo returns to the Anglo-Saxon period, and specifically to the poems of *Beowulf* and *Genesis A*, the latter a usually close translation of the Latin vulgate account. Mazo’s aim is to measure the components of traditional style and originality in the diction of these two poems, particularly their compound words, and his results will therefore be of interest to a great many specialists outside the area of Old English verse. To his conclusions about medieval English poets, Carol Dougherty adds a consideration of the Odyssean bard Phemius, specifically on the much-debated matter of his being *autodidaktos* (“self-taught”). Making reference to actual accounts of bardic activities and procedures, she argues engagingly that Phemius’ characterization reflects “the dialogue between tradition and occasion in oral poetic composition.”

Indeed, Ruth Finnegan’s 1989-90 Parry Lecture also concentrates on the meaning of “tradition,” an elusive term and concept often left unexamined by those interested in oral literature and related forms. Bringing numerous different perspectives to the discussion, she “deconstructs” the idea of tradition and lays bare many of the cultural assumptions that have supported its various meanings. This issue also includes a symposium feature: three position papers—by Frederick Turner, Carl Lindahl, and Robert Kellogg—on the topic of “Rules for Art in Oral Tradition.” First presented in a Modern Language Association section sponsored by the Anthropological Approaches to Literature division in 1988, these brief comments will soon be followed (*OT* 7, i) by papers contributed by Joan Radner and Dennis Tedlock.

I close by asking our readership to participate in any way that seems fitting and useful in the subscription drive now underway for *Oral Tradition*. Our aim is to increase the subscription roll by twenty per cent, and your recommendation to a colleague (individual rate: \$18) or a library (institutional rate: \$35) will bring us nearer that goal. We will certainly appreciate your assistance.

John Miles Foley, Editor

Folk Traditions in Serbo-Croatian Literary Culture

Svetozar Koljević

The interplay of oral and literary traditions in Serbo-Croatian—whether in the form of reference, inclusion, imitation, or creative use—reflects some major features of Balkan social and cultural history. To begin with, St. Sava, the founding father of the Serbian Orthodox autocephalous Church, encouraged the spread of Christianity by preserving old folk customs and giving them a distinctly Christian meaning and significance. In his later cult among the Serbian Orthodox population he came to be seen as a traveling deity introducing order and welfare by teaching men how to plow and dig, and women how to cook, make cheese and sour milk, and bake bread, weave, and knit, so that he seems “to have taken over the role of the ancient Slav deity Dabog” (Petrović 1970:263). But he was also praised by his biographer Teodosije, a thirteenth-century monk, for shunning folk culture—particularly “indecent and harmful songs of youthful desires that weaken the soul in the extreme” (Bašić 1924:83).¹ The early Catholic animosity to all forms of lay folk singing in the Balkans was also coupled with the translation of the Latin hymns into vernacular oral poetic forms in which they are sung to this day as “folk” Christmas carols among the Croatian population (Kombol 1945:40). This ambiguous tradition goes on among Serbs and Croats—the two peoples often divided by similar historical misfortunes and sometimes even by the same language—well into the eighteenth century. The fifteenth-century *Statute of Poljica* entitled parents to disinherit their sons if they became professional singers of popular songs (Latković 1954:190), and many Catholic and Orthodox priests spoke in the same voice about the folk “wanton, base, and impure songs,” “dishonorable songs,” “empty and useless songs,” and “the songs of love” (Pavić 1970:427-28).

¹ My thanks are due to the late Professor Anne Pennington, Oxford University, for help with many of my English translations of Serbo-Croatian quotations in this text.

But the *Chronicle of the Priest of Duklja*—a confused and often fictitious genealogy of medieval Slav rulers, and an account, for the most part legendary, of their exploits from the middle of the fifth to the middle of the twelfth century—contains a beautiful medieval hagiography with distinct folk epic touches.² And the history of the Renaissance urban Dubrovnik literature is also instructive: Šiško Menčetić (1457-1527) is far less readable in his fashionable literary compositions than in his shorter lyrics, “which are in their tone reminiscent of the simple expressions of the fervor, gaiety, or grief of folk poetry” (Kombol 1945:91). His contemporary Džore Držić (1461-1501) also wrote some of “the most charming examples of our oldest lyrical love poetry” in the manner of folk lyrics (*ibid.*:91), which again shows the dependence of a gifted poet on folk forms in the situation in which his setting and language are dominated and sometimes “falsified” by the political and cultural forces of powerful alien centers. And this is why the limitations of Ivan Gundulić’s long epic, *Osman*, left unfinished when he died in 1638, are sometimes explained by the triumph of his literary culture and rhetoric over his insufficient imaginative gifts, so that he comes to be seen as an important influence on Ivan Mažuranić, whose masterpiece, *The Death of Smail-aga Čengić* (1846), was much more deeply steeped in folk traditions and forms (Kombol 1945:235).

However, it was Petar Hektorović, a Hvar literary nobleman, who spelled out the most fascinating chapter in the history of the interplay of folk and literary forms. His *Fishing and Fishermen’s Conversations* (ca. 1555; published 1568) is a long poem describing a few days’ outing of two humble fishermen who entertain a grand literary nobleman in various ways, among other things, by performing folk lyrics and epics and solving riddles. Thus a highly literary form of the Italian fishermen’s eclogue has been modified for the purpose of folk diversions with their distinct social and linguistic features and so become a form of “folk” characterization in a highly stylized poem (Čale 1970:99-100). It should not come as a surprise that this happened, and perhaps could only happen, in the Renaissance agrarian setting of Hvar, in Starigrad, where a grand literary nobleman could go a long way in sharing forms of life and entertainment with his humble compatriots.

When Andrija Kačić Miošić, an educated Dalmatian Franciscan friar, published his *Pleasant Recreation for the Slavic People* in 1756, it was a major step in another culturally significant direction. His versified

² I have discussed this elsewhere in greater detail (Koljević 1980:16-19).

chronicle of major historical events in the past was so skillfully written in the manner of folk heroic songs that it was soon widely accepted as a form of folklore, and sung by the illiterate populace. In the nineteenth century, when the linguistic forms of folk culture came to be seen as the foundation of national and cultural identity, and, owing to the work of Vuk Karadžić, gained international recognition, the folk traditions became the objects of literary cult and inspiration. The results, of course, varied—most frequently in the wrong direction—but the two greatest epics in the language, Mažuranić's *The Death of Smail-aga Čengić* and *The Mountain Wreath* (1847) of Petar II Petrović Njegoš, were major landmarks in the cultural and literary history of the Balkans. For the first time major educated poets, incidentally also powerful political figures—Mažuranić was ban [governor] of Croatia and Njegoš Prince-Bishop of Montenegro—were writing national literary classics that were at the same time politically topical and molded in the language, forms, and associations of traditional folk epic poetry.

In his epic *The Death of Smail-aga Čengić*, Mažuranić deals with a contemporary event that was, characteristically enough, reported in the newspapers and immediately treated in folk epic poems. Apparently, a small company of Montenegrins ambushed and killed a comparatively humane and decent landowner in Herzegovina (Živančević 1969:13-14), but since the cruelties of the Turkish tax-gathering system were a major topic of European politics and the epic spirit disregards the trifles of personal guilt and merit, the incident was seen as a subject of burning political significance: the small but valiant company of underdogs, the Montenegrins, had seen to it that a Byronically perverse tyrant, a Turkish tax-gatherer, should meet the fate he has richly deserved, in person and by proxy, as a small screw in a big machine. The rituals and associations of traditional folk epic language were ideal for his purpose, and since Mažuranić lived in his formative years in a setting in which such traditions were fully alive, and, of course, was a major poet, his poetry, like that of Njegoš, showed the kind of wisdom that is fully alive in a folk idiom, that makes it as obvious to the simple as it is enigmatic to the wise. He combines the octosyllabic and decasyllabic lines, each characteristic of folk poetry even if not in such combination. The illusion that this is traditional oral poetry is also sustained by occasional use of fixed epithets and of the semantic and syntactic patterns that we find in some of the generally

recognizable lines of traditional oral poetry.³ Such examples are indeed not very many; their frequency varies, but one is generally surprised by how few they are in any well-known passage—on an average, perhaps about three or four clearly recognizable epic formulas in a hundred lines. But everything is so much an organic part of the prevailing epic folk tone and spirit—sustained also by the truncated folk metaphors (when, for instance, “heaven is weeping,” l. 824)—that it is the very few classical allusions and coinages that sound “strange.”⁴

This explains, perhaps, why Mažuranić seems to be full of “quotations”: many of his greatest lines have become fairly common currency in the language. As a rule these lines sum up the poet’s vision within a dramatic moment of the story: the night of horrors and suffering of helpless victims of a bloodthirsty tyrant, for instance, is described in a laconic, almost neutral statement: “The earth is hard, the skies are high” (l. 766). It sounds like a proverbial, clichéd utterance; but the standard proverbs also realize their meaning in an active interplay with a particular situation. And it is only against the background of a particular form of human suffering that this line is moving, even if one can ask who is it that has never felt that “[t]he earth is hard” and that “the skies are high.” But the contrast between “[t]he earth” and “the skies,” between the “hard” immediate and the inaccessible (“high”) beyond, only “sounds” like a proverb. It is, in fact, primarily an *ad hoc* personal utterance, which embodies a collective sense of history. Its structure and texture reflect

³ Sometimes Mažuranić “quotes” standard folk epic lines: “The sun went down and the moon came out” (Živančević 1969:l. 114); “Not even the *vilas* [fairies] could carry the hero through / Let alone his own feet” (ll. 139-40); “And Novica came to Cetinje” (l. 163); “For the honorable cross and golden freedom” (l. 206); “The aga flamed up like a living flame” (l. 912). The following are the instances of fixed epithets: “cold water” (ll. 7, 826), “the hero’s head” (l. 147), “the hero’s heart” (l. 200), “golden freedom” (l. 206), “honorable cross” (l. 206), “great God” (l. 184), “unknown hero” (l. 167), “falcon’s eye” (l. 356), “white hands” (l. 458), “fierce pains” (l. 80), “bright arms” (ll. 482, 792), “war horses” (l. 483), “white tents” (l. 483), “living flame” (l. 912), “a good horse” (l. 551), “flat field” (ll. 547, 581), “black earth” (l. 575). There are also examples in which we find broad semantic parallels with folk epic poetry, such as, for instance, the “gifts” of torture: “He presents them with the Turkish gifts: / To each youth, a sharp pole, / To some, a pole, to others, a piece of rope” (ll. 23-25). On the other hand, sometimes Mažuranić’s lines follow only the syntactical patterns of folk epic poetry: “The servants started shouting, on their horses, / The horses started running, under the servants” (ll. 552-53). Finally, there is also an example of Slavonic antithesis: “Is it an outlaw or a Turkish spy? /... It is neither an outlaw, nor a Turkish spy, / But Novica, Čengić’s servitor” (ll. 132, 135-36).

⁴ Apart from references to Hector and Troy (ll. 564-65), we also find some Homeric coinages: “silk-fleeced flocks” (l. 133), “thin-horned herds” (l. 134), “wing-legged horses” (l. 563).

Mažuranić's creative predicament and a characteristically nineteenth-century historical situation in which language of this kind could be used with such individual and personal force to express a collective awareness.

Further on, the same dramatic situation evokes a purely lyrical touch: "Fine dew, as if heaven were weeping" (l. 824), a touch that embodies an intimate relationship between nature and personal, or collective, fate, which is so often found in folk epics and tales. Sometimes the account of what is happening in the story lives on in its reflective and lyrical undertones, as, for instance, when an old priest blesses the Montenegrin fighters: "A weak old man cheering the weak / To give them strength approaching that of God" (ll. 466-67). And often his voice has both a historical and a prophetic epic ring: "The eagle makes his nest on top of Timor / For there is no freedom in the plain" (ll. 344-45). That so much actual history and landscape could be contained in a single image is also significant; it explains why these lines have attained such wide circulation in the language, second perhaps only to Mažuranić's truly scriptural vision of the Montenegrin heroic spirit: "Fear the man ready to die / Without much complaining" (ll. 62-63). Such, and similar, lines testify to the unique historical moment of the threshold of national identity when a major poet could speak in such a powerful voice in the folk expressive idiom.

Njegoš's *The Mountain Wreath* illustrates—even in more paradoxical and aphoristic terms—the same point. It was widely known by heart by the illiterate populace of Montenegro and naively taken to justify the eradication of Islamized Montenegrins by their Christian brothers, appropriately enough on a Christmas eve at the end of the seventeenth century. This reading was fully endorsed by patriotic scholarly opinion, and the research that showed that this "historical event" never took place must have come as a blow to national pride.⁵ In fact, Njegoš took the subject from a folk heroic song that makes a series of extremely inept attempts to see what must have been many local conflicts and skirmishes as a grand national gesture of the eradication of Islamized Montenegrins. It is true, of course, that Njegoš uses the traditional popular decasyllabic line, that he introduces the folk round dance in the function of a chorus, that he quotes, sometimes in a highly original dramatic and moral context, the formulas of laments, curses, blessings, charms, incantations, proverbs, and

⁵ No reference to "the eradication of Turks" can be found even in *Grlica* (1835), which lists, with patriotic zeal, all the memorable events during Bishop Danilo's rule, including "the introduction of potatoes" in Montenegro (Banašević 1957:11).

aphoristic utterances, if sometimes with slight modifications.⁶ But *The Mountain Wreath* has a dramatic form, the eradication is pushed into the background and comes only in the form of a message, and the central figure is the hesitating Bishop Danilo, whereas his heroic compatriots, far too ready for quick action, are seen in a slightly comic light. In short, Njegoš dramatizes his own position as an educated ruler and sensitive poet engaged in desperate struggles in an extremely cruel environment of tribal rivalries and the Turkish penetration of Montenegro.

The difference between the folk poem from which Njegoš took his subject and the way he treated it in his dramatic poem is significant. In the folk poem Bishop Danilo is treacherously captured by the Turks during the consecration of the church in Podgorica, and he asks his congregation to sell their “crosses and icon lamps,” to give all the “ecclesiastical treasure” in exchange for his ransom; when the ransom is duly paid, he concludes that there are too many Islamized Montenegrins and gives a simple and straightforward order: “Let us slaughter Turks in Montenegro” (Bošković et al. 1980:l. 170). When the job is finished, Bishop Danilo shouts for joy: “Dear God, thank you for everything, / I have yearned for this feast for a long time!” (ll. 175-76). In *The Mountain Wreath*, however, Bishop Danilo is no more a simple-minded epic hero, but a lonely martyr to his insights and his moral fate. Faced with his compatriots who are only too ready to indulge in the prospective blood-bath—“Strike the devil, so that no trace is left” (Banašević 1973: l. 301)—Bishop Danilo curses the day he was born (ll. 84-85), and his human and moral position is mirrored in the imagery of “a straw among the whirlwinds” (l. 35) and “The closed skies above his head” refusing his “tears and prayers” (ll. 39-40). And if he is “torn by black thoughts” at the idea of the prospective eradication of Islamized Montenegrins (l. 522), if “his breast boils with horrors” (l. 523), it is not because he is a coward but because he is a wise man, because his

⁶ In *The Mountain Wreath* we find about a half-dozen examples of standard folk epic lines: “Do you see this wonder, O Montenegrins” (Banašević 1973:l. 143); “No Serb would betray a Serb” (l. 1051); “But they all fell side by side” (l. 1055); “O hateful day, may God destroy you” (l. 84); “Who live as long as the sun shines” (l. 78); “I dreamed a terrible dream last night” (l. 1367). The following are the instances of fixed epithets: “the blue sea” (ll. 55, 1110), “razor-sharp sword” (l. 368), “clear sky” (l. 584), “living eyes” (l. 202), “living heart” (ll. 1267, 2781), “honorable cross” (l. 1329), “bright arms” (l. 669), “slender voice” (l. 1292), “green coat” (l. 1349), “a grey falcon” (l. 1834), “sore wounds” (l. 1959), “white towers” (ll. 2269, 2790). There are also several examples of close imitation of folk epic syntactic patterns: “He who escaped the Turkish sword... / Took refuge in the mountains” (ll. 262, 265). For further instances of this kind see P. Popović 1939:275-76. And, of course, the whole of the lament of Batrić’s sister strictly follows folk patterns (ll. 1913-63).

brains have not been confused by heroism as “a drink” on which “generations got drunk” (606-7). Finally, when he is driven to accept the decision and call on his compatriots to “kiss a bloodstained saber,” so that “the smoke of the blood of the just can rise on the altar,” he feels that his moral drama is taking place in an indifferent world: “The earth groans, the heavens are silent” (l. 630). And his final war-whoop has a characteristic ring: “if there were a brother in the world, / his pity would be like help” (ll. 647-48). If his counsel-taking and moral bewilderment appear to his heroic compatriots like “the cackling of geese” (l. 300), if they are frightened that children will mock them unless they take immediate action, if they tell him that they are “afraid of much thinking” (l. 519), as if they “had no business but to think” (l. 504), such utterances are not so much a judgment on Bishop Danilo as instances of dramatic irony.

The split between historical and moral loyalties is also embodied in dense, paradoxical imagery that hovers formally between proverbs and riddles. The fact that hegumen Stefan, an old, blind prophet who has quaffed the cup of the horrors of life to the full and found ultimate peace of mind, should incite Montenegrin warriors to action is another major paradox in this poem. But the way he does it is often more paradoxical: “A blow finds a spark in stone / Or else the spark dies of despair” (ll. 2322-23). The relentless “stone” embodies, literally and metaphorically, the geographical and historical landscape of Montenegro, and the “spark” the spirit of the people. The relationship between “stone” and “spark” suggests perhaps what Montenegrins were up against, or, indeed, what human life is about. It is not a simple heroic act but the heroism of moral spirit that can impose human significance on chaos, or give humanity a moral chance, if only a tragic one, in any situation, however desperate. And, of course, the only alternative to this paradox, to this madness, is despair and death. And does this option for the impossible become any clearer when Bishop Danilo reaches the same decision and says: “Come what can never be” (l. 659)? The fact that the greatest line in the language—the equivalent of “To be or not to be”—consists of semantic auxiliaries that have no definite meaning if taken separately is paradoxical in itself. But it is even more paradoxical that in such a line “meaningless” words should, in their interanimation, embody as much a sense of history and national identity as a spirited response to a hopeless situation. This reflects perhaps the extraordinary creative predicament of a highly sophisticated, sensitive poet in a historically cruel situation. That he could resort to such simple folk devices for such paradoxical purposes may be a sign of his genius, but it is also a sign of a cultural setting and historical

situation that offered such an exceptional meeting ground for folk and urban culture. The same feat has certainly never been repeated again.

But in the different and changing conditions of social life in the second half of the nineteenth century, in the new era of freedom and corruption in Serbia, in the era of urban awareness and the “educated” cult of folk traditions, the comic possibilities of the heroic heritage became much more apparent. Of course, most of the literary forms that assume and express a lofty view of man and his destiny lend themselves easily—often too easily—to mock-heroic usage. And indeed many of the traditional songs about Marko Kraljević exploited such possibilities: in *Marko Kraljević and General Vuča*, Marko is seen on his Šarac that is not “like other horses are / But spotted like a cow” (Nedić 1976:no. 42, ll. 129-30) and with his mace so heavy that nothing but a sheepskin of wine can keep it in balance (l. 87), while in *Marko Kraljević Recognizes His Father’s Saber*, when he drives the sultan to the wall and plants his boots on the praying-rug, it is only a rich pourboire that can appease his rage (no. 57, ll. 135-41). He is also funny as a lover, which is not surprising, but there is a touch of humor even when he has to die after spending only three hundred years in this world. In *The Death of Marko Kraljević*, “[d]eceiving world, my sweet flower” is his last, mature word on himself and human life as he has come to know it (no. 74, l. 68).

There are, indeed, comic elements in Duke Draško’s account of Venetian life in Njegoš’s *The Mountain Wreath*, but the first great instances of comic transformation of epic heritage, of placing the old heroes and their heroic language in a new setting, are to be found in the poetry of Branko Radičević and Jovan Jovanović Zmaj, poets who were born and lived in a far more urbanized and sophisticated social setting, mostly in the region of Vojvodina. At the heart of Radičević’s “Farewell to Schooldays” (1847) is the famous round dance of brotherhood that is still sometimes sung as a national classic. The whole poem is a masterpiece of romantic gaiety and joy of life, but the round dance is keyed in a spontaneously sophisticated reaction to the patriotic urban cult of a folk custom. Among the Serbian population in Vienna, where Radičević was a student, the round dance was not so much a genuine folk custom as a cultivated form of folklore used in a foreign setting to express both national loyalty and defiance (M. Popović 1972:123). In his round dance Radičević sings, quotes and misquotes, and at one moment invokes the popular epic figure of Marko Kraljević, proposing a toast to the heroic hand that has killed Filip Madžarin [the Hungarian]. Marko, as we have seen, has lived for three centuries, and he has killed many enemies, mostly Arabs and Turks,

also some friends, including his own brother, for whose death he will take revenge on the Turks who had killed him!⁷ However, Hungarians were Radičević's nearest neighbors, so it may not be surprising that the little episode with Filip Madžarin is evoked. The actual folk poem describing the adventure, *Marko Kraljević and Filip Madžarin*, ends in a memorable image of Marko's triumph: "Marko went away singing his song, / Filip was left behind digging the ground with his foot, / His faithful wife bemoaning his death" (Nedić 1976:no. 59, ll. 192-94). Radičević, however, changes the imagery of this happy ending and leaves Marko at the end of the duel laughing and watching the fire that comes out of the stone under his blows. But there is also the afterthought that Marko would have been even happier if wine, instead of fire, had come out of the stone and that is apparently one of the reasons why we should never stop grieving for the death of such a hero. In our grief we should remember that wine, if not Marko, has been left to us; and if Marko had remained alive, who knows if any wine would have been left! It is in this mock-heroic banter that Marko comes alive and becomes identified with the spirit of the boundless joy of the poem; it is in his irresponsibility that he lives, not as a patriotic dummy idolized out of existence in an overenthusiastic attitude. Radičević's achievement has only to be compared to the hundreds of abortive evocations of the grand spirit of epic poetry that can be found in almost all Serbian Romantic poets, even such major ones as Djura Jakšić and Aleksa Šantić (in an early phase); the difference between lively creative use and a respectful dead cult of the folk heritage becomes glaringly obvious.

But what is less obvious and perhaps more interesting is the nature of Radičević's superiority over Zmaj and Radoje Domanović, who used similar mock-heroic forms for purposes of political satire, even if the works of Zmaj and Domanović may be more significant in terms of social and cultural history. Zmaj's "Official Gusle in Belgrade" (1865) invokes a typical mock-heroic comparison between the old stringed instrument, a symbol of the heroic songs and their moral values, and modern government newspapers. The poet appears in it as a fool: "Budalina Zmale" is perhaps a slightly strained coinage on the analogy with the comic, club-wielding Moslem hero Budalina Tale. Anyway, the poet masked as a fool prepares for a great national celebration, washes his eyes in the lead article of a government newspaper, goes to the palace of the

⁷ Marko kills his brother in the well-known song *Marko Kraljević i brat mu Andrijaš*, which Hektorović recorded, and which he first published in 1568 (Hektorović 1953:12ff.). He takes revenge on the Turks for the death of his brother in *Marko Kraljević osveti brata Andrijaša koga mu Turci pogubiše* (Bogišić 1878:no. 89).

“glorious police,” breathing deeply—if not sweet smells, at least attitudes that may help him to get through that day. He prepares himself to be blind to all he is going to see and swallows in advance all that he is going to hear. But what he cannot swallow is the traditional guslar celebrating urban political lies, the government, and the police: the gusle with “official standing,” the weapons of the police, the new “ministerial Muse” which has just been born to sing the new government hero who is “just sprouting wings” (Leskovac 1970:224). It is only in this ending that the strains of the mock-heroic analogies completely disappear and that we hear the natural tonal vigor of great poetry.

In a similar but richer vein Domanović used the legends and poems about Marko Kraljević in his description of the late nineteenth-century political and urban scene in Serbia in his short story “Kraljević Marko for the Second Time among the Serbs” (1901). In the grand opening scene that takes place in heaven, God grants Marko’s prayers to return to his Serbs who invoke his name so ardently in their political agitation and poetry. This scene is followed by Marko’s comic duel with a cyclist and his visit to an inn, where he beats the innkeeper for bringing him his wine in a ridiculously small modern glass instead of a sheepskin. Marko is finally arrested but, owing to his previous services to the nation, sentenced to only ten years’ imprisonment. When he leaves prison, he tries to move with the times, but his old-fashioned epic heart begins to burn at a political meeting when his name is invoked. When he stands to speak in response, everyone is embarrassed and he is told that he has taken literally the modern art of political rhetoric. Since he is unwilling to part with his weapons out of a sense of duty, it turns out that the only government job for him in a modern state is that of a policeman. In this role, however, he comes into conflict with his superiors because of his old-fashioned sense of justice, and finally has to be shut up in an asylum. But who is really mad and morally insane—the old epic hero or the modern world? Domanović is certainly at his best in his linguistic handling of his material: the slightest inversions of the heroic decasyllabic line often produce absurd effects, and as a rule Marko speaks in verse, lapsing into prose only when he cannot stop laughing at his petty-minded and cowardly latter-day countrymen. Thus the prosaic deflation of the traditional heroic language becomes a medium of satirical moral judgment on modern civilized life.

The short stories of many regional writers—from Milovan Glišić to Dinko Šimunović—live on the interplay of the old moral concepts and the new social realities, but it is in the works of Petar Kočić that this issue is embodied for the first time in a highly ambiguous modern way. In his well-

known cycle of four stories about Simeun the Novice—the “novice” is an elderly gentleman who has never taken vows but lives in the monastery of Gomionica—we are faced with the hero who glorifies his own absurd heroic exploits against the Austrian armies and who is so carried away with his epic fantasies that it becomes more and more difficult to say whether he is a straightforward liar or is genuinely self-deluded. The framework of the stories is ironic rather than heroic: instead of drinking wine the heroes are brewing and sipping plum brandy, and there is even a voice “behind the vat” asking awkward questions and pricking epic bubbles. But the heroic fantasies are in a sense indestructible; Simeun’s heroic daydreaming, inspired by brandy and decasyllabic songs, remains fundamentally more human than the realities of “progress” that the Austrians have brought to Bosnia. Simeun sees his age as “the final period” of an approaching doomsday: bishops “go for walks with German sluts” in Banja Luka (Koljević 1982a:139); everything is weaker—“the harvest, the brandy, the people” (123)—even plum brandy is no longer graded by the human tongue! Simeun’s absurd daydreaming is his only chance for being human, and this tone of satirical nostalgia suggests, perhaps, what the heroic heritage will have to offer to twentieth-century writers.

To begin with, the heritage of diverse folk forms—epics, lyrics, proverbs, riddles, and questionings, together with various beliefs and legends that embody an animistic sense of the world—is no longer taken “literally,” but metaphorically, and it is not imitated or even parodied but freely used for the expression of the poets’ sense of history and the personal human drama in it. A modern sense of the cruel absurdities of history, which assumes that its “meaning” and “significance,” what people read into it, are political and social frauds, is reflected in the poetry of such different writers as Miroslav Krleža and Matija Bečković. Krleža is certainly the most sophisticated and perhaps the greatest Croatian writer of the century, and in his masterpiece, the *Ballads of Petrica Kerempuh* (1935-36), he uses the local kajkavian dialect and the mask of a wise village idiot for a grotesque evocation of great peasant revolts of the sixteenth century when Matija Gubec, “the first emperor of rascals,” was actually crowned with burning iron in Zagreb (1573).⁸ In the introductory poem, “Petrica and the Gallows Birds,” Petrica sings in his rich folk idiom a humorous song about the peasants’ “wounds, tears, and punishments of blood,” about “crushed knees, broken ankles, / Tithes in the skull,” and the fate of three

⁸ As he came to be called in one of the aristocratic invectives against the peasant revolts. This pamphlet had the form of a nobleman’s edict purporting to be issued in 1713 by Matija Gubec, “the first emperor of rascals.”

peasant rogues, swinging to the rhythm of his tambour on the gallows, while “bishops like blabbering parrots” pray “for a blessing from the Chains” (Krlježa 1956:11). This grotesque exposure of what law, order, morality, church, and state were about for those who did not share the upper-class morphology of their interpretation is expressed in a rich interplay of folk music and idiom with German and Latin phrases, often in idiotic aphorisms in which all the assumptions of upper-class syntax and semantics are exposed by a sly peasant wit.

In an equally sophisticated way Matija Bečković uses diverse folk forms in his collection of quasi-epic poems, *Someone Told Me* (1970). Bečković’s language is also a very local dialect, spoken, if we can trust his explanatory note, in the Montenegrin village of Velje Duboko, “the ancient resort of outlaws and fugitives,” which “had seen enemies’ heads, but never their feet” (163). The poems are set in postwar times, and the disappearing old heroic ways of life are apparently ridiculed by the poet, tongue in cheek, from an ultra-progressive modern point of view. Instead of the outlaws, there are police agents, and their life is hardly any easier: “It is not easy to be a spy anywhere, / Especially where there are no secrets” (95). And instead of the old-fashioned meaningful tragedy of Njegoš’s Bishop Danilo, who felt that above him “the skies” were “closed,” refusing his “tears and prayers” (Banašević 1973:ll. 39-40), Bečković’s modern hero lives in meaningless chaos and feels that “the skies above him never sober up” (65).

Diverse forms of folk heritage are also interwoven into the surrealist and paradoxical patterns of many modern poets, including such major names as Momčilo Nastasijević, Branko Miljković, and Vasko Popa. In this sense Edward D. Goy pointed out that Nastasijević was “the first to use rather than to imitate folk poetry” (1969:13-14), and his poetic credo “to be the fetishist of all things” (8) brings us to the heart of this matter. Thus in the first cadence of his lyrical cycle, “Silences,” his urban shriek for dumbness is voiced, as Goy remarked, in a typical folk vocative: “Be calm / my too heavy heart / change stony me into stone / O silent rock” (Mihajlović 1971:85). Of course, not only the vocative form but the whole idea of being changed into stone has the distinct imprint of ancient folk beliefs. And surrealist semantic patterns are also haunted by the folk syntax of proverbs and riddles in many of his other poems as, for instance, in his vision of urban love: “You are a cure / And I suffer you alone” (88). Similarly, the personal drama of urban loneliness lives in Miljković’s poem “The Pipe,” in which a traditional folk image illuminates modern metropolitan horizons: “Falconers are weeping under the empty skies”

(Miljković 1972:107). If the image is strikingly like Yeats' view of the "falcon" that "cannot hear the falconer" in "The Second Coming" (1961:210), the comparison is interesting primarily because it points to an almost identical creative predicament in which a major modern poet succeeds in harnessing the traditional folk heritage for his own avant-garde purposes.

The richest illustration of this creative destiny is found in the poetry of Vasko Popa, which not only is distinguished by its aura of folk heritage but thrives on a strange imaginative collapse and revival of old legends and myths. So, for instance, in his collection of poems *Earth Erect* (1972), the title refers to Serbia and its history, to the legends and the epic awareness of what it was about and what it can mean to a living, modern poetic sensibility. In the first cycle of these poems, "Pilgrimage," we are faced with old Serbian monasteries—a traditional subject in folk epic poetry—to which the poet makes his journey in search of his own roots and identity: "I go with my father's staff in my hand / My burning heart on the staff" (13). The image radiates the mystery of a religious emblem as much as it expresses a modern restlessness. It is, as Ted Hughes put it, one of the "solid hieroglyphic objects, meaningful in a direct way, simultaneously solid and spiritual, plain-statement and visionary" (Popa 1972:note on cover). In a similar way the monasteries themselves come alive; Žiža is not addressed as a building but as an animate being: "You stride towards your heights / And high love / In the only possible direction" (16). And most of the other poems in this collection also embody a restless quest. Thus a quotation from a Serbian folk song—"In vain I went a pilgrim / To St. Sava's spring"—is used as a motto in the cycle "St. Sava's Spring." And when the old belief in the miraculous powers of this saint is invoked, the invocation defines what the poet is seeking in the past (23):

To wash in this water
Heals all pain of death
To drink of this water
All pain of life.

The image is deeply rooted in the folk sense of miraculous healing powers, but it lives as a metaphor of an actual belief that has been lost. The attempt is not perhaps quite unlike T. S. Eliot's use of Christian symbols in *Four Quartets*, but instead of Eliot's cosmopolitanism, we are faced here with the patterns of language and associations deeply rooted in their own soil. For a poet this need not be a disadvantage.

Finally, what is it that makes the folk patterns so miraculously

persistent and recurrent in the cultural and literary history of Serbs and Croats—from the illicit medieval love affairs of folk and literary traditions to their strange marriage in the works of Mažuranić and Njegoš, their fruitful quarrels in the mock-heroic literary works, and, last but not least, their restless union in the modern metaphorical explorations of the possibilities of language and its historical memories? There is, of course, the intrinsic value and excitement of the epic understanding of history and the lyrical exploration of human possibilities in folk poetry. There is also the fascination of paradox and enduring wisdom in proverbs and riddles, in curses and blessings, in the ancient cries of grief and joy. But as our greatest twentieth-century writer Ivo Andrić put it (1977b:196), “the folk wisdom of ancient sayings and verses... is the cruel *fata morgana* of our consciousness,” and his works are certainly the greatest literary monument to this belief (Koljević 1982b). And it is perhaps appropriate to remember what he said about them in Stockholm (1977a:25): “in the second half of my life I came to the conclusion that it is in vain and mistaken to search for meaning in the senseless, but seemingly so important, events taking place around us, but that one should seek for it in the layers that the centuries build up around the few main legends of humanity.” These “layers constantly, *if ever less faithfully*, reproduce the shape of the grain of truth around which they gather” (emphasis mine); therefore, “[in] fairy tales” lies “the true history of mankind” (25). At the same time the interplay of folk and literary culture is also a sign of a living union of the imagination with ages past and vanished people, who live on in the heritage of language. “The idea that underlies this,” to use Pasternak’s words about Christ’s parables (1958:42), “is that communication between mortals is immortal, and that the whole of life is symbolic because it is meaningful.”

University of Sarajevo

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The Evolution of an Oral Tradition: Race-Calling in Canterbury, New Zealand

Koenraad Kuiper

The roots of the contemporary study of oral tradition lie in the German Romantic movement, for example in the work of great collectors of oral folklore such as the Grimms. But collecting folklore is one thing; understanding exactly what an oral tradition is and how oral traditions are transmitted is another. The most significant contribution to such an understanding has been made by Milman Parry and Albert Lord. Their seminal theory of oral-formulaic performance has given rise to a great deal of scholarly activity.¹

One curiosity is how little of this research has taken place within linguistics. There are good reasons why more of it should have been conducted there. First, it is research into the nature of performance. If we take linguistic performance in general to consist of the uses to which native speakers put the linguistic resources that they have at their disposal, then oral-formulaic theory should be of interest to linguists. Second, Parry and Lord make claims about the way in which memory is engaged during performance, claims that should also interest linguists who are concerned with performance. Third, linguistics concerns itself with native speakers' linguistic resources. One of the primary resources of oral-formulaic performance is an inventory of oral formulae. Formulae are clearly lexicalized linguistic fragments very like the idioms of normal speech. It follows from considerations such as these that it should be possible to undertake quite exacting linguistic research into oral-formulaic traditions, and thus lend a high degree of linguistic precision to the approach of Parry and Lord, in the process making this approach more empirically vulnerable.²

It is particularly interesting to attempt to do so in the case of oral transmission, since greater

¹ Summarized in Foley 1985, 1988.

² In the following work by the author and his associates this has been attempted: Kuiper and Haggio 1984, 1985; Haggio and Kuiper 1983, 1985; Kuiper and Tillis 1986.

linguistic precision should lead to greater insight into how traditions emerge, evolve, and gel into more or less fixed forms. This can only rarely be done from recorded sources, but New Zealand race-calling is one such tradition.

The sport of kings is a popular one in New Zealand, as is the associated activity of gambling on the outcome. Its popularity is such that the commentaries provided by race-callers can be heard emanating from suburban dwellings, particularly on the weekend. The speech of New Zealand race-callers is an oral tradition. It is passed down from one caller to the next in an unbroken chain. Normally such traditions are able to be reconstructed only by comparative investigation (see Kuiper TBP), but the tradition of race-calling is more immediately accessible because its origins lie in the history of broadcasting.

Before the advent of radio, patrons attending horse races had to find out for themselves how the race was proceeding. This was facilitated by the racebook, which showed the colors of the owners in the case of gallops and trainers in the case of harness racing, but there was no on-course commentary. Gambling was permitted by law only at the track, although illegal bookmaking also took place with an associate of the bookmaker phoning through the information of placings to the bookmaker from the course.

The broadcast of a racing commentary was one of the earliest external radio broadcasts in New Zealand, preceded (appropriately enough) only by an account of a rugby football match. This first call was made in June 1926 in Christchurch by Allan Allardice on amateur wireless and was followed in the same year by further meetings broadcast on commercial wireless. Those who had early wireless sets were in some cases able to get the better of the bookmaker by learning of the results from their wireless and then placing their bets with the bookmaker before he received the results by phone.³ The origins of racing commentary in New Zealand can therefore be precisely fixed with the King's Birthday meeting of the Canterbury Park Trotting Club in Christchurch in June of 1926. But the oral tradition of Christchurch race-callers did not spring fully fledged into being on that date. To understand its evolution requires us to look at the contemporary tradition and to retrace its development.

The Contemporary Tradition

The leading contemporary exponent of the Christchurch tradition of race-calling is Reon Murtha. He is a full-time employee of Radio NZ and calls all the major race meetings in the Canterbury district of the South

³ *New Zealand Listener*, 6.6.1966.

Island. Meetings in some of the smaller towns are either regularly or occasionally done by part-time callers depending on the town. But since Reon Murtha is regarded by all the local callers as the master of his trade, his performance will form the basis of the analysis of the contemporary call.

Race-calling consists of four major sets of features: discourse structure rules that provide the high-level structure of the call, oral formulae that provide the low-level structure of the call, chanted prosodics in which the call is intoned, and a consequent extraordinary fluency that manifests itself in a very low frequency of normal hesitation phenomena such as pausing, anacoluthon, self-repair, and the like.

Discourse Structure Rules in the Contemporary Tradition

The commentary on most races of whatever kind consists of the commentator mentioning the horses in the order in which they are running as many times as possible until the race ends. The runners are located in the race relative to one another and, from time to time, the whole field may be located in the race or in actual space. So race-calls have individual locator formulae that place a runner relative to other runners or relative to a location on the track or in the race, and they have field locator formulae that describe the whole field in the race or on the track. Sequencing these locations is done in race-calling by the following discourse structure rules (figure 1):

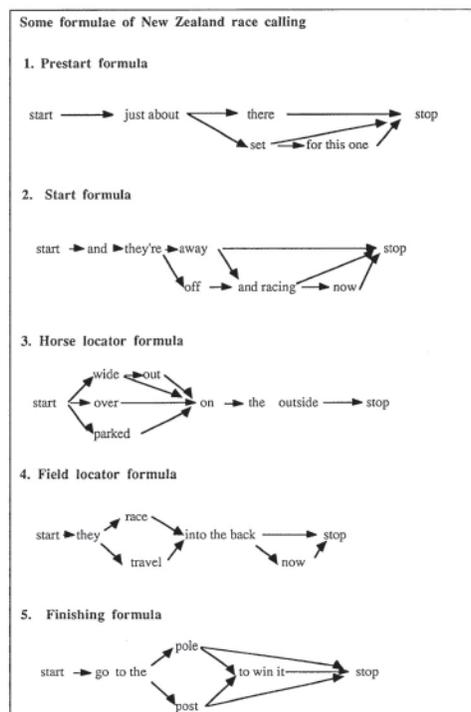
<u>Discourse structure rules for racing commentaries in play by play mode</u>	
R1 Racing	----> (pre-start) + start + 1st cycle + loop + 2nd cycle + loop + ... + finish + final cycle
R2 Cycle	----> location of xth horse in field + $\left(\begin{array}{c} \{ \text{untoward happening} \} \\ \text{field locator} \end{array} \right)$ where x ranges in sequence from the first horse through to the last horse in the field.
R3 Loop	----> (track location) + (field location)
() represent optional constituents { } represent alternative constituents.	

This set of rules indicates that commentators of horse races in Christchurch cycle through a number of horses that may or may not constitute the full field. They cycle through them in the order in which they are currently to be found and then loop back to the beginning of the

field again. After repeating this pattern a number of times until the finish of the race, they go through a final cycle. At any time during a cycle the callers may indicate where the field currently is in the race, or they may interpolate commentary on an untoward happening where one takes place, for example a collision between horses.

Formulae of the Contemporary Tradition

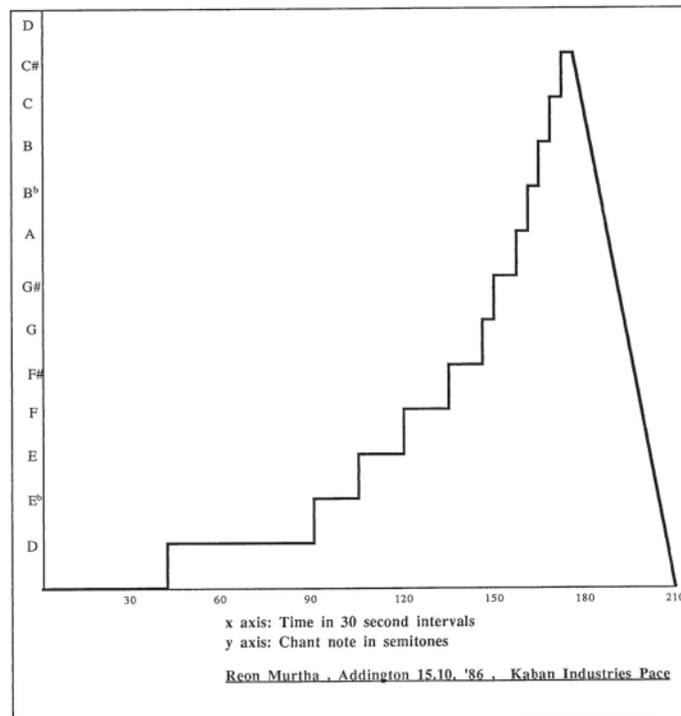
At each point in the commentary's discourse structure, commentators select what they are going to say from a dictionary of formulae, each one of which is indexed for a particular part of the discourse. There are formulae used to indicate the location of horses in the first cycle: for example, the formula *first out was...* is used on the initial cycle. There are loop formulae that specify either the location of the field on the track or the location of the field in the race: for example, *They race their way down the back* is a field locator formula often used in a loop. As well as being discourse-indexed, formulae also have the structure of finite state grammars; a sample of common formulae might look as follows (figure 2):



There are hundreds of these formulae and race-calling is constructed almost entirely of them. On occasions when something very untoward happens, a commentator will resort to non-formulaic speech; for instance, when a race is held in heavy fog the commentator will indicate that he cannot see the horses on the far side of the course by employing speech for which the oral tradition of race-calling provides no ready expression.

Chanted Prosodics

Race-calling in Canterbury province is chanted. Commentators basically sing their call in a monotone, with a small amount of prosodic variation in the way of the occasional fall tune at the end of a cycle, or more unusually during a cycle. The chant is modulated according to the distance the race is from its conclusion. Reon Murtha normally covers an octave with a gradual ascent by semitones in the earlier part of the race and a steep ascent by semitones toward the finish. After the finish he descends during the final cycle and reverts to normal speech intonation towards the end of the final cycle. The tune of a typical call is given in figure 3:



Extraordinary Fluency

As a result of speaking in this way, race-callers achieve an extraordinary fluency. Their speech exhibits virtually no hesitations, false starts, or pausing. They also speak with an even syllable-production rate. They do not speak rapidly, just very fluently.⁴

The Evolution of Race-Calling

Such are the major features of the contemporary race-calling tradition. But this snapshot is taken from the high ground. There are many variations within the performances of one caller, and there is variation among callers. But it is equally clear that there is a tradition linking all the contemporary practitioners, as can be shown by looking at the evolution of the call over the last forty-five years. Unfortunately, no recordings appear to remain from the very earliest days, but samples of the calling tradition are available from 1935 on. These recordings are tantalizing, first because they commence only relatively late in the given race and second because there are so few of them. Thus they afford a close-up view of the evolution of the call, but do not provide enough evidence to indicate how reliable a guide they may be to the whole of the tradition at the time. Notwithstanding such problems, these early calls do provide a basis for some interesting observations.

Discourse Structure

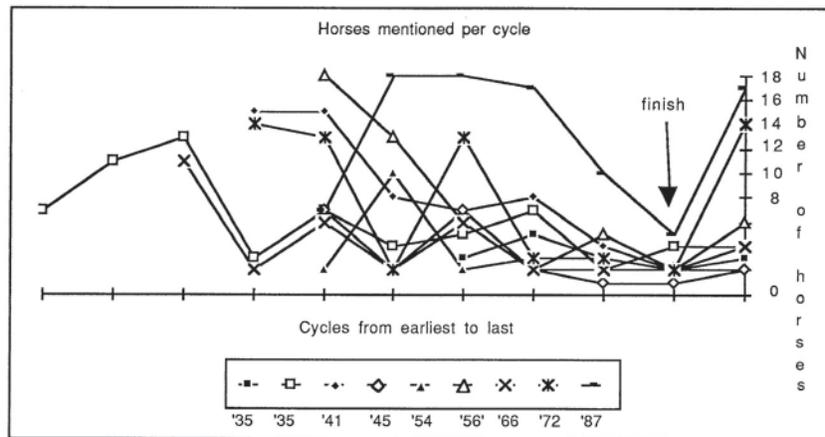
The basic nature of the discourse structure seems to have been established by 1935. Frank Jarrett, the caller at that time, used the same three rules as Reon Murtha, but Jarrett's particular implementation of them is different from that of his successors. First, he seldom called the whole field. Although we have only the latter end of two races, the second one is long enough to have permitted at least one cycle to cover the whole field. Second, the number of horses called per cycle was variable. It does become smaller as the horses approach the winning post, but it tends to bob up and down. Third, he called only the leaders on the final cycle after they passed the post.

Dave Clarkson, Jarrett's successor, was more likely to cover the whole field but again not on a regular basis. From time to time he cycled through the leaders only. This way of proceeding is shared among a number of

⁴ For a fuller description of the contemporary New Zealand oral tradition of race-calling, see Kuiper and Austin 1990.

callers in the contemporary tradition. Clarkson’s rule seems to be that he called the whole field unless he was calling the leaders or unless the race was reaching its final stages; at that point the tail end of the field was left uncalled. Clarkson also cycled on the leaders at the conclusion of the call for quite a long time. He might cycle more than five times on the leaders as they approach the winning post, and he does not call the whole field past that point.

The third caller, Reon Murtha, implements the discourse rules differently. On the first cycle he will call only a section of the field, namely those that either did well at the start or began badly. He will then cycle through the whole field, or as much of it as he can see, until very near the end and only then reduce the cycle to the leaders. He also calls the whole of the field past the winning post. These trends can be seen in figure 4:



A second change in the way discourse structure rules have been used is in the loop formulae. When Jarrett looped using a field locator, he employed either a race locator or a track locator formula but not both. He also tended to employ field locator formulae within the cycle quite frequently. In the early calls Clarkson had a strong preference for race locators as loops, but in the last two races tended to use track locators more often. There is an interesting distinction here between racing and harness racing. When calling gallops where the track is much larger, the commentator is more likely to call the race location because the field passes indicator pegs that mark the distance left to run. In harness racing with its smaller track, it is easy to mention the track location since it changes frequently. Reon Murtha’s practice is generally to locate the field by its location on the track at the beginning of the race, in the middle stages to

call both the track location and the race location, and at the conclusion of the race to mention only the track location.

We can conclude that the discourse structure rules for race-calling were established by 1935 but that their implementation has changed over the years. The present practice of Reon Murtha seems to be governed by a logic that supposes that at the beginning of the race the distance left to run is not important, so that mention of it is omitted from the first and perhaps second loop. In the middle of the race it is important to indicate both where on the track the field of runners is and how far the race has still to run, while at the end of the race only the location on the track is significant since the winning post is in a predictable place after the field has rounded the home turn.

A third area in which the tradition has changed is the order in which horses are called. The discourse structure rules require that horses are called in the sequence in which they come. But horses are also located relative to other horses. The syntax of English makes it possible to name horses in the reverse order to that in which they are currently running: for example, *horse 1 is behind horse 2*. Such reverse order makes difficulties for the caller in that he has to have two horses in view and reverse the order in the syntax. It also creates problems for the hearer in that he or she hears horses in the reverse order and has to transpose them to get the right order. On those grounds one would predict that reversals are rare, and that is certainly the case, but they do occur. Dave Clarkson was the only one of the three callers to show reverse order, with five reverses in the 1941 call, one each in the '45, '55, and '56 calls, and none in the '66 call. All except one are subject to a special condition, namely that the horse being called in second place has been mentioned earlier as coming in front of the horse in first place. An example of this special situation would be: *Column is four out on the outside of these three and appears to be galloping well. Cardigan is following Column*. It seems, in short, that the evolution of the call has moved to prevent reverse order sequences.

The Evolution of Formulae in Race-Calling

Given the limited size of the sample, it is not possible to detail the evolution of specific formulae. However, the formulae used by Frank Jarrett in 1935 are, in many cases, still in use today (figure 5 below).

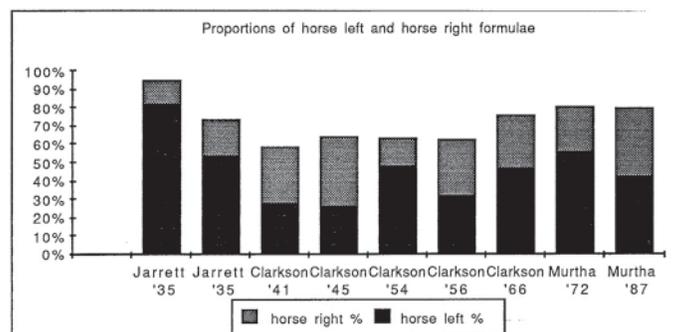
Formulae in use in 1935 and still in use in 1990

NP is in the lead.
 NP's gone into the lead.
 NP's (closely) followed (now) by NP.
 The leader (now) is NP.
 NP is wide out.
 NP's (in) on the rails.
 NP's got clear.
 NP's flying down the outside.
 NP1's X lengths clear of NP2.
 NP is next.
 then comes NP.
 NP's moved up.
 NP1 from NP2.
 Then NP.
 NP1 is going (up) to challenge NP2.
 X lengths away (now) is NP.

These formulae have the locations for horses (designated by NP for Noun Phrase) either on the left of the formula or on the right, or have two locations with one at either end. The normal location for horses might be expected to be in left-hand position, since that arrangement would make the horse the subject of the sentence. However, there are advantages to having the horse in the right-hand position, since uttering a formula gives the caller time to pick up which horse is next. To place the horse into right-hand position requires a variety of syntactic strategies including the following:

- passivization, e.g. *NP1 is followed by NP2*
- preposing around *be*, e.g. *And going up with them is NP*
- adverbial fronting, e.g. *Every yard they go she's losing ground*
- there* insertion, e.g. *There's NP1 going up on the outside of NP2*
- extraposition, e.g. *It's NP on the rails*
- right dislocation, e.g. *He might get to him, Integrity*
- complement in preposition phrase, e.g. *Then a length to Patriss*

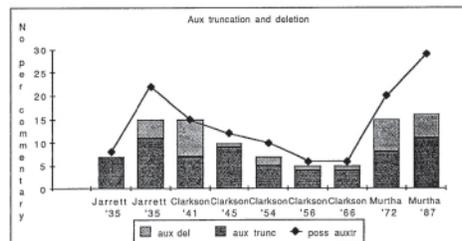
The figure below indicates the three callers' mix through time of left and right placement (figure 6).



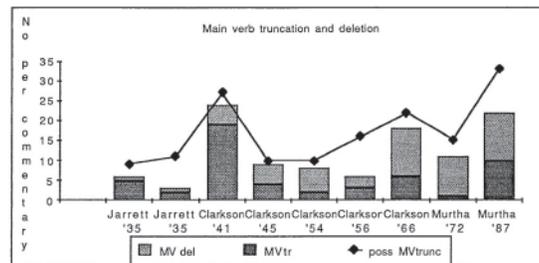
Taking into account that race-callers speak under pressure of time and while trying to recognize horses in the field, one might hypothesize that they would opt for the simplest syntactic structures to indicate the location of each horse. Given the large proportion of phrases that have horses on the right and the syntactic cost of doing so in terms of the complexity of the constructions involved, we have to argue that the syntactic cost is worth the benefit of having the horse on the right at least a good deal of the time.

There appears to be a stylistic element underlying this phenomenon. During a call a commentator will often use a number of formulae all of which have horses left and then switch to horses-right formulae. A stylistic explanation would hold that the caller wants to create some variety in the call and thus changes the basic location in which horses are placed from time to time. But this rationalization fails to explain why the variation is usually in blocks. This characteristic can be explained by the fact that, regardless of whether horses come on the left or the right of a formula, the crucial thing from the caller's point of view is to have text between one horse and the next. If switching from horse-left to horse-right formulae could be done on a turn and turn about basis, the caller would end up with two horses next to each other—a situation that would be more awkward for the commentator in terms of speech processing as well as for the hearer, who would not have formula text to indicate the relationship between the two horses.

A second plausible prediction about the structure of formulae that follows from the theory that callers will endeavor to simplify the syntax of their call wherever possible is the following: where formulae contain auxiliary or main verbs that can be either truncated or deleted, they will be truncated or deleted with increasing frequency over time. Thus we would expect verbless formulae to evolve, and this has in fact happened. A formula like *NP1 on the inside of NP2* is verbless. But the question is whether it is actually verbless or whether the verb is deleted by the caller as he makes the call. If there were a trend towards increasing deletion and verblessness, then this should show in the tradition. As figures 7 and 8 illustrate, the trend is currently in the opposite direction, at least as far as Reon Murtha is concerned.

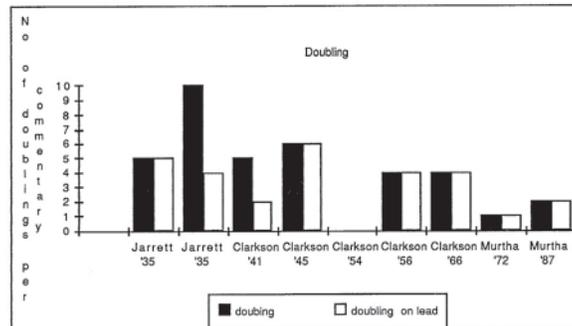


These figures indicate that Dave Clarkson increasingly truncated and deleted deletable verbs, but that Reon Murtha does so less frequently.

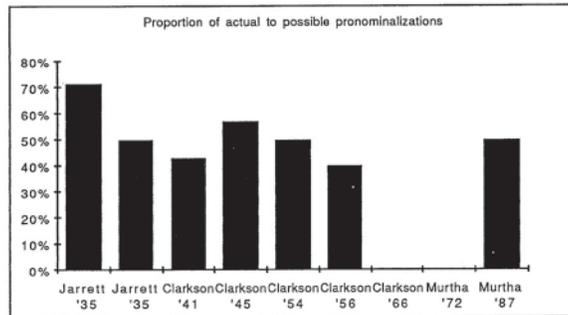


There is an explanation for this variance. Since formulae are finite state grammars, at the point where truncatable or deletable verbs appear in the formula there will be three alternative paths through the finite state diagram. Callers may choose the full verb path, the truncated verb path, or the deleted verb path. There is a processing trade-off for each of these paths. Selecting the shortest path means having to pick up the next horse from memory that much faster, while at the same time managing to pack so much more into the commentary. Picking up the next horse a fraction of a second faster on a regular basis puts the caller under just a little more pressure. Second, taking the path of reduction or deletion changes the rhythmic structure of the call. Race-callers have a strong metrical quality to their chant, with long and short syllables being accentuated differently. Verbs that can be truncated or deleted are rhythmically weak and so serve an important rhythmic function.

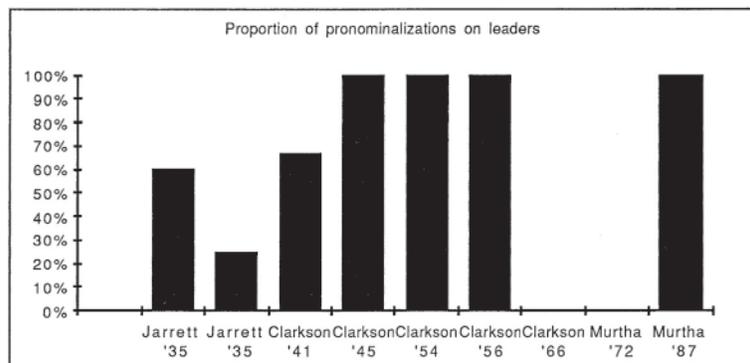
There are other areas where, counterintuitively, callers have opted for greater syntactic complexity. Occasionally callers mention a horse twice in a row. I have termed this process “doubling” since it often involves the repetition not just of the horse but of the whole or part of the previous formula: for example, *Gold Bar still out in front by twelve lengths. Gold Bar by twelve lengths.* Doubling is efficient from a speech production perspective, since the second mention does not require the horse to be identified in the visual field; but it is less efficient in giving the audience as many passes through the field as possible. But doubling serves a purpose other than communicative efficiency, one that explains why doubling is to be found in all the commentaries in the sample. In the early commentaries most cases of doubling were of the leading contender, while in the latter part of the sample all cases are of the leader or the horse that is about to become the leader. Thus doubling has come to be a rhetorical device for highlighting the front-runner at the beginning of the cycle (figure 9).



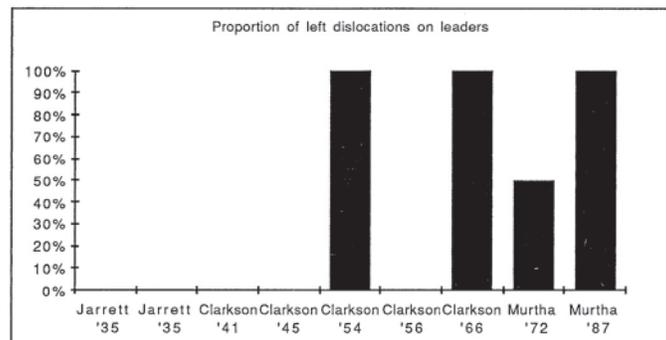
Communicative efficiency might be thought to require that the second mention should be pronominalized. But again the data suggests otherwise (figure 10).



Of the possible NPs that could be pronominalized only a relatively low fraction actually are, and this fraction has decreased over time. Furthermore, given what happens in the case of doubling, it is not surprising that where pronominalization does take place it has become restricted to the leaders, since it is always associated with doubling (figure 11).



Left dislocations are a last parallel example. Occasionally callers produce left dislocated structures, e.g. *Johnny Globe, he pokes his nose in front*. In the early commentaries there are no left dislocated structures. But when they do appear later, they are also almost exclusively a device for topicalizing the leader (figure 12).



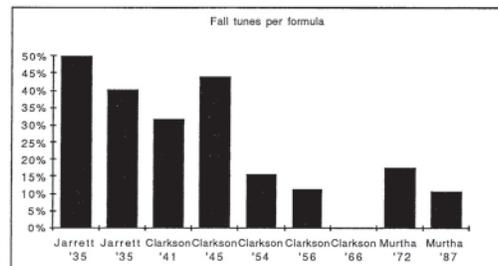
This analysis of some of the syntactic properties of formulae has falsified an extreme form of the hypothesis that formulaic speech will be syntactically simple. In many areas simplicity in the syntax runs counter to the way in which the tradition has evolved. Since formulae are memorized and later recalled rather than constructed in speech, this complexity is not surprising. The syntax of formulae has evolved to provide callers with structures that will place horses in the order in which they are actually running and to focus on the leaders in a variety of ways. These syntactic properties of formulae also seem to fall into two groups—those where individual callers are able to have their own idiosyncrasies and others where the tradition has made what appears to be a categorical determination that a particular feature shall be exclusively of a certain kind. Features relating to verb truncation and deletion appear to be of the former kind, whereas rhetorical devices that focus on the leaders appear to be of the latter.

Evolution of the Chant

On listening to the recordings on which this study is based for the first time, one feature of the development of the tradition stands out starkly: the development of the chanted prosodics. The two commentaries by Jarrett and the first two Dave Clarkson tracks are intonationally relatively normal. Jarrett drones a little and has normal fall contours at the end of many of his sentences. Toward the finish of the race he does raise

the pitch of his voice semitone by semitone, but his highest pitch is reached not at the point at which the horses pass the winning post but a few seconds earlier. The first Dave Clarkson commentary is almost speech-like, with relatively normal intonation. In the second Clarkson speaks with a mainly level intonation, but with a nuclear fall tone relatively early in many formulae and therefore with a rather long following tail. This pattern gives a kind of characteristic “dive bomber” melody to his 1945 call. But in 1954 Clarkson is chanting in a manner very similar to that of contemporary callers. At the end of the race his pitch rises steadily until the race reaches its climax. In the later commentaries he is occasionally so excited that his voice breaks on the top notes like that of an inexperienced tenor.

Speculating on the development of the chant, I would suggest that callers are likely to chant at the conclusion of the race as their pitch elevates and the level of excitement rises. This is certainly the case in Dave Clarkson’s 1945 call. Concurrently in that call the number of fall tunes decreases markedly while Clarkson is chanting, so it may well be that the chant spread backwards to cover the whole race. A prediction that follows is that the number of fall tunes will decrease with the advent of the chant, and this prediction is borne out (figure 13).

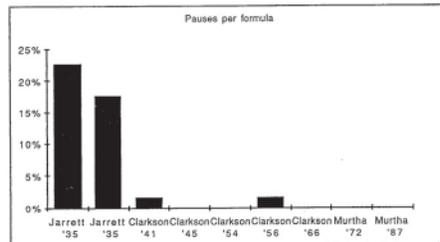


The number of fall tunes decreases markedly with Clarkson’s call. The normal pattern in the contemporary tradition is for there to be only an occasional fall tune, usually coming at the end of a cycle. This change goes hand in hand with the development of the chant.

Fluency

The manifestations of extraordinary fluency also coincide with this period in the evolution of the call. Jarrett pauses quite frequently and hesitates in a normal manner. But after the first years of race-calling, Dave Clarkson almost never pauses and seldom hesitates in any way. In his

1972 commentary Reon Murtha has one hesitation, but the 1987 call has none and this is the current norm (figure 14).



However, self-repair is occasionally to be found, not surprisingly given the complexity of the caller's task. What is surprising is that it occurs as little as it does and is not linked with hesitation more often than it is. Reon Murtha is able to perform self-repair with no hesitation at all. His self-repairs are, for example, not preceded by voiced pauses as a number of Jarrett's are.

Conclusions

By 1935 some of the basic features of race-calling were already established. The discourse structure rules had evolved into something much like their present form and the call was largely formulaic. However, it was not yet chanted and was relatively normal in its fluency. Many other aspects of the current race-calling tradition appear to have evolved during the career of Dave Clarkson. Relatively early in his career the chant becomes mandatory, and the various features for highlighting the leaders such as doubling, left dislocation, and leader pronominalization are incorporated. During his career other characteristics, such as reverses of horse ordering, disappear. The more recent feature of calling all the horses in each cycle until relatively late has been added by Reon Murtha. The relatively low incidence of verb truncation and deletion also appears to be a feature of Murtha's call.

What has been demonstrated in this study is how quantitative methods that look in detail at specific linguistic features of an oral-formulaic tradition can give additional precision to the study of such traditions and also contribute to a better understanding of those features that are mandatory versus those that allow for variation both in the calls of individual callers and from one caller to another. Such methods also show in a series of snapshots the evolution of single features of an oral tradition. Many more such features might have been selected; together they form a

complex repertoire of traditional resources that callers have at their disposal.

University of Canterbury

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**Serial Defamation in Two Medieval Tales:
The Icelandic *Ölkofra Þáttr* and The Irish
*Scéla Mucce Meic Dathó***

William Sayers

Ireland and Iceland in the early medieval period display similarities in cultural development that cannot be simplistically referred to the conditions of insular societies on the European fringe. In both the spread of literacy in Latin was matched by a readier accommodation with the native tradition than in many parts of western Europe. This resulted in two relatively early vernacular literatures, with a keen but not uncritical appreciation of their pre-Christian native cultures and oral traditions serving to generate a rich and varied corpus of texts. The Icelandic family sagas dealing with the period after the Settlement are widely known and admired; the earliest Irish tales, cast in the epic mold and purporting to describe a world more remote than a century or two, have a more limited readership. As a backdrop for the literary scholar and of prime importance for the student of cultures, both islands preserved an extensive body of legal texts, whose value for determining the degree and kind of “historicity” of the literary material is increasingly being recognized. The two societies seem to have been very prone to litigation and to its more violent alternative, feud. Ireland pursued feud through the kin group; Iceland favored political alliances around local chieftainships (Byock 1982). But economy and social organization certainly differed in relatively bountiful Ireland and resource-scarce Iceland. Both had a hierarchical system, at one time with slaves at the bottom, but compared to aristocratic Ireland we might see Iceland as relatively more egalitarian, in that the common social unit, the freeborn, landed farmer, might aspire to a chieftainship, at least during the period depicted in the family sagas. The historical relations of the two parent societies in an earlier era—Viking raids in Ireland and the Western Isles, Norse settlements there, then the fresh emigration some generations later from Celtic lands to newly discovered Iceland—are additional compelling reasons to pursue cultural affinities if not direct dependencies.

Although differences between the two islands may be numerous as points for comparison, some may lead to the identification of further parallels, of a generic if not genetic nature. In notes to his translation of *Ölkofra Þátr* (*The Tale of Ale-Hood*) Hermann Pálsson (1971:90) remarks that Broddi Bjarnason's retort to Eyjólfur Þórdarson contains one of the few references to cattle-raiding in the Icelandic sagas, but that the theme is common in Old Irish epic literature. Both societies were preoccupied with land claims, legal ownership, and forcible occupation. But, in the ideological world of the Irish epic, land could not be dissociated from the extended family without its full consent, so that warfare was more for the enhancement of personal prestige and plunder of transportable goods than for territorial acquisition. The cattle-raid of the epic then provided a narrative context for heroic action much like the social environment of the feud or flawed marital alliance in the Icelandic sagas.¹

There is another, arguably more compelling, reason for drawing a comparison between *Ölkofra Þátr* and an early Irish epic concerned with cattle-raids, and this is in its special use of *flyting* (from Scots) or trading of insults (ON *senna*; cf. OIr. *comram*, more generally "contention, contest," verbal and other). Broddi's scornful mention of cattle-raiding is made in the course of a series of objections raised by six plaintiffs to partiality in a law case that had been awarded to him for judgment. His remarks are not the battlefield boasts and taunts we usually associate with the term *flyting* but, while they differ from them in significant ways as concerns context, purpose, structure and tone, they are their clear descendants in this minor genre of speech arts. An early Irish tale, *Scéla Mucce Meic Dathó* (*The Tale of Mac Dathó's Pig*), also has the particular feature of a series of verbal confrontations in a setting of formal contention over rights, in this instance the best warrior's right to carve the *curadmír* or champion portion, the choice part of the pig, when it was served in the banquet hall.² Like the Icelandic law court, the Irish king's hall was at

¹ The Icelandic text of *Ölkofra Þátr* is quoted is quoted from Jóhannesson 1950a, the English translation from Pálsson 1971. Additional general comment is found in Baetke 1960. Pálsson notes the cattle raid motif in *Laxdæla saga*, ch. 19. It also occurs in the relatively late *Hrafn's saga Sveinbjarnarsson* (Jónsson 1954), suggesting that it may have been more common in reality than as a literary motif. The feud has a long scholarly history (see Byock 1982 for full treatment). More recently, marriages and other unions have attracted rewarding critical attention (Clover 1988).

² *Scéla Mucce Meic Dathó* is cited from Thurneysen's edition, which is reproduced in Lehmann and Lehmann 1975. Gantz (1981) offers a contemporary translation into English. Recent scholarly discussion of the tale includes Ó Coileáin 1978, Buttimer 1982, Sayers 1982, and O'Leary 1984, 1986. Another *locus classicus* of the champion's portion motif in early Irish literature is in *Fled Bricrend* (*The Feast of Bricriu*; see Henderson 1899). Here, too, an external figure, the Loki-like Bricriu ("Venom-tongue"), intentionally creates the circumstances which oblige the Ulster heroes to vie with each other. Even their

some remove from the field of battle, but was no less a formal and to a degree ritualized setting. Verbal confrontation here could function either as a proxy for or prelude to physical martial activity.

A third justification for such a comparison is the relative positions occupied by the two *flyting* scenes on the orality to literacy spectrum. In both these medieval tales, committed to writing or originating in written form, we have the fiction of speech behavior deemed appropriate in the litigation-prone oral culture of the past (cf. Nagy 1986). The resulting verbal performance combines collective societal and personal history, impromptu oral composition (*repartee*), and, as a counterpoint and facilitating environment for extemporaneous production, a traditional formal framework favoring malicious *ad hominem* humor, brevity, balances and oppositions, and wordplay.

The mutual interpellations or “calling out” of *flyting* are performative utterances intended as social judgment according to a cultural code still dominated, at least in the archaizing texts of the family sagas, by honor and warrior heroics. Shame functions within the public sphere. The stylized agonistic dialog of the narrative-dramatic form had a double public—that within the tale, plus the enveloping shell of reader and his audience—but for both it had the same entertainment and lightly didactic value (Lönnroth 1979). A tantalizing question, in the light of the deep historical perspective of the war of words, is the degree to which the medieval written texts record authentic preliterate verbal behavior and traditional patterns of content and form. The liberal use of humor and irony in character-to-character situations (as opposed to their use by an author or his characters, or toward his public) also raises the more formal question of genre, to which we shall return. Naturally, *flyting* is not restricted to these two words in the two literary traditions. Initial considerations will, however, keep a close focus on the technique of defamation in *seriatim* form in these two brief tales.

As the Irish tale is the older and can on linguistic grounds be traced to the ninth century (although some doubts remain), it will be summarized first. The Mac Dathó of the title is a king of Leinster, but has powerful neighbors, kings Conchobar of Ulster and Ailill of Connaught, arch-rivals in the corpus of epic text known as the Ulster cycle. Mac Dathó has a famous dog which guards the kingdom. When his neighbors both ask for it, he can devise no better strategy than to invite each of them to come and fetch it—unbeknownst to them, at the same time. A huge pig is slaughtered for the obligatory banquet. Its size and other extraordinary features led some commentators to think the tale to be in a satirical, Rabelaisian vein, while for others the pig is part of the residue of mythic material in these stories, and the *bruiden* or hostel, where the rivals are received, is an

wives engage in what is explicitly called a war of words.

Otherworld setting.³ In an uneasy truce the warriors of Ulster and Connaught take their places in the banquet hall. The kings' initial discussion of how the pig is to be carved is a brief exercise in one-ups-manship and stimulates individual heroes on both sides to lay claim to the carver's right with reference to cross-border raids to steal cattle and engage in single combat. Finally, Cet mac Mágach of Connaught appears to dominate the assembly. He hangs his weapons higher than the others', takes out his knife, prepares to carve the pig, then gives the Ulstermen a last chance: "Find among the men of Ireland one to match me in the contest—or let me have the division of the pig."

At this point we may turn to *Ölkofra Þátr*, thought to have been composed in Iceland in the latter half of the thirteenth century, and trace its development to a comparable contest scene. The "Ale-Hood" of the title is a wealthy but stingy man named Þórhallr. He is also short and ugly, a good carpenter and smith, and brewer of a poor beer which he sells at the annual assembly, the Alþingi. He shields his weak eyes with a hood, whence the nickname. Here we have the caricature of an Odinic figure, immediately creating a less than fully historical ambiance. Ale-Hood owns a wood near the Alþingi and in the course of burning charcoal the wood-lot catches fire. It spreads to consume a neighboring wood owned by six powerful chieftains, called *Goðaskógr*, suggestive of the chieftains' (*goðar*) earlier status incorporating priestly functions at specific sacral sites. The six men are all known from other sagas and historical documents, although they were not exact contemporaries, while Ale-Hood and the events which he triggers in the tale are not (Jóhannesson 1950a:xxxiv-xxxviii, Baetke 1960:1-8). The *Þátr* is then of the "tall tale" variety, combining historical material with exaggerated fiction. The chieftains think they can extract money from Ale-Hood by bringing a case against him at the Alþingi, since destruction of such a precious resource as wood in early Iceland was an offense punishable by varying degrees of outlawry. Although on a different social level, Ale-Hood, like Mac Dathó, is caught between the claims of neighbors, here acting collectively rather than as rivals.

Ale-Hood can find no allies among his former customers at the Alþingi until the young Broddi Bjarnason, brother-in-law of Þorsteinn Hallsson (also known from other sagas), apparently on a whim decides to champion the blustering but worried firebrand. In the best saga fashion the audience is not privy to Broddi's counsel and must wait to see it acted out. It involves a duplicitous procedure where Ale-Hood appears to back down from his former arrogance and placate two of the chieftains, thus playing them off against their colleagues. He offers to cede to them

³ See Nagy 1981. If Mac Dathó's patronym is interpreted as meaning that he was the son of two mutes, the chthonic associations would be strengthened. Buttimer (1982) argues for an intentional political silence maintained by this king of Leinster *vis à vis* his powerful neighbors of Ulster and Connaught with a view to promoting their mutual attrition.

the right to judge the case (cf. the double invitation to the Irish banquet, devised by Mac Dathó after a discussion with his wife in their bed chamber, significantly in a dialog poem with several exchanges).⁴

As it turns out, after the agreement and handshake, Ale-Hood claims with Broddi's and Þorsteinn's support that he had reserved for himself the right to name the arbitrators in the case. Not surprisingly, at least to the audience of the tale, he names Þorsteinn and Broddi to judge the suit. They agree that the former will announce the verdict and the latter deal with any objections which might arise, a procedure attested in other Icelandic texts. Þorsteinn finds that the woods were worth relatively little and that Ale-Hood was powerless to stop the spread of the fire after his own wood had been burned. He awards the six chieftains as damages a quantity of homespun cloth so insignificant as to be insulting. The mean Ale-Hood thus escapes with a minimum fine. Broddi must then stand down the inevitable cries of outrage and this he is well equipped to do. Like Ale-Hood he appears to be a fictional character, so that some importance can be attached to the name chosen. Broddi can be referred to the ON verb *brodda* "prick, goad, incite" and the noun *broddr* "spike, shaft, sting, front of a column of men" (metaphorically, one might say, an "advocate").⁵ Not only is he prepared to respond to objections, he even provokes them with a verbal taunt as demeaning as the petty award, referring to it as *argaskatt*, the tribute due men of *ergi*, roughly "unmanliness" with overtones of sexual deviance. This theme will be developed in what follows.⁶ We may now proceed to examine in parallel the series of verbal confrontations involving Cet of Connaught and Broddi Bjarnason. These claims and

⁴ Two recent studies, Lapidge 1985 and Dronke 1986, throw interesting light on the origins and early development of the dialog poem, with specific mention of *Scéla Mucce Meic Dathó*. The Lehmanns (24) suggest that Norse examples were influenced by Irish models, but the concept of the dialog poem seems too widespread for this; see also Holtsmark 1970. Also related to the *senna* is the extemporaneous contest in poetic composition, well attested in Norse tradition.

⁵ Orel (1985) revises Hamp's (1974) proposal and derives OIr. *áer* "satire" from IE **aig(h)ra-* "sharp weapon," thence "sharp word," also adducing Slavic parallels. The name Broddi for a satirical commentator then fits well into this semantic field. In this domain of metaphor we may also compare the type-scene of incitation or *hvöt* "whetting," where a woman attempts to shame a male relative into taking overdue revenge (Clover 1986, Jochens 1986, Miller 1984).

⁶ *Slikt kalla ek argaskatt* (91). The import of these words is rather muffled in Pálsson's translation: "I call this a tribute to the craven" (89), but is recognized in Jóhannesson's (1950a) footnote and well developed in Sørensen (1983), who has a useful discussion of *Ölkoþra Þáttur* in a chapter entitled "Humiliation and Challenge." For a more recent examination, see Gade 1986.

counter-claims are made in a larger context of legal or quasi-legal contention—the dispute over the dog and the background of rivalry between the two kingdoms in the Irish tale, the court case over the burned wood-lot, and the tensions of the class and clientship system in the Icelandic. The Irish story structures these confrontations according to a more one-sided formal pattern than its Norse equivalent. Each warrior who faces Cet is described in succinct epic terms—“a tall fair warrior,” “a large, grey, very ugly warrior,” and so on—and most make a brief remark to the effect that it is not right for Cet to carve the pig before their very eyes. Cet, however, is allowed a much fuller response. The first Ulsterman to protest is Lóegaire, usually known as “the Victorious.” Cet replies that Lóegaire had crossed the Connaught border on his initiatory foray as a warrior, but had to abandon horses, chariot, and charioteer before Cet, and flee with the latter’s spear through him. “Is that how you propose to take the pig?”—this initial retort is then aimed at the events which launch the adult warrior’s life: the first cross-border raid. Subsequent remarks will focus on later stages of the warrior biography.

Skapti the Lawspeaker (*lögsögumadr*) is the first of the Icelandic chieftains to recognize and respond to the *flyting* posture which Broddi adopts and relatively mildly remarks that Broddi has gone out of his way to get involved in the dispute and to make enemies, and that the chieftains will doubtless have better luck in other court cases. Broddi replies, purposely escalating his tone, that Skapti will need such luck if he is to compensate for damages he was forced to pay Ormr for composing a love-song about his wife. In both cases, the contestant is bested with reference to an earlier dishonoring incident: defeat, flight, and personal injury on the one hand, the always suspect erotic verse-making and unfavorable court decision on the other.⁷ In the Irish account, the respondent was personally involved. In the Icelandic, he was not; his personal aggrandizement will hang on these verbal encounters only.

Óengus mac Láme Gábaid of Ulster is next put down by Cet, who recalls that his father got the name Lám Gábuid (“Hand-Wail”) when Cet hurled his spear back at him and struck off his hand, the first of a number of body-specific references. Here the insult pre-dates the warrior’s entry

⁷ As Sørensen remarks (1983:35): “Love-poetry is mentioned in Grágás [“Gray Goose,” a law book] in the same section as lampoons, and it rates the same punishment, outlawry. The reason was that love-poetry was regarded as a gross outrage against the man—father, brother, or husband—who was the woman’s guardian,” as well as compromising the honor of the woman in question. In comments on his translation of Kormák’s saga, Lee Hollander (1949:193) makes reference to Celtic affinities of complexion and temperament as well as the Irish name of the poet. Such traits seem typical of a number of Icelandic poets from the early period, especially those composing erotic verse. The restricted literary use to which such Celtic material was put is discussed in Sayers 1988.

on the martial scene. How can the son of a man with such a nickname challenge Cet? Porkell “Fringe” (*trefill*) now queries the Icelandic decision. He says that Broddi is making a mistake, turning legal opponents into lasting enemies. As in the previous instance, Broddi takes his lead from one of the terms used by his interlocutor, here “mistake.” He cites Porkell’s mistake in letting another man’s stallion mount the mare he was riding to the Alþingi. His cloak was pinned under the horse’s legs and Broddi is unsure whether mare or master was the eventual object of the stallion’s attentions. This further, more scurrilous reference to aberrant sexual activity (an inversion of the more common charge of bestiality), now not only illegal but unnatural, foreshadows a later comment and puts the exchanges on quite a different stylistic level than the heroic but still abusive atmosphere of the Irish tale. Nonetheless, as will be seen, points of contact exist between the two cultures in this sphere as well.

The third Ulsterman contesting Cet’s claim is Éogan mac Durthacht. Cet had earlier met him on a cattle-raid and had thrown back his spear putting out one of Éogan’s eyes, a variant on the spear-and-hand motif. Again the injury and insult are compounded by the use of the warrior’s own weapon. The third chieftain, Eyjólfur Þórdarson, now complains that Broddi is abusing them and cheating. Broddi retorts that he is not cheating, but that Eyjólfur was cheated when he went north to steal Porkell Eiríksson’s cattle, was chased off, and escaped only by turning himself into a mare. Exactly what is meant here may be lost on a modern audience but it is clearly another defamatory reference to sexual transformation and would have recalled the mythological parallel of the god Loki turning himself into a mare. This is far from the warrior’s shape-shifting into ursine or lupine form. Loki is recalled in another way as well, when Broddi takes his place as the master of insult directed against social superiors (cf. *Lokasenna* and Loki’s string of dishonoring references to the gods).

In the Irish hostel Muinremur tries to contest Cet’s claim to the pig but is reminded that less than a week earlier Cet had taken four Connaught heads, including that of Muinremur’s first-born son. Incidents have now escalated to the death of a family member, progeny replacing parts of the body, and reference is to a later point, that is, parenthood, in the life of the opponent. Snorri the Priest next criticizes Broddi, urging the others to remember what kind of friendship Broddi is showing them. Broddi retorts that Snorri must have little sense of priority if he insists on taking revenge on him instead of avenging his own father. In Iceland, then, a similar escalation as family honor enters the scene. In these references to events prior to those of the tale, we have bits and pieces from other sagas (intertextuality), and Pálsson notes that Skarpheðinn makes a similar

insinuation in *Njáls saga*.⁸ The antecedents of the Irish episodes are not similarly attested in the extant texts. We shall return to this question of deflating reputations established elsewhere—whether epic or historical—in the concluding remarks on this serial variant of the *flyting* device.

The next pair of encounters offers the closest thematic parallel between the Irish and Icelandic tales, with references to both family involvement and the lasting evidence of wounds, and the two episodes may be given in full to illustrate their stylistic characteristics and degree of affinity.

“In comram beus!” ol Cet. “Rot-bia són,” ol Mend mac Sálchada. “Cía so?” ol Cet. “Mend,” ol cách. “Cid ane,” ol Cet, “meic na mbachlach cusna lesanmannaib do chomram cucum? Ar ba mese ba sacart oc baistiud ind anma-sin fora athair, messe thall a sáil de co claidiub conna-ruc acht oínchois úaim. Cid do-bérad mac ind oínchoisseda cucumsa?” (Thurneysen 1935:12)

“On with the contest!” said Cet. “You will have that!” said Mend son of Salchad. “Who is this?” asked Cet. “Mend son of Salchad,” said everyone. “What next!” said Cet. “Now sons of herdsmen with nicknames are challenging me. I am the priest who baptized your father with that name, for I struck his heel with my sword so that he took but one foot away. What could bring the son of a one-footed man to challenge me?” (Gantz 1981:184)

In this episode, after the formulaic challenge and response, Mend scarcely has the opportunity to establish himself verbally. Cet cuts off his name as given by onlookers and now for the first time makes a socially demeaning reference—to a herdsman father with a dishonorable nickname. Then he ironically moves to the other end of the social scale and identifies himself as the priest at this baptism. Another sobriquet is named, a new weapon is mentioned, and Cet continues his catalog of parts of the body. We have the further vignette of Mend’s father retreating on one foot from Cet, the foot wound itself suggesting a prior attempt at flight. The entire scene is summarized in the last four words of the non sequitur question: “son of a one-footer against me?”

Pá mælti Þorkell Geitisson: “Þetta er líkast, at þú hafit þat helzt af nafni því, er þú ert eptir heitinn, at hann vildi hvers manns hlut óhæfan af sér verða láta, ok þat annat, at menn þoli eigi ok liggir þú drepinn, er stundir líða.” Broddi segir: “Engi vegr er okkr í, frændi, at yppa hér fyrir alþ ýðu ógæfu frænda várra, en ekki skal þess dylja, er margir vitu, at Brodd-Helgi var veginn. Var mér ok þat sagt, at faðir þinn toeki ofarlíga til þeira lauanna, en hitt ætla ek, ef þú leitar at, er þú munir fingrum kenna þat, er faðir minn markaði þik í Böðvarsdal” (Jóhannesson 1950a:92f.).

⁸ It would have been useful to point out that this remark was also made at the Alþingi assembly, although not in court, in the course of similar remarks to other chieftains (ch. 119f.; see below). Typically, Snorri does not rise to the bait.

Thorkel Geitisson said, "It strikes me that all you've inherited from the man whose name you were given is to make all the trouble you can for everyone. Nobody's going to put up with this sort of thing for long, and maybe you'll have to pay for it with your life." Broddi said, "We can't gain anything, kinsman, by shouting in public about our people's bad luck. There's no point in denying what everyone knows, that Brodd-Helgi was killed, but I've been told your own father paid the same high price. I think if you had any sense of touch in your fingers you'd find the scars my father marked you with at Boðvarsdale" (Pálsson 1971:90f.).

Unlike the laconic Mend, Porkell makes a full, confident statement and his measured opinion has a clear temporal axis from past to future, in fact, from birth to death. The English translation cannot convey the economy of the dark but indirect allusion to Broddi's father, the progression to the word *drepinn* "slain," and the casual conclusion "for long." The inheritance metaphor and reference to naming may be compared to the Irish baptism image. Porkell is remarking that future action might follow. Broddi's response is to turn to the past. His opening comment deflates the menace of Porkell's remark, first with its reference to kinship and the undesirability of airing family squabbles in public, then by seemingly conceding the point of Broddi's father's death. *Ógæfa* "bad luck" puns on *óhæfi* "trouble, improper conduct," a variant of the literal repetition of earlier exchanges. The abstract and relatively neutral metaphor of the father having "paid the price" is then contrasted with the concrete but unrealized reference to Porkell fingering scars on his own body, a very different inheritance than the one to which Porkell had alluded. As elsewhere, the mention of a specific site in Iceland where the events occurred serves to situate the shameful incident in historical time and familiar space. But as Porkell is Broddi's kinsman, this is the mildest of the insults, and, unlike the others, wholly contained within the heroic code: Porkell had only been bested in a fight. Broddi later effects a reconciliation with Porkell by presenting him with the warrior's attribute, an ornamented sword.

We may now return to briefer summaries of the encounters. The grey and ugly Celtchair mac Uithechair is the next Ulster champion. He too had exchanged spear thrusts with Cet, who had pierced his thighs and testicles, thus depriving him of further sons and daughters, a variation on the earlier motif of a son killed, and leaving him incontinent like an aged man. Celtchair has been unmanned by Cet, much as Broddi silences his opponents with reference to other, more passive unmanly activity. Broddi's above reply to Porkell Geitisson closed the episode at the Alþingi, although the sixth chieftain had not yet objected. He would meet Broddi the next day and this final encounter will be considered below.

Cet's penultimate contestant is Cúscraid Mend Macha, son of king

Conchobar, and this marks a social escalation. But he too had been maimed by Cet's spear, which pierced his throat, leaving him with a speech defect (*mend* "stammerer"). Thus the sequence of refutations appears to end appropriately with Cet besting an opponent who cannot even compete verbally. This physical blemish would, according to the Irish conception, also disqualify Cúscraid from any future claim to the kingship, although the early Irish pattern was never that of sons directly succeeding fathers. These seven confrontations between Cet and the Ulstermen can be summarized as having moved on ideological spectra from warrior initiation to impotent old age, from base social condition to the kingship.⁹

The contention in the Irish tale concludes with the appearance of the Ulster hero Conall Cernach in the hall. He is a late arrival, and his entry can in narrative terms be compared to Broddi's later encounter with the last chieftain. This episode is structured more elaborately than those preceding and opens with ironically menacing compliments instead of insults. It concludes with Cet prepared to cede the pig to Conall as the better man, but he regrets that his brother Anlúan is not there to contest the issue. But he is, replies Conall, and throws Anlúan's severed head down on the table.¹⁰ The multiple reversals—eulogy instead of scorn, Conall and Ulster dominating Cet and Connaught, the reference to the better brother and his shocking appearance on the scene—mark the climax of the story, as the preceding episodes were much of a single kind and thus only accumulative in effect. In the Icelandic tale the reversal of Ale-Hood's fortunes takes a sudden twist early when Broddi is awarded the judgment, but Broddi's final exchange will be after Ale-Hood has disappeared from the tale. In the hostel, Conall carves the pig, shares out the pieces (miserly

⁹ The injuries which Cet inflicted on his opponents were, firstly, unspecified body wounds, then the loss of a father's hand, the loss of an eye, the death of a son and loss of his head, the loss of a father's foot, emasculation, and the loss of speech. A number of one-eyed and one-handed figures, with Óðinn and Týr the Norse divine prototypes, have been identified in cultures sharing the Indo-European heritage. I would extend these chosen or imposed mutilations, with their reduction of the binary to the unitary, often with compensatory powers accruing, to encompass a third type of injury and would add a third maimed figure, lame or sexually dysfunctional (for a fuller discussion, see Sayers 1990).

¹⁰ On Conall's closing remarks before Cet's concession, see Sayers 1982. Heads are occasionally taken in Icelandic literature as well, although more to demean the figure of the dead man than to enhance the killer's prestige or for magico-religious purposes as in Irish. In *Bjárnar saga Hítadælskappa* (*The Saga of Björn, the Hítadæl Champion*), the story of the enmity between two satirical poets, Þórdr throws Björn's severed head down at his mother's feet. Þórdís' reply outdoes even Þórdr's jeering comment, thus bringing this episode, too, into the sphere of the *senna* (Jónsson 1953:ch. 33). A reply similar to Connall's occurs in ch. 27 of *Heiðarvíga saga* (*The Saga of the Battle on the Moor*) (Jónsson 1953), where Þorgautr says of a noise he hears, "Hasn't Bardi come yet?", a standing joke about Bardi's slowness to seek vengeance. Ketill steps into the forge, throws down his brother's body and says "Your son Gísli found he has come."

to the Connaughtmen, like Þorsteinn's lots of cloth), and the expected general melee follows to wind up the story. Ulster comes off best in the conflict, but Mac Cathó's dog, which had sided with them, is killed and Conchobar himself is humiliated. Thus, despite the outcome of the series of verbal confrontations, the events of the larger political context are eventually inconclusive, as *Ölkofra Þáttr* will also prove to be. The Ulster heroes who suffer ignominy at Cet's hands are not permanently diminished in the epic corpus. Cet's recollections simply point up the fact that they, too, do not always come out on top.

Ale-Hood's tale concludes with Broddi making amends to his kinsman Þorkell Geitisson the day after the judgment. Then as the Alþingi is breaking up, Broddi encounters the last of the six chieftains, Guðmundr Eyjólfsson. Guðmundr asks which way Broddi is riding home and, when told, urges him to keep his promise and ride through Ljósawater pass. Broddi thinks it unlikely that Guðmundr could harm him at the pass, "seeing the honor you lost when you didn't bother to defend the narrow pass in your backside." Broddi's series of defamatory remarks closes with the reference to dishonorable sexual activity, here male rape or at least homosexuality, a very grave accusation in medieval Iceland.¹¹ Accompanied by his kinsman Þorkell (martially "reinstated" and prepared to risk a fight), Broddi makes his way safely home.

The climax of the Icelandic tale, if, indeed, the term is the proper one, is very different from that of the Irish. Broddi's exchange with the sixth chieftain occurs after the Alþingi has broken up and thus outside the relative security of the law court. It takes place in another time and in another place, once again the menacing, tension-ridden society of rural Iceland. Guðmundr can be the most reticent of the chieftains, but the threat implied in his urging Broddi to keep to his intended path is the most serious. After Broddi's retort, we do not know what to expect: will there be an armed encounter like the many referred to in Broddi's accusations? But other social forces are now also at work and Broddi has the backing of his kinsman. At the end we are left in doubt whether Guðmundr was too shamed to face up to Broddi at the pass, or whether he thought the better of it for more practical, tactical reasons. The moment of greatest tension has passed, whether it was recognized as a climax to the story or not.

We can note an escalation in Broddi's accusations from the first hint of illegal erotic actions to the final insult, passing along the way through other charges of deficient manliness in the area of martial activity and

¹¹ Sørensen (1983:37) notes that a similar allegation is made against Guðmundr in *Ljósvetninga saga* (*The Saga of the Men of Lightwater*). The story of Björn and Þórdr also has one of the most explicit examples of such defamation in the instance of the pole with the carving of two men which Björn had set up. For general discussion see Almqvist 1965, Ström 1974, and Sørensen 1983. Almqvist makes briefer mention of *Ölkofra Þáttr* on p. 181.

inadequate defence of personal integrity. All these accusations, paralleling the pedestrian case of the burnt wood itself, are intentionally below the station of the six plaintiffs: Skapti is the Lawspeaker, Snorri is always called “the Priest,” Gudmundr is called “the rich” in other documents, Porkell Fringe “wise and learned in law” (Jóhannesson 1950a, introduction). The incidents that Cet recalls explains epithets and nicknames; the Icelandic events Broddi cites are in contrast to them. In other inversions, those who should generously dispense ale, the chieftains, persecute its brewer, and the attempt to manipulate the law by a former lawman is thwarted by a rank amateur. The whole development of the tale is implicit in the primary event, the reduction of the (once sacred?) “priestly wood” (Goðaskógr) to commonplace ashes. The chieftains’ reputations suffer a similar reduction, although like Ale-Hood’s intended charcoal—if I may force the image a bit—they smolder against Broddi without breaking into open flame.¹²

The story ends with the tensions relieved, power balance restored, untypically for the sagas at the cost of only a wood-lot and not human life, and conventional social values reaffirmed. Like the unidimensional Ulstermen, the more complex Icelandic chieftain figures have not, in terms of reputation, been permanently disabled by the contest with Broddi. The ahistoricity of the tale is perhaps confirmed by Broddi’s getting off scot free after such gravely offensive accusations in the public forum of the Alþingi. As has been increasingly recognized in recent decades of saga scholarship, the purportedly historical tale tells us more about the age in which it was written than about that it claims to depict.

Joseph Harris (1983:219f.) calls the Old Norse battle of words “a stock compositional unit” and provides this summary statement:

The major insults are cowardice, sexual deviances, and unfree social status. The insults and threats are framed in fairly regular alternating exchanges, and it would be possible to consider most extant examples of the *senna* in terms of a single dramatic schema or pattern: a preliminary, comprising an Identification (which may be insulting, factual, or even laudatory) and then a central exchange, consisting of either Accusation and Denial, Threat and Counterthreat, or Challenge and Reply or a combination. . . .the *sennur* are typologically recognizable compositional units: stereotyped but variable in form, traditional in content, repeated in the poetic corpus, structurally (and

¹² On the use of fire, it is interesting to note that firing a house containing an enemy and his family was not considered dishonorable in early Iceland, apparently since those inside always had the option to come out and fight; see Allen 1971 for the literary use. Numerical strength was seldom a factor in public judgment, except in honoring the valor of a man outnumbered. Early Irish epic literature also has examples of hostels and halls set on fire, the most extreme case being to lure guests into a disguised iron house and then putting the surrounding wood to the torch; see *Mesca Ulad (The Intoxication of the Ulstermen)*, Watson, translated in Gantz 1981).

contextually?) predictable within limits.¹³

As concerns content, we have seen that *Ölkofra Þáttr* is true to form, while the Irish *scél* stresses defeat over cowardice, makes few social allusions, and limits sexual comment to emasculation. Broddi's relatively mild treatment of his kinsman Porkell, distinct as it is from the five other exchanges, is closest to the Irish examples and their heroic ethos.¹⁴ In terms of composition, both tales here considered differ from the Icelandic norm, where the *senna* is typically a poetic device, by having a series of confrontations between a protagonist and a group of rivals, rather than an escalating series of insults traded between opponents and reaching a readily identifiable climax. There is a certain economy of form in the single statements and replies, although Cet's interlocutors in the Irish tale have little latitude to establish their counterclaims. The structure of the Icelandic exchanges is based on Broddi isolating a term from the chieftains' critical and threatening comments, then linking it, often through wordplay, to the example of dishonorable conduct that he cites. The form is succinct, with an apparently casual opening mention, then the malicious point quickly and economically made. Given such formal differences, the Irish tale is nonetheless perhaps closer to the other *sennur* considered by Harris than to the *Þáttr* in the important respect that the verbal duellers are social equals and the context is an explicitly martial one.

Although a free man, Broddi has neither the power nor the rank of

¹³ Harris gives a catalog of other Old Norse examples of the *senna* (236, n. 22). He includes a reference to ch. 35 of *Njáls saga*, an exchange of insults between Hallgerðr and Bergþóra, but in what must be an oversight fails to mention the later scene at the Alþingi (ch. 119f.), where Skaphedinn puts down a number of chieftains who spot him standing among Ásgrímur's followers (see below). The woman's war of words over precedence at table and in hand-washing seems to be a set piece, as it occurs as well in *Ljósvetninga saga* (Sigfússon 1940); see further Holtmark 1970. Ellis Davidson also treats *flyting*. As concerns *Hárbarðzliod* and the *senna* with Óðinn and þorr she writes (1983:26): "Nor is it easy to understand why Óðinn's [concluding] reference to a ring to make atonement between them arouses Thórr to intense fury." But this too may be a reference to sodomy. The author also makes interesting observations on the longevity of stylized verbal abuse in Irish tradition as represented by wake games and by the Newfoundland mumming tradition. Like the two rival hosts meeting at Mac Dathó's hostel, these are instances of verbal aggression when the speakers are outside their home or home territory. Useful listings of studies of the *senna* are found in Lönnroth 1986:91n. and Clover 1985:288n. For *flyting* in the Old English tradition, see Olsen 1986.

¹⁴ In the Irish epic *Táin Bó Cúailnge* the hero Cú Chulainn asks that his charioteer satirize him if he weakens in battle and this he does with a series of disparaging comparisons to domestic life ("your opponent goes over you like a tail over a cat"), but when Cú Chulainn engages in a *flyting* with Fer Diad of Connaught, the praise, then abuse in the dialog poem is the more conventional martial taunts ("nervous lad, you with the heart of a fluttering bird, without valour, without vigour;" O'Rahilly 1976:260f.). Cú Chulainn's opponent here is his former foster-brother, Fer Diad, who had been lured to fight him by Queen Medb of Connaught, their negotiations also given in a dialog poem.

the chieftains. Their opening comments to him need be only veiled threats, neither full-fledged boasts nor insults. In a similar distinction, Broddi is not an established champion and his only asset is his *orðspeki* “verbal wit.” He does not vaunt his own exploits, nor do his observations carry any future menace. What is at stake is simply the enhanced prestige that would result from the successful management of the court case with its meager indemnity and from besting the others in the verbal encounter which all present seem consciously to recognize as a contest.¹⁵ Finally, the context is only symbolically martial, opposing sides in a law court, not on a battle field, although the final exchange takes place beyond these controlling limits. *Ölkofra Páttr* must then be seen as an evolved example of the *senna*, one with traditional content, but exhibiting a new structure and fundamentally different social dimension. As a literary form, it harnessed discourse contrived with artistic intent (wit, brevity, the shock value of personal information delivered in a socially inappropriate manner) for purposes of open debate on cultural norms and values.

Ellis Davidson and others have observed that the poems of the *Edda* are to a great extent monologs or dialogs, leading Phillpotts in 1920 to posit some kind of ritual drama associated with their public recital. Ellis Davidson rightly dismisses this as speculation and goes on to consider insults and riddles in particular in this context of dialog, finding parallels between the threat and insult on the one hand and the question and answer on the other. This comparison can be pursued beyond the formal resemblances she notes. In the situations in the *Edda* poems, knowledge is power. With riddles and related encounter and testing scenes, it lies in the possession of secret knowledge not open to the uninitiated; in the case of insults, it implies access to and revelation of information which the other would keep hidden. The etymon of *senna* is a verb meaning “to state, prove.” As with the Irish tale, we are invited to think that the factual content of the accusations is correct, although for the accompanying emotional state ascribed to the opponent (fear, submissiveness) equivalent proof is not always available. Exchanges like that between Óðinn and Þórr or those considered here have the intertextual nature of an *Aufreihlied* or catalog poem: brief references to other stories in the tradition, with these insults illuminating the tales from the vantage point of mockery.

The dialogs in the *Edda* often occur in the context of a journey, with the exchange occasioned by some obstacle to continued advance, resulting

¹⁵ Cf. the explicit use of the word *comram* “contention” in Cet’s taunt. The attestation of the *flyting* topos in the Germanic and Celtic traditions and elsewhere such as Homeric Greece suggests that such exchanges were part of the common Indo-European cultural tradition, but while mythological texts such as *Hárbardzlióð* offer examples of such verbal contests between the gods, we have no instance of an etiological myth which would explain their origin. Satirical comment could also have a self-fulfilling quality, bringing it closer to other forms of verbal magic; see Ó Cathasaigh 1986.

in liminal situations like the soul's attempted entry to the kingdom of the dead or, more generally, the quest. These are, literally, moments of passage; in quite a different way the "secular" confrontation of Broddi is a kind of rite of passage whereby his credentials for daring and wit are established. In the Irish story the sought-for status is that of supreme champion. In riddling situations the protagonist's life is also frequently at stake. This gives the encounter the nature of an ordeal or judicial combat. Holtsmark remarked that the tales of Ale-Hood and the Confederates (see below) had as chief motif the *senna* moved to a court, but she doubted that it belonged there. But on the analogy of Ellis Davidson's association of insult and riddle we can view the move to the law court, in literary terms, as a realistic development of an integral strain of the traditional verbal contest.

A further point deserves mention. The classic *senna* seems set in the meeting of two champions with no mention of a public in attendance. Even in Loki's attack on the gods, they can be seen as a collective adversary. But in the two tales reviewed here, a public was present: in Ireland, two rival hosts and perhaps the non-partisan Mac Dathó's men; in Iceland, the thingmen of the chieftains and other less committed onlookers. No longer simply a two-way communication, the dialog, now like a staged drama, becomes a polyvalent message affecting the various members of the public in different and individual ways. Gasps, snickers, and guffaws are then to be heard in the background. The environment was a contingent one, reflective of everyday reality, while the formal structure of the exchange—marked by brevity, wit, recalls and wordplay, the requirements of "heightening" (that is, the response "topping" the initial comment), and the larger repetitive pattern—are reminiscent of timeless ritual, and, indeed, replicated the "dialog of the gods." Reputation was at stake to a much higher degree than can be assumed, albeit somewhat artificially, for the one-on-one battlefield *senna*. And here we reach a fundamental point in an honor/shame-oriented society, as opposed to one concerned with guilt: honor was intact until the potentially dishonoring events of the past were made public.¹⁶ When historical fact was unveiled or recalled to the audience, the chieftains, like the Ulster heroes, simply had no further recourse in the immediate social context. Reception of the message by the third-party public constrained the reaction of the person to whom it was nominally addressed. Unlike battlefield insults which served to incite to warlike activity (and thereby served also to advance narrative), Broddi's and Cet's observations were true non-sequiturs.

¹⁶ This provides an approach to understanding how the nominally heroic could resort to trickery—only the publicly made promise need be kept, and the deception of one man by another without witnesses posed no threat to one's public reputation; see O'Leary 1986.

In Broddi's apparently whimsical assumption of Ale-Hood's case we find further evidence of the Icelandic approach to the containment of violence within a society shaped by law but without an institutionalized and impartial means of law enforcement. The creation of a new alliance and Broddi's mediating role prevent the chieftains' misappropriation of the legal apparatus and convert the potential economic violence, which might have occurred if Ale-Hood has been fined or outlawed, into stylized verbal violence turned back on the chieftains. Broddi's reputation has been enhanced, at relatively small cost to the reputations of the chieftains—although memories were long in Iceland, as in all feud societies. The resolution is the precarious one achieved in so many other feud situations in the sagas (Byock 1982).

A last question that must be considered, however, briefly, is whether the Icelandic story is in any way related to the Irish precedent. In 1968 Michael Chestnutt wrote that "the proposition that Norse literature owes a debt to Celtic, although at one time widely accepted, cannot lightly be advanced by any modern scholar" (124). The overall question has been relatively little pursued since the time of his comment, although a number of closely focused studies have shown the mobility, conceivably in either direction, of literary motifs, while others have continued to argue for the importance of formative rather than determinative Celtic influences on early Icelandic literary art (see the bibliography in Sayers 1988).¹⁷ The first scholars like Bugge who considered the issue were also less well equipped to evaluate the interplay between such possible cross-cultural transfers on the one hand, and biblical and classical models, and the common Indo-European antecedents of medieval Celtic and Norse ideologies on the other. The *flyting* is found in other early Germanic literary traditions, while the Celts' dispute over the champion's portion is similarly attested in early Irish texts and in classical authors' adaptations of Posidonius' ethnographical account (Tierney 1959-60).¹⁸ Other societies with a heroic ideal offer a multitude of parallels to these examples of warring dialog. But while there may be no compelling reason to assume the transfer of an original Celtic genre of martial repartee, we do have the

¹⁷ It should be noted that anthropologists have as yet to come up with any conclusive proof of a major Celtic component among the settlers of Iceland. See Pálsson and Schwidetzky 1975, who conclude that the great mass of settlers originated in Norway. This of course does not invalidate the claim that many immigrants may previously have been resident in Ireland or the Hebrides, some the product of mixed marriages.

¹⁸ Athenaeus (IV.40) quotes Posidonius: "And in former times when the hindquarters were served up the bravest hero took the thigh piece, and if another man claimed it they stood up and fought in single combat to the death;" cited from Tierney 1959-60:247. Diodorus Siculus (V.28) adds: "At dinner they [the Celts] are wont to be moved by chance remarks to wordy disputes, and, after a challenge, to fight in single combat, regarding their lives as naught" (*ibid.*:250).

parallel of the evolved serial yet streamlined form evidenced in the two tales here considered, a multi-person series of exchanges replacing the two-party escalation of boasts, threats, and insults. But this too seems a fairly natural evolution in form, a variation on the basic pattern of repetition and accumulation that could easily occur independently, perhaps in the passage from an oral to a dual oral/literate tradition. The ultimate antecedents and extra-artistic congeners of the serial defamation are found in natural dialog and the stylistic devices available to it for making a telling *ad hominem* point, albeit normally in situations of verbal sparring between only two opponents. The transfer of serial structure between the two cultures is then no more likely than that of the motifs of the verbal contest in general or the earlier mentioned cattle-raid.

Ölkofra Þáttr does, however, have clear generic affinities within Icelandic literature, more explicit than mere categorization among the *sennur* would suggest. Chapter 10 of *Bandamanna saga* (*The Saga of the Confederates*) quite obviously derives from the earlier tale of Ale-Hood, although the defamation scene is not as streamlined as that reviewed here.¹⁹ The aged father Ófeigr has many of the characteristics of Ale-Hood, but is still able to take on the defence of his son Oddr. He does this by winning over two of the eight chieftains in the collective case. He assumes a role like Broddi in reviewing the background of six of them, before disqualifying them from pronouncing the judgment. Here the chieftains do not speak and the references to them are not especially abusive. Ófeigr reserves his harshest criticism for Egill, with whom he is in fact in collusion. Gellir and Egill are awarded the judgment, the former to pronounce the decision, the latter to justify it. The fine is trivially small and three chieftains protest. Unlike Broddi's more self-contained respondents they actively disparage Egill and he replies in kind with references to cowardice, stinginess, and masturbation. The exchanges are much longer than in the *Þáttr* and are not limited to a single complaint and retort per speaker. While the scene is undoubtedly effective, it does not have the crispness of characterization and form of the tale of Ale-Hood.

Also related to this *Þáttr*, although at a somewhat greater remove, is the visit of Skarpheðinn and Ásgrímr in *Njáls saga* (chapters 119-20) to the Alþingi booths of various chieftains in efforts to win support in the case involving the death of Höskuldr. After Ásgrímr's request for assistance and the discouraging reply, each chieftain goes on to inquire concerning

¹⁹ Magerøy 1981:ch. 10; see, too, Baetke 1960. This saga also drew on that of Þorsteinn Síðu-Hallsson, Broddi's brother-in-law; for the theme of the contested chieftainship see Magerøy 1957. Coincidentally, Þorsteinn has Irish affinities as well, having fought at the battle of Clontarf in 1014, when Norse power in Ireland was further checked, and eventually dying at the hands of a Celtic slave called Gilli (OIr. *gilla* "servant;" Jóhannesson 1950b). Like *Ölkofra Þáttr* these stories are from the East Friths. See further Sayers forthcoming.

the tall, hard-looking man fifth in line. Skarpheðinn speaks up with the dishonoring and scurrilous replies whose themes we recognize from other examples considered here. Here, the consequences are more serious, since this development effectively cuts the Njálssons off from any possible further support. What we have seen in all these instances is the move of the *senna* from the battlefield to the law court and environs, where the intra-societal battle itself—the law suit—once joined, will be conducted in the same verbal medium. But, typically, such symbolic battles, despite the fact that a victory could have important consequences in terms of prestige and future alliances, are narratively bracketed by continued recourse to physical violence.

Scéla Mucce Meic Dathó does not permit a ready generic categorization. Ó Coileáin concluded (1978:187): “*Scéla Mucce Meic Da Thó* is finally an amused, detached and sceptical interpretation of the heroic milieu” (187), while Gantz goes even further (1981:180): “it is hard to resist the conclusion that ‘The Tale of Macc Da Thó’s Pig’ is a later story, a parody of the Ulster Cycle in general and of ‘The Cattle-Raid of Cúailnge’ in particular.” But in Irish tradition we have little in the way of precedent to convince us that what must have been a traditional tale could be modally recast to serve such an artistic purpose. It seems more likely that, just as the Icelandic chieftains could be mocked for certain deficiencies, the Ulster heroes could be shown to have less than perfect records; transitory amusement and detachment perhaps, but no scepticism. It should be recalled that the “aberrant” situation of Cet’s dominance is righted when Conall arrives. This would still accommodate Buttimer’s (1982) suggestion that the general tone of the tale points to preservation in a pro-Leinster environment.

I earlier noted that the description of Ale-Hood has associations with Óðinn and his disguises, and Óðinn was the Norse riddler par excellence as well as a formidable opponent in a *senna*. In *Ölkofra Þáttr*, the replacement of a verbal duel between two comparable divinities like Óðinn and Þórr by a series of encounters between a relatively untried young man like Broddi (representing the powerless and thus inverted Óðinn, Ale-Hood) and the powerful chieftains serves quite a different end than the traditional Norse *senna*. Not so much a parody of the *senna* as a pastiche for purposes of social criticism, in particular of avarice and the quality of justice in thirteenth-century Iceland, *Ölkofra Þáttr* owes its interest and success less to the none too rapid escalation in its derogatory accusations than to the contrast between the opponents in experience and social standing, as well as the wit and ease with which those nominally superior, with imposing stature elsewhere in the historico-literary tradition, are bested by one who enjoys our natural sympathy if not our full moral approval. Our enjoyment is founded in the conviction that everyone has

something to hide and in the all too human desire to see the mighty get their comeuppance—even if only for a moment. As Irish gnomic wisdom has it: *sochlu cách co áir*—“everyone is fair-famed until he is satirized” (Meyer 1909:36). Perhaps those less bold than Cet or Broddi would do well to heed the Words of the High One (*Hávamál*, in Hollander 1962: st. 31f.).

A wise man he who hies him betimes
from the man who likes to mock;
for at table who teases can never tell
what foes he might have to fight.
Many a man means no ill,
yet teases the other at table;
strife will ever start among men
when guest clashes with guest.

In summary, the defamation scenes in these two tales exhibit a series of shifts or displacements from supposed archetypes or historical antecedents: 1) verbal contention moved from the battleground to a court or hall, no less a stylized setting; 2) the single duel of words multiplied into a series, with a kind of shooting-gallery effect; 3) intertextual transfer of character and event from other legendary or more temporally proximate history in order to situate the incidents in a credible context; 4) modal and generic lowering—from ribald insult between Norse gods to more onesided coarseness among men, and, perhaps, from more conventionally conceived Irish epic incident to a denser, more self-consciously crafted, “epicized” account; and, lastly, 5) projection of the traditional speech-craft of an oral culture, more specifically its defamatory repartee, into a literate medium.²⁰

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²⁰ My thanks are due the editorial readers of *Oral Tradition* for much helpful comment on an earlier draft of this article; inadequacies that persist are stubbornly my own.

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**There's Nothing Natural About
Natural Conversation:
A Look at Dialogue in Fiction and Drama**

Ryan Bishop

While discussing some of the ideas presented in this paper, a colleague mentioned that after reading David Mamet's play *Glengarry Glen Ross*, he thought to himself that the dialogue in the play portrayed the way people really talk. I followed his comment by saying what makes *The Great Gatsby* such an excellent novel is the dialogue, especially the off-hand remarks that strike my ear as being real. Our remarks were not unusual in the least. Probably everyone reading this paper has experienced the same sort of conversation. Readers from a culture with a long literary tradition bring biases, ideas, and a great deal of information regarding texts to each text they encounter. They know what a literary work should be and should do. Knowledgeable readers can then judge conversation in a literary text to be "natural" or "unnatural," as my colleague and I had done. What we must consider, though, is that dialogue is only "natural" or "unnatural" within the literary mode or framework, what "natural" conversation in a literary work should be or what we presume it to be, and that even "natural" conversation bears little resemblance to everyday conversation (Bishop 1984:21).

In this article I will examine dialogue and its relation to everyday conversation. In doing so, we will see how literacy and knowledge of the literary tradition have influenced dialogue and the evolution of conversation as presented in literary works. Therefore, this will be an examination of dialogue writ large, for it will also include the dialogue found between text and readers, as well as within the text itself. And we will see that our judgments regarding "natural" dialogue are determined by our literacy and literary tradition, not by the event of actual conversation we engage in every day. Thus, dialogue will serve as yet another example of Western culture's preoccupation with *mimesis*, or representation, and its willingness (even desire) to confuse the map for the territory.

I See Your Lips Movin', But I Don't Hear Nothin' Comin' Out

I think it worthwhile at this point to glance at conversation (or speech) in day-to-day life and discuss some of the problems it poses for writers who attempt to capture and display it in texts.¹ The first, and what should be the most obvious, quality of speech that we will discuss is its evanescence, its constantly going out of existence as it comes into existence, for as I say the word, “existence,” the “exis” sounds have vanished before the “tence” can cross my lips (Ong 1982:32). Indeed, these initial sounds must be gone in order for the latter sounds to come out; speech passes away as it comes into being, as it is being produced. Thus, the first task writers face in producing dialogue is perhaps the most difficult: the making of a thing (a text, in this case) from a process (conversation, or speech). Writers must make readers believe that the text is not simply “frozen” speech, but speech itself. They must conjure away the thing-like qualities of texts and bestow dialogue with the “speech as event” characteristics it manifests in everyday experience. While such a trick (sleight-of-hand, performed pen-in-hand), if successful, seems worthy of the greatest magicians, it is not so difficult when the audience desires to be duped (as my colleague and I were in the situation presented above and, indeed, most readers are when approaching a text, all of which casts a disturbing hue on the concept of the “suspension of disbelief” in which all audiences of art/fiction are supposed to engage—how much suspension should there be and, more importantly, when does it stop?).

The swallowing of the word as event by texts is not as spurious as it may initially seem. In fact, it has been argued that the technology of writing is one of the reasons Western culture values things, or nouns if applicable, and interprets much of the world as “thing” rather than process, or verb. Many primary oral cultures, on the other hand, display biases toward processes. They lack the technology required to make speech static (Tyler 1987). Such a bias on the part of Western culture might lead readers to texts in order to find “natural” conversation.

Compounding the difficulty of producing a static entity intended to resemble a dynamic process is the fact that people do not read one word at a time, due to physical restraints regarding eye movement. Some

¹ Please note that I have in no way exhausted the travails of trying to represent conversation in dialogue. Further, it is beyond the purpose of this paper to deal adequately with the extensive body of literature comparing literary discourse and everyday discourse, and that engaging the manifold ramifications of shifts from oral to literate world-views, which comes from a variety of disciplines and from a variety of positions for an even larger variety of purposes. To mention just a few excellent examples of these works and to cover a broad spectrum, I would direct interested readers to consider Tyler 1987, Ong 1982 and 1977, Havelock 1963, Pratt 1977, Smith 1978, Tannen 1989, Bakhtin 1981, Friedrich 1986, Clifford and Marcus 1986, and Goody 1977.

psycholinguists contend that we pick up groups of words at a time and lump them together in order to derive meaning from the word units. So from the outset the reproduction of conversation in a text contains another inherent obstacle, for we cannot produce a group of words together in an utterance. In fact, we cannot manage even a single word at a time unless it is constituted by a single morpheme, the largest single unit of sound that can be produced by a human being at any given moment. In attempting to reconstruct conversation presented in a text, we fall prey to space (the realm of things) at the expense of time (the flux in which speech occurs) by grouping words in a way impossible in day-to-day life. Writers are unable in this situation to shield the readers' eyes (and ears) from the "thingizing" (the objectification) of the process of speech, and the difficulty of their task of presenting "natural" dialogue is increased.

Everyday conversation is filled with backtracks and elliptical thoughts. Added to these is an enigmatic mixture of redundancies and references to shared knowledge, which often take the form of seemingly magnificent leaps in logic to an eavesdropper, but which are usually easily followed by the interlocutors. Often utterances in everyday conversation are not composed of complete, uninterrupted sentences. Usually, much overlapping of statements and completion of thoughts by the other interlocutor occurs. To bear these points out, consider the difficulties one has in transcribing a recorded conversation. Punctuation becomes random at best, and text-like structure often has to be abandoned altogether, as those who do linguistic, anthropological, and sociological research that requires such transcription are acutely aware. In a satirical statement regarding critics and the difficulty of writing dialogue for the stage, Harold Pinter (1977:9) highlighted the randomness of punctuation in speech and attributed the success of his second play to slight shifts in his use of punctuation:

In *The Birthday Party* I employed a certain amount of dashes in the text, between phrases. In *The Caretaker* I cut out the dashes and used dots instead. So that instead of, say: "Look, dash, who, dash, I, dash, dash, dash," the text would read: "Look, dot, dot, dot, who, dot, dot, dot, I, dot, dot, dot, dot." So it's possible to deduce from this that dots are more popular than dashes and that's why *The Caretaker* had a longer run than *The Birthday Party*. The fact that in neither case could you hear the dots and dashes in performance is beside the point. You can't fool critics for long. They can tell a dot from a dash from a mile off, even if they can hear neither.

Pinter has good fun in this passage by sending up critics and other holders of judgment. However, there is a lurking concern regarding what judgment is based on. In a culture that finds "natural" conversation in texts, we should not be surprised to also find chirographic bias, which Pinter plays up, in the representation of pauses in speech or a leaning

toward the eye over the ear in such a representation. Seeing, as Tyler (1987) shows, and everyone knows, is believing; hearing is merely hearsay (or heresy).

Most of the qualities of everyday conversation pose problems for a writer of literature, but the movement from time to space (as we have seen above) presents fundamental obstacles. One of these obstacles, as yet unaddressed in this paper, is the quality of overlapping, in which more than one person speaks at the same time. Esau and Poth, in their study of conversation, especially that which occurs between intimates, state that the interlocutors' speech is not so much focused on "linear sequences and consecutive turns [as] it is on an overall *gestalt*" (1980:21). Writing is unable to reproduce nonlinear, overlapping speech because of textual restraints. Esau and Poth go on to say that most conversations, while not linear, represent "variations on a theme" (27). These "variations on a theme" conversations manifest a vertical form of verbal play in which one topic receives more or less different treatments by the interlocutors, and the treatments serve more for the entertainment of the interlocutors than for the passing of information. Written conversation, by necessity, must be linear and maintain turn-taking between interlocutors. In addition, the representation of "variations on a theme" does little to propel traditional plot line. Writers, therefore, face the task of turning a nonlinear, overlapping process into a linear, space-restricted thing when attempting to write dialogue. Still, in spite of all this, we find and judge dialogue to be "natural" or not.

What's Relevant Is Relative

As different as speaking and writing are, there is an underlying quality which intimately binds them: their communicative intention (if we allow that the communicative *gestalt* includes both communication *and* intention, for both are prevalent in both spoken and written communicative constructs). Both speaking and writing have senders (speakers or writers) and receivers (listeners or readers) of a message conveyed via a medium (speech or writing). Even though they share this important property, there is one major difference: writers are rarely present at the reading of the text, an act usually performed, as was the production of the text, in isolation. Thus, writers have to be far more careful than speakers in their presentation if anything like the intended message is to be understood. (This is, of course, assuming that writers do have something that they wish to communicate, which is not always the case). Writers, unlike speakers, cannot clarify the message if readers become confused. In fact, the writer of any given text, as is the case with many texts, may even be dead. From

these realities rise the myths of precise language use and exact word meaning and, from these, *the* meaning of a text—myths that many linguists, literary critics, and hermeneuticians seem reluctant to give up. (While not all in these fields hold these myths sacrosanct, those who do not are, unfortunately, much in the minority.) Thus, by invoking this particular model of communication, I am not stating that the process is merely one of encoding and decoding with perfect understanding occurring at all times. (After all, with such a view of language, there would be no need for critics.)

For our purposes here, we will assume that most writers do have a message (or messages) they want to convey to readers, no matter the dangers of misunderstanding. In order for this to occur, in order for the text to operate successfully, it must function meaningfully on at least two levels: within the world of the text itself, and between text and readers. For drama, a third level, that between actors and audience, must be added (Bishop 1984:19-21). A text, just as a person in a conversation, should adhere to Grice's Co-operative Principle (1975), which simply states that certain rules, or maxims, need to be followed in any communicative construct if communication is to occur.² This principle operates on the assumption that people enter communicative acts with the intent to perpetuate communication, not destroy it. Readers approach texts as attempts at meaningful communication and expect this principle will be followed, an assumption the absurdists preyed on, for people will go to great lengths to make sense of something they assume to be communicative.

For this study, perhaps the most important of the Gricean maxims is relevance, the requirement that the statements issued by a speaker or a writer be relevant to the topic and the understanding of what is being communicated. Relevance, however, is a rather protean phenomenon, for what is relevant is often solely dependent upon context. However, readers assume that the information provided by writers is relevant to their understanding of the text. Also, readers assume that the characters within a given text are being relevant when conversing with one another, or not, in order to maintain relevance between text and readers. It is possible, of course, to have characters who are unable to communicate with each other due to irrelevance, or by being trapped in their subjective worlds, or by manipulating one another (as in David Mamet's *Glengarry Glen Ross*), but still the text remains relevant to readers via other provided information. If the text does not maintain relevance with readers, then the writer has either failed or is attempting to show the artifice of the entire writing enterprise.

Closely related to relevance, and containing information that influences what is relevant, is the Given-New Contract (Clark and Haviland

² See Grice 1975 for further explanation of this principle and its maxims.

1977), which demands that the dimension of experience, the shared knowledge of the interlocutors, be expressed either through syntax or intonation.³ In any communicative act, assumptions regarding the audience's knowledge have to be made by the writer or the speaker. What is assumed to be known is marked as Given; that which is assumed not to be known is marked as New. The more intimate the relationship between sender and receiver—the more shared knowledge of the world, the more shared experience—the more the Given aspect of the communicative act expands. The more the Given expands, the more the area covered by relevance expands. My use of terminology in this paper, for example, is controlled by my assumptions regarding my audience's knowledge. Certain terms I use freely; others I think may need explanation. Therefore, in an intimate conversation, the Given is quite large, as is what can be considered relevant. This situation allows the interlocutors to make huge leaps in logic difficult for a non-intimate to follow; old, shared information is abundant in such conversations and manifests itself in many ways.

I would contend that relevance and what writers assume the audience knows have greatly influenced conversation as represented in literature. I would even contend that these things have greatly influenced texts and literature as a whole. However, the shared knowledge in this case is not shared knowledge of the world, *per se*, but rather of the literary tradition and literacy itself. Texts became the context (“con”-text, “with”-text). As literacy became further entrenched in cultures and in the consciousness of readers, as it became more widespread, the shared information regarding texts (which we may call intertextual context) between writers and readers grew, and more information that could be considered relevant was allowed writers. Thus a kind of conversation between text and readers evolved that allowed, ironically, for the representation of conversation with more of the qualities found in everyday speech. This phenomenon is traceable to the shared knowledge of the literary tradition, what texts were and could do. Dialogue grew to be more like real conversation but still remains a far cry from the nonlinear, overlapping process we engage in every day. It remains removed from real-life conversation because of the restraints mentioned above and also because it was spawned by literacy and the literary tradition. Yet this mutation of conversation hatched from texts still strikes readers as being “natural” or “unnatural.”

In charting this change of intimacy, I will start very late in the development of the literary tradition with Henry James and move, focusing primarily on American writers, up to the present. There will also be a brief foray into drama by looking quickly at Samuel Beckett and David Mamet.

³ For a more detailed discussion of the Given-New Contract as applied by writers, see Glatt 1982.

The Growing Intimacy: Text as Context

Although Henry James came from and wrote for a highly literate community, one that had also incorporated the effects of mass printing, he still relied on the “dear reader” convention of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century writers, in which readers are addressed in the text as if the writer were telling the story orally. This convention manifests itself in several ways, specifically in the amount of information given to readers through both narration and dialogue. Although the audience James wrote for was steeped in literacy, the Given aspect of the literary tradition (the shared information regarding texts) was still relatively small. Therefore James assumed his audience would not understand a text, and/or would stop reading the text, unless a good deal of information, New information, was supplied. James felt it necessary to provide his readers with a great deal of information.

A relatively late story, “The Jolly Corner” (1909), begins in the middle of a conversation, an unsettling but hardly innovative technique at the time. However, it is interesting to note the amount of information provided in the two sentences of dialogue and the one sentence of description immediately following it, all of which James must have felt necessary (1986:688):

“Everyone asks me what I ‘think’ of everything,” said Spencer Bryden; “and I make answer as best I can—begging or dodging the question, putting them off with any nonsense. It wouldn’t matter to any of them,” he went on, “for, even were it possible to meet in that stand-and-deliver way so silly a demand on so big a subject, my ‘thoughts’ would still be almost altogether something that concerns myself.” He was now talking to Miss Staverton, with whom for a couple of months now he had availed himself of every possible occasion to talk; this disposition and this resource, this comfort and support, as the situation in fact presented itself, having promptly enough taken the first place in the considerable array of rather unattenuated surprises attending his so strangely belated return to America.

This passage contains the only snippet of conversation for several pages, the rest being filled in with information regarding characters’ intents, thoughts, and motives, again all of this being necessary, evidently according to James, for the audience to understand the events and conversations that occur later in the story. Not just in this story but in many works, James spends what seems to contemporary readers an inordinate amount of space on providing background for dialogue. So, although James daringly thrusts his readers into the middle of a conversation, which he never completes, he immediately falls back on effusive New information provided by a narrator, who sounds suspiciously like the character Bryden, to set up the rest of the text.

If we turn from Henry James to James Joyce, we will see a striking

difference in not only the conversation within the text but also in the one between text and readers. Although published only five years after the James story mentioned above, Joyce's slim volume, *The Dubliners*, represents a major shift regarding relevance in literature. The stories contained in this collection seem rather staid, though certainly excellent, to contemporary readers. Yet Joyce had tremendous difficulty getting the collection published, due in no small part to his steadfast refusal to make changes demanded by the publisher, but basically because the stories were considered far too daring, an adjective which few readers today would probably apply to these works.

Daring? How? Actually, the stories were daring in many respects, especially in the demands Joyce placed on the readers' knowledge, the amount of information provided readers, and also in the dialogue, which reflected the rhythms of daily conversation, as well as other qualities of this phenomenon, but which were not common in dialogue at the time. In the story "A Little Cloud," two men, Chandler and Gallagher, meet in a pub to discuss old friends and their new lives. Their conversation is laced with references to people and events familiar to the interlocutors but about which readers do not have a clue. In the following segment, Chandler invites Gallagher home to meet his wife and child (1969:79):

- I hope you'll spend an evening with us, he said, before you go back. My wife will be delighted to meet you. We can have a little music and —
- Thanks awfully, old chap, said Ignatius Gallagher, I'm sorry we didn't meet earlier. But I must leave to-morrow night.
- To-night perhaps . . . ?
- I'm awfully sorry, old man. You see I'm over here with another fellow, clever young chap he is too, and we arranged to go to a little card party. Only for that . . .
- O, in that case . . .
- But who knows? said Ignatius Gallagher.

The rhythms of the lines certainly seem more natural than those spoken by James's character, who like all of James's characters always sound to my ear how I imagine James talking to himself would have sounded. This seemingly more natural conversation is due not only to the lines being less contorted, but also because of the way in which they intertwine. The conversation contains interruptions, incomplete sentences, and utterances that fade into the silence whence they emerged, all qualities not frequently found in texts before Joyce. Also, obviously not heeding Pinter's advice regarding the dubious merit of dashes, Joyce substitutes dashes for quotation marks, which in some way lessens the visual intrusion of the text upon the dialogue (perhaps due to the lines' apparent freedom from the constricting, bound image given a line by quotation marks). This dash technique was later employed, as we will see, in the work of William

Gaddis.

Regardless of the innovations, Joyce is still ever-present in his authorial intrusions. Not wanting to plunge readers in too far over their heads, Joyce maintains speaker identification virtually every time Gallagher speaks. This technique provides readers with sufficient information as to who is speaking when. Joyce intrudes in other ways, but one of these is particularly innovative or daring: the use of realistic detail and/as symbols. In this way Joyce resembles an earlier American writer, Stephen Crane. Unlike Crane, however, most of Joyce's symbols were either coupled with literary or historical allusions, or were actually allusions themselves, and this is where he broke new ground.

Numerous such allusions can be found in the frequently anthologized and lauded story "Araby," a tale of personal anguish and disillusionment as a young boy struggles to come to terms with himself as he moves from his personal world into the public one via his infatuation with a girl. The boy recalls finding three books in the room of a former boarder, a now-deceased priest. The books are *The Abbot* by Walter Scott, *The Devout Communicant*, and *The Memoirs of Vidocq*, all works that amplify themes in the story, particularly self-confusion and feelings of failure. The first book is a romanticized account of Mary Queen of Scots, a person both loved and loathed in history and idealized by both sides for their own ends. The second is a book of rules for holy week written by a Protestant clergyman involved in public debate with Jesuits. The third book recounts the somewhat ribald tales of a well known criminal who engaged in blasphemous imposture to elude the police and in blatant sexual liaisons. All of these details reveal as much about the boy as they do the priest, for the boy, too, idealizes a young woman, is caught in an almost religious fervor for the woman that casts doubts on his devotion to Catholicism, and feels guilty of lust and crime that have led him to be an imposter of himself—an aspect of the epiphany at the end of the story. The books become literary manifestations of the boy's anxieties and of themes in the work. Joyce also employs allusions to Yeats's story "Our Lady of the Hills" and a poem well known in Ireland at the turn of the century, "The Arab's Farewell to His Steed," to further evoke themes, respectively, of the idealization of love's object and the selling of love for personal gain, for vanity. The poem is a particularly interesting usage, for it was very popular in Ireland, so much so that Joyce did not even quote it, with the narrative leaving the boy's uncle on the verge of recitation. Readers are left to fill in the lines of the poem themselves, lines that foreshadow the conclusion.

Joyce demanded his audience use its literacy and literary tradition (the sources necessary to garner the information needed to understand literary, mythological, and historical allusion) in the reading and

understanding of the text. He relied upon shared, intertextual knowledge. Joyce, in other words, depended much more on Given information—Given textual information—than James had. He employed references from a wide variety of fields of literary knowledge and assumed his readers could understand the work. *This* was daring. (Of course, the extent to which his audience could understand these allusions is open to debate and is grist for those who perceive such modernist moves as elitist.) By placing these demands on the readers' knowledge, Joyce expanded relevance, what is relevant, in literature. He also heralded the coming of modernism and all of its demands stemming from literacy and shared cultural knowledge.

Ernest Hemingway, strange as it may seem, follows closely behind Joyce by employing much of the innovation the Irishman displayed in his stories. However, by the time Hemingway began producing his best work, Joyce's innovations were already interiorized by an increasingly sophisticated and intimate (due to expanded relevance and more Given information) audience, thus providing a basis for Hemingway's own daring moves. These moves, it seems to me, are most apparent in his short fiction, especially his so-called "dramatic" stories. One of the most anthologized and analyzed of these is "Hills Like White Elephants," first published in 1927. Of the 1,445 words in the story, sixty percent are given over to dialogue (Kobler 1980). Thus narrative information is minimized, although still exceptionally important as we will later see. Hemingway relies on the conversation of the protagonists, a man and a woman, minimally described, to carry the bulk of the story. The conversation, which we hear (read) from beginning to end, seems very "real" to most readers, even though lacking the above-mentioned qualities of everyday conversation.

The interlocutors are intimates, and their conversation reveals their intimacy through marked Given information and the subject matter of the conversation or argument, in this case whether or not the woman should abort the child they have conceived—clearly marking the relationship as intimate. Hemingway's approach to readers via the text is also as intimates. The abortion is always referred to as "it" or "the operation" and is never called what it actually is. Likewise, the unborn child/fetus bears the pronoun "it" throughout the text. In this manner, Hemingway supplies little direct information and places the onus of topic discovery on the reader. He does not, however, leave readers in a narrative wasteland. All of the narrative description reveals important information. Hemingway places the interlocutors in the Ebro valley, the man looking at dead, barren hills from which the woman breaks her gaze to look at green, lush fields. From these descriptive paragraphs alone, it is easy to discern who is pro-abortion and who is not; however, Hemingway relies solely on the audience to infer the topic of the argument, an inference only possible

from the dialogue. Hemingway pushes relevance further than Joyce did by supplying less narrative information and by forcing readers to rely on their knowledge of the text and the world to create the meaning of the story. This intimacy between text and readers helps make the story successful and satisfying. Yet Hemingway gives readers ample clues through narration and by following the argument from its beginning to its supposed end. In real life such a discussion, with the participants at complete loggerheads over a subject as emotionally charged as this, would probably have no such neat opening or closing. Such structuring may be a bow by Hemingway to the space-restrictedness of texts and to the artifice of closure.

Heather and Donald Hardy (1990) argue, successfully I think, that the essential conflict of the story stems not from the abortion, although it is certainly a catalyst for conflict, but rather from a difference of life metaphors. The man wants to continue avoiding life by traveling and trying new drinks, while the woman desires to participate in life and its natural processes. I would contend that the abortion itself serves as a metaphor for what Hemingway was trying to accomplish in writing the story, specifically in the attempt to reproduce actual conversation. Hemingway distances himself from real conversation (via the technology of writing, a technology that separates the producer of communication/ language/text from its audience), much as the male protagonist distances himself from life and the child he has created, by making the process of conversation into a thing, an "it." Hemingway makes his story into a thing that cannot be born, for it cannot be process; it must always remain a static text. It is a story that should be spoken, but is written. In the end the story remains a dead, mimetic model of speech, which is all dialogue can ever hope to be. Yet an audience steeped in literacy is willing to clutch the corpse to its breast and breathe the breath of life, which is no longer speech but dialogue, into the moribund and dub the corpse alive and "natural," using much the same terminology we use to describe someone displayed in the front room of a funeral parlor.

The Ghost of Dialogue Present

Since Hemingway, fiction and drama have taken many different directions, far too many to be done justice in a paper of this length. However, in the last thirty years or so, two major directions seem to have developed in prose. One of these intensifies Hemingway's minimalist tendencies by presenting stark, bare narrative in which surface facts regarding characters and minute details of day-to-day life are presented. The information provided is not so much the unifying features of these writers as is the flatness of the prose. Conversation in this sort of fiction

is expectantly brisk and short and sometimes avoided altogether. Writers in this vein seem to think curtness equals reality. Some representatives of this style are Jean Stafford, Alice Munro, Tillie Olsen, Ann Beattie, and Raymond Carver, whose writing is so spare as to make Hemingway's seem (in comparison) as lush as the fields at which the woman gazes in "Hills Like White Elephants."

The other major direction taken by American writers reveals fiction for what it is—artifice. Those following this path, often called Post-Modernists, emphasize their roles as writers and write about writing or play with traditional prose structures and conventions. Yet it is literacy and literary tradition that serve not only as a springboard for this sort of writing, but also as the tool that allows writers such as Thomas Pynchon, John Barth, Vladimir Nabokov, and Donald Barthelme to perform their metafictional machinations and be understood by their audience. The intimacy between text and readers has become such that these writers can produce texts that, in many important ways, do not resemble traditional texts, and that present characters in a world completely created and determined by the text and show readers this is the case. The conversations in these texts often still bear little relation to everyday conversation, nor do they seem to have any aspiration to do so. The fiction of fiction is on display. In this way, the conversations presented in these texts often bear little relation to traditional literary dialogue either. Occasionally, as in the case of Barth's *The Sot-Weed Factor* or Nabokov's *Pale Fire*, traditional prose styles are employed to facilitate the metafictional fun, for parodic purposes. Readers lacking the shared literary knowledge required to get the punch line of these sorts of texts are often left unsatisfied or befuddled, their literary knowledge having been outstripped by that demanded by the text.

The reason for this harrowingly cursory examination of American fiction is twofold. The first is to show how vast the change in the relationship between text and readers has been and what it has allowed writers to do. In a remarkably short time, say from James of 1909 to Barth of 1960, the publication date of *The Sot-Weed Factor*, the intimacy between text and readers grew to the point where minor details of minor events are presented starkly and succinctly, and where some writers (such as the metafictionalists) no longer care if their dialogue resembles either everyday or literary conversation or if their texts resemble those that readers are accustomed to reading. Again, it should be borne in mind that increased shared information garnered through literacy about literacy and the literary tradition has allowed the intimacy between text and readers to deepen, a shift that in turn allows for the understanding of such disparate literary works and writers as those exemplified by these two major directions in American fiction.

The second reason for this examination is to provide background for a novel which does not neatly fit into the two directions mentioned above, although it certainly lists to the post-modern side. This is *JR*, by William Gaddis (1975), a work which in my estimation comes as close to capturing everyday conversation as is possible given the restrictions of textual dialogue discussed near the beginning of this paper. The first edition of *JR* runs to 706 pages, a good ninety-five percent of it dialogue, to which is added many of the sounds that intrude on everyday conversation. Gaddis, like Joyce, employs dashes rather than quotation marks to introduce spoken lines. Not one line of dialogue includes speaker identification by the author. Readers are left to fend for themselves in a chaotic ocean of dialogue churning with interruptions, back-tracks, elliptical phrases, and vague references to incidents both inside and outside the text as well as some inside the speaker's consciousness—all of this and only the speaker's "voice," as presented in print, to identify who is speaking to whom. Reading *JR*, as one might imagine, can daunt even the heartiest of readers. There is little traditional literate rope for readers to hang onto when scaling this dialogue. Yet the work renders the aural world in a way unlike any other I have encountered: a maelstrom of multi-layered voices, sounds, noise, and consciousnesses spewing forth in speech. Demanding as it is, this novel yields tremendous returns in its beauty, hilarity, and frightfulness (229):

— Hello. . .? the door clattered closed—is Mister Bast there . . .? Who me? I'm his, I'm this here business friend of his is he still at the city? See I have this urgent matter which I have to discuss my portfolio with him to . . . No I said I have this here urgent mat . . .he went where . . .? No but look lady, he . . .no but holy . . .no but how could he be someplace accepting some reward see we have this here ouch, boy hello . . .?

The line rang with three more piercing notes. —Mercy! they could burst an eardrum hello? I said Mister Bast is abroad somewhere just a minute, Julia? The card that came yesterday with a picture of a mountain, where, hello . . .?

— Who in heaven's name . . .

— Well I never! The oddest voice, it sounded like someone talking under a pillow. I thought he was a business friend of James, the most awful shrill sounds on the telephone line and then it sounded like a loud bell ringing and he simply hung up. I thought we asked Edward to take it out.

— No the stock Anne, the stock, we asked him to sell our telephone stock. Once that's done I may take it out myself.

— I hope he can find someone who wants to buy it though I must say, I'd feel a bit guilty. It's like selling poor soul shares in a plague, my ear is still ringing. Who was it that called here this morning.

— Some wretched woman who had a wrong number. She asked me to name the second president of the United States, when I told her Abraham Lincoln she congratulated me.

— Oh I think that Lincoln came later, didn't he? When Uncle Dick came back from Andersonville prison . . .

— I'm certainly quite aware of that, I simply said Lincoln for a little

joke but it didn't disturb her in the least. She told me I'd won a free dance lesson.

The excerpt presented above exemplifies the style and technique of *JR*. We hear the contorted syntax of JR himself in the first monologue. By this point in the text, readers are quickly able to recognize his "voice" and know he is a junior high school student and are able to understand the bells ringing in the background that confuse the elderly woman on the other end. The transition of moving from JR's side of the telephone conversation to that of his interlocutor's (one of two elderly women) is typical of Gaddis. He relies on the context of a phone conversation and the very familiar voice of one of the women to make the move from JR's school to their home. Once inside the house, readers get snippets of conversation that wander off track and that place historical events in the context of family history, conversational repetitions in which these two characters often engage.

For all of its efforts, *JR* does not reproduce overlapping voices, but it does (like *Waiting for Godot*) include conversations that are "variations on a theme" and that have no real desire to propel plotline, to lead the reader between events. Although much happens in the novel and much more is spoken, there are no real events, in traditional plot terms. In *JR*, the conversations are the events, much as they are in our everyday lives, and it has only taken us several hundreds of years of writing and print to yield a text that effectively evokes our aural life-world, our daily conversations. The irony is obvious, especially when we find this text "difficult."

Winged Words, Words from the Wings, and Other Frozen Things

When dialogue takes to the stage, it is intended by its author to be event, to be performed, to be Homer's winged words dying as they come into existence. This is the obvious advantage that the stage holds over fiction, that the lines of dialogue are meant to be spoken aloud. In drama, therefore, we should be able to find "natural" dialogue more worthy of the adjective. However, this is not the case until, again, fairly late in the literacy game. When we do reach playwrights capable of rubbing elbows with day-to-day conversation, the results are exciting, unnerving, and not quite what you and I do every day, in one case, and a Gaddis-like evocation of speech that eventually bows to the literary constraints of plot and closure in the other. The first case is Samuel Beckett, the latter David Mamet. I choose these two playwrights because they have done much to push everyday conversation into the limelight.

Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* blends elements of everyday conversation, such as continuation of thoughts by another interlocutor, "variations on a theme," and a certain nonlinear quality of conversation, with traditional characteristics of written dialogue, specifically those that occur due to spatial restrictions, for example turn-taking. This combination of everyday and textual conversational elements are exemplified in the following passage (Beckett 1955:62-63):

Estragon: In the meantime let us try and converse calmly, since we are incapable of keeping silent.
 Vladimir: You're right, we're inexhaustible.
 Estragon: It's so we won't think.
 Vladimir: We have that excuse.
 Estragon: It's so we won't hear.
 Vladimir: We have our reasons.
 Estragon: All the dead voices.
 Vladimir: They make a noise like wings.
 Estragon: Like leaves.
 Vladimir: Like sand.
 Estragon: Like leaves.
Silence.
 Vladimir: They speak altogether.
 Estragon: Each one to itself.
Silence.
 Vladimir: Rather they whisper.
 Estragon: They rustle.
 Vladimir: They murmur.
 Estragon: They rustle.
Silence.

The interlocutors engage in their favorite game, indeed the essence of their existences: the killing of time through the voice (conversation). Their themes build upon one another, and it seems more like a shared monologue than a conversation, which is a quality ascribed by Esau and Poth, among others, to intimate conversation. The whole construct collapses occasionally into silence, Vladimir and Estragon's most feared state. This silence most frequently occurs when Estragon is unable to keep the game going and unimaginatively repeats his last utterance.⁴ Vladimir, however, always wrests more talk from silence (a truly heroic act in Beckett's world), and the entire play moves spasmodically along in this manner as both men continually verify their existences through conversation.

The combination of both everyday and textual elements of conversation, the great reliance by the characters on Given information when the whole question of linear time is in doubt, and sporadic bursts of beautiful "thematic" dialogue spoken by two bums in a landscape empty of

⁴ For interesting and profitable analyses of the links between repetition, speech, and poetry, see Friedrich 1986 and Tannen 1989.

everything except a lone tree creates a highly unusual experience for the reader/audience. The dismantling and recombination of familiar qualities of both everyday conversation and dialogue is unsettling. This portmanteau dialogue that combines “variations on a theme” and huge leaps in logic allowable by shared experience with resolutely maintained and regularly metered turn-taking yields something hauntingly familiar but not quite right for audiences schooled in literacy. Beckett has defamiliarized these familiar qualities of everyday conversation and textual dialogue by combining them in unusual ways and placing them in unusual contexts. All of these strategies help to make this work, in my opinion, one of the greatest and most original in literature.⁵

The American playwright David Mamet employs many elements found in everyday speech in his play *Glengarry Glen Ross*, which in many ways resembles Gaddis’s *JR*. The dialogue is full of interruptions, incomplete statements, backtracks, and referents unclear to readers or the audience, as exemplified in the passage quoted below. Mamet also tries to break the back of overlapping by including in his stage directions the requirement that a given line start on the last word of the preceding line. While this technique gives the suggestion of overlapping, it does not present overlapping as it occurs in day-to-day speech (some transcriptions of conversations studied by discourse analysis linguists have even resorted to presenting overscored utterances to express simultaneity, although brackets, vertical lines, or equal signs are more common devices for indicating overlapping; even when readers are capable of mastering these sorts of textual manipulation, I would find it difficult to believe that the overlapping hits the mind’s ear in the same way such utterances aurally strike the real ear). When we examine the ending of the play, we will see why Mamet is ultimately unable to present overlapping if he is to achieve his purpose.

Within the level of the text itself, the characters are not trying to communicate with each other as much as they are trying to manipulate one another; therefore, relevance is not maintained at that level. However, the attempts at manipulation grow out of the characters and their situation (salesmen caught in a market with little leads of any value), so the manipulation is evident to readers or the audience. Thus the text remains cooperative at that level. The text does demand a great deal of the readers or the audience by thrusting them into the middle of various conversations, well underway, with little or no background knowledge of the interlocutors or the topic of their conversations—a strategy similar to, yet very different from, the technique employed by James and more like the example given from Gaddis. These conversations also serve the purpose of showing the

⁵ A detailed examination of Beckett’s dialogue in *Waiting for Godot* can be found in Bishop 1984.

characters engaged in acts of manipulation, making the readers or the audience privy to information not known by all of the other characters. In this way, Mamet maintains relevance and also allows the readers or the audience a way of making sense of what they are reading or hearing.

Where Mamet has the most difficulty maintaining his portrayal of everyday conversation is in the climax. The final scene brings together all of the characters in a tense, confrontational situation. As a result, many simultaneous conversations occur, with characters breaking off conversations and interrupting other ongoing ones, which we can hear/read in the following passage (Mamet 1984:106-8):

Baylen (*Comes over*): . . .Get in the room
 Roma: Hey, hey, hey, *easy* friend, That's the "Machine." That is Shelly "The Machine" Lev . . .
 Baylen: Get in the goddamn room.
 Levene: Ricky, I . . .
 Roma: Okay, okay, I'll be at the resta . . .
 Levene: Ricky . . .
 Baylen: "Ricky" can't help you, pal.
 Levene: . . .I only want to . . .
 Baylen: Yeah. What do you want? You want to *what*?
 Roma: Williamson: listen to me: when the *leads* come in . . . listen to me: when the *leads* come in I want my top two off the list. For *me*. My usual two. Anything you give *Levene* . . .
 Williamson: . . .I wouldn't worry about it.
 Roma: Well I'm *going* to worry about it, and so are you, so shut up and *listen*. (*Pause.*) I GET HIS ACTION. My stuff is *mine*, whatever *he* gets for himself, I'm taking half. You put me in with him.
 Aaronow *enters*.
 Aaronow: Did they . . .?
 Roma: You understand?
 Aaronow: Did they catch . . .?
 Roma: Do you understand? My stuff is mine, his stuff is ours. I'm taking half of his commissions—now, *you* work it out.
 Williamson: Mmm.
 Aaronow: Did they find the guy who broke into the office yet?
 Roma: No. *I* don't know.
 Aaronow: Did the leads come in yet?
 Roma: No.
 Aaronow: Oh, God, I hate this job.
 Roma (*Simultaneous with "job," exiting the office*): I'll be at the restaurant.

Mamet, like Pinter, uses dots to show lapses and pauses (and like Pinter, he was quite successful since this play won the Pulitzer Prize the year of its release). He also uses ellipses to show where other speakers jump in. Even though this is a small segment of the climax, and one with relatively few characters speaking cross-conversationally, I think it is easy to get a good idea of how Mamet constructed this final scene. While there are many characters speaking more or less simultaneously, textual turn-taking is maintained. If it were not, a cacophonous chaos would result, leaving the

readers or the audience with no idea of what is happening, or of what happened. Yet, in everyday life, such a great noise *would* occur in this particular situation. Mamet bows to plot-line and to closure at the expense of everyday speech. In fact, the only art forms I know of that extensively employ the overlapping of speech are ones in which time is a necessary component of the performance: the films of Robert Altman (who was roundly criticized for using overlapping dialogue because it made it difficult for the audience to follow what was being said) and opera.

In examining these two plays, it is interesting to note once again the dependence upon literacy and literary tradition that allows Beckett to disconcert readers or the audience and Mamet to elicit the response my colleague felt. If the Given portion of the text-reader relationship had not expanded, these writers could not have written these works, or at least they could not have readily been understood by their audiences. These plays, although difficult, still maintain relevance between text and reader/audience, and they do so by relying on literary elements, for example literary dialogue, which remains distantly removed from its everyday counterpart.

Parting Words / Parting Thoughts / Parting Shots

Throughout this paper I have skirted an issue that needs to be briefly addressed here: that speech and dialogue serve different functions. Speech is rarely used to propel plot line, to connect events, or to reveal character (in the way literary characters reveal theirs), all of which are functions of dialogue. Speech, as I have argued, usually serves entertainment, the sharing of verbal play with friends. There are, of course, many other uses for speech, but none of these fits the needs of dialogue. Dialogue need not be like speech, for it does indeed serve different purposes. The main points of this paper have been to examine briefly the relationship between the two (and the dialogue between text and reader) in order to glimpse how literacy has influenced texts and the representation of conversation as dialogue, and to hint at some of the ramifications of the way we speak about dialogue, what these may mean for our culture, our thought, and our interpretation of the world.

In conclusion, what can I say (write) about conversation in literary texts? Being true to my literary heritage, I will invoke the conversation alluded to in the introduction and write about a conversation dealing with dialogues in written texts. Also, by returning to an item mentioned in the introduction, I have yielded to the artifice of closure because my audience is comfortable with it and expects it (see Ong 1982:132-35). I was struck then, as I am now, by how much we are influenced by literacy and its

forces, which we have unquestioningly accepted and interiorized and which have shaped our commonsense knowledge of reality. Even in the midst of discussing the ideas presented in this paper, my colleague mentioned the “reality” of the dialogue in Mamet, which prompted my statement regarding *The Great Gatsby*; both comments were made as if the ideas currently being discussed did not exist. Are we so influenced by literary tradition and literacy that we go to a text, say the dialogue is “natural” or “real,” and believe it, when we know that it bears little resemblance to the phenomenon we engage in every day? Will I, as writer of this essay, return to the world of everyday discourse where we refer to dialogue as “real” and “natural” and use these terms myself? Has our culture’s desire for *mimesis* so privileged representation that we look at the map and call it the territory? Is the comfort found in freezing the flux of temporal existence—where speech and pain and death occur—into static space-like things the result of fleeing from existence and the desire for wanting the representation to be reality because it is manageable? To these questions, I would, in writing, say yes.⁶

Rice University

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⁶ This article is an outgrowth of a paper given at the 1988 International Conference for Cross-Cultural Studies: American, Canadian, and European Literatures, 1945-1985, held in Lake Bled, Yugoslavia, published in the proceedings of that conference (ed. Mirko Jurak, pp. 257-69). I would like to thank Jurak and the University of Ljubljana for inviting me to this conference and for allowing me to participate. The present article also reflects my rereading of Walter J. Ong and Stephen A. Tyler, both of whose voices pervade this work. I would like to thank Tyler for his help, encouragement, and insight. Many thanks are also due to Ong for his comments on an earlier draft of this paper and for the friendship via correspondence that was initiated by his reactions. Finally, I would like to acknowledge the help of Robin Bates, fellow Fulbrighter in Yugoslavia, with whom I discussed the seeds of this paper, and that of Jeff Petry, a colleague at Rice, whose discussions and intelligence did much to shape this paper.

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Compound Diction and Traditional Style in *Beowulf* and *Genesis A*

Jeffrey Alan Mazo

One of the most striking features of Anglo-Saxon alliterative poetry is the extraordinary richness of the vocabulary. Many words appear only in poetry; almost every poem contains words, usually nominal or adjectival compounds, which occur nowhere else in the extant literature. Creativity in coining new compounds reaches its apex in the 3182-line heroic epic *Beowulf*. In his influential work *The Art of Beowulf*, Arthur G. Brodeur sets out the most widely accepted view of the diction of that poem (1959:28):

First, the proportion of such compounds in *Beowulf* is very much higher than that in any other extant poem; and, secondly, the number and the richness of the compounds found in *Beowulf* and nowhere else is astonishingly large. It seems reasonable, therefore, to regard the many unique compounds in *Beowulf*, finely formed and aptly used, as formed on traditional patterns but not themselves part of a traditional vocabulary. And to say that they are formed on traditional patterns means only that the character of the language spoken by the poet and his hearers, and the traditional tendency towards poetic idealization, determined their character and form. Their elevation, and their harmony with the poet's thought and feeling, reflect that tendency, directed and controlled by the genius of a great poet.

It goes without saying that the poet of *Beowulf* was no "unwashed illiterate," but a highly trained literary artist who could transcend the traditional medium.

There is another side to the coin. Brodeur is himself reacting to an earlier scholarly consensus, that the style and diction of this magnificent poem are to a great extent traditional, rooted in the ancient Germanic past.¹ Old English poetry shares its formal features and many of its subjects and themes with other poetic traditions, such as Old High German, Old Saxon, and Old Norse, all of which independently derive from a putative common

¹ See, for example, Klaeber 1950:lviii-lxxi, espec. lxvi.

Germanic oral tradition. The basic unit of Germanic poetry was a half-line of two stressed and a varying number of unstressed syllables; two half-lines were linked together by alliteration of either or both stressed syllables in the first half-line with the first stress of the second half-line. The number of unstressed syllables permitted, and even the matter of whether the lines were grouped in stanzas or not, varied both chronologically and geographically.

Francis P. Magoun, Jr. applied the findings of Milman Parry and Albert Lord for the living Serbo-Croatian tradition and the Homeric poems to Old English poetry, and concluded that the language of the Anglo-Saxon narrative poems is entirely formulaic and traditional.² In a previous article (1929) Magoun had explored the compound diction of *Beowulf*, focusing on the repeated use of the same first elements in the formation of compounds in that poem and in the Old Norse Eddic poetry. In contrast to Brodeur's findings, Magoun argued that the repetition of first elements in the compounds of *Beowulf* indicates a lack of originality, skill, and resourcefulness on the part of the poet, since the Eddic poets only infrequently formed more than one compound with a given first element. "In respect to the use of the very prominent feature of recurring first elements of different nominal compounds," he wrote, "the style of *Beowulf* is inferior to, or at any rate different from, that of the Eddic lays" (78). The *Beowulf* poet was a highly skilled artist, as Brodeur demonstrates, yet the paradox remains: the compound diction of the poem is at the same time both original and unoriginal—original in contrast to the compounds of other Anglo-Saxon poems, unoriginal from the standpoint of the elements that form compounds in *Beowulf* itself.

This paradox arises from the traditional oral compositional style—not the oral-formulaic technique as Magoun described it, to be sure, but from a traditional oral process nevertheless. In this article I describe how the diction of *Beowulf* reflects traditional technique; that is, how the features that distinguish the diction of this great poem from poems known to have been composed by literary artists result from the traditional process of composition. Both the striking originality of the diction and the unoriginality of the compositional elements stem from this process. I then compare *Beowulf* and the literary poems to various passages in the poetic Biblical paraphrase *Genesis A*, in order to explore further the traditional process of composition. This process is no less creative than is literary composition; in Magoun's terms, the style of *Beowulf* is not inferior to, but different from, the works of literary artists using the same language and verse form.

² Magoun 1953. The relevant work of Milman Parry may be found in Parry 1971; the definitive work is Lord 1960.

Magoun's claim that all Anglo-Saxon narrative poetry is formulaic is based on Milman Parry's classic definition of the oral formula, "a group of words which is regularly employed under the same metrical conditions to express a given essential idea" (Parry 1971:272; Magoun 1953:449). This definition creates several difficulties. What, in Anglo-Saxon poetry, is meant by "the same metrical conditions"? What is meant by an "essential idea"? How much similarity in phraseology between two phrases must there be for us to consider them formulaic? Magoun did not address these issues directly; he merely looked for half-lines which are repeated in whole or in part elsewhere in Anglo-Saxon poetry. Larry Benson (1966) revealed the shortcomings of Magoun's approach when he showed that two unequivocally literary works, the Old English *Phoenix* and *Meters of Boethius*, are as "formulaic" as any of the texts Magoun considered; according to Benson, the formulaic nature of the poetry is a reflection of an earlier, not an active, oral tradition.

This demonstration does not establish the literary quality of *Beowulf* or any other Anglo-Saxon poem; it does show that the stylistic feature of repeated phraseology is inadequate as a signpost of orality in Anglo-Saxon literature. The study of traditional composition in Anglo-Saxon nevertheless continues, concentrating on tradition-dependent features of the formulaic technique and on the concept of formulaic systems.³ Few scholars would disagree that there was some form of oral composition common to the Germanic peoples before the advent of literacy, for there is no doubt that poems were orally performed and orally transmitted. There are three general approaches to the reconstruction of the traditional Anglo-Saxon oral compositional technique: theoretical extrapolation both from the formal aspects of meter and syntax in Anglo-Saxon and by analogy to other traditions, extrapolation from features of the extant Anglo-Saxon poetry of both literary and unknown origin, and the identification of features in the latter poems absent in literary works. The three approaches are interrelated, and equally valuable. The traditional composition of any Anglo-Saxon poem can never be unequivocally established; at most, we can show that a poem's style is consistent with the hypothetical traditional style.

Of greatest significance to this investigation of the diction of *Beowulf* are John D. Niles' studies of formulaic systems.⁴ Niles takes as his point of departure Donald K. Fry's definition of the formula in Old English poetry as "a group of words, one half-line in length, which shows

³ For extensive surveys of Anglo-Saxon oral-formulaic studies, see Foley 1985:41-47; Olsen 1986, 1988.

⁴ For the priority of formulaic system over formula in the study of epic, see Lord 1960:30-31; also Kellogg 1965:66-67.

evidence of being the direct product of a formulaic system” (1967b:204). The formula is thus considered to be the surface reflection of the compositional process rather than the poet’s primary *Kunstmittel*. Concerned that Fry’s concept of formulaic system is neither formulated nor applied with sufficient rigor, Niles develops his own definition of the formula in Anglo-Saxon, which provides him with a standard for assessing traditional style. He considers the formula “a rhythmic/syntactic/semantic complex one half-line in length,” one of “a set of verses (or *formulaic system*) of a similar metrical type in which one main verbal element is constant” (1981b:395). The formulaic system should be considered as the underlying pattern of which formulas are surface products; for practical purposes the system is best viewed as equal to the sum of its recorded members. The importance of this definition lies in its utility as a key to the poet’s *habitual mode of thought*; Benson (1966:410-11) demonstrated the use of repeated phrases, not of flexible formulaic composition, in the literary poems. Niles shows how 33 of the first 50 half-lines of *Beowulf* can be seen as products of formulaic systems made up exclusively of verses from that poem; Magoun had deemed 37 formulaic using all 30,000 lines of extant Anglo-Saxon poetry for comparison.

Niles’ analysis of the opening of *Beowulf* is founded on the theoretical reconstruction of formulaic technique based for the most part on extant poetry and on other oral traditions. In a different study (1981a) he focuses specifically on the compound diction of *Beowulf* and presents evidence that it is the product of flexible systems of composition, *in contrast to* the diction of the literary poem *Meters of Boethius*. He therefore takes issue with Brodeur’s claim that the *Beowulf* poet transcends the traditional form. The poet was a master, but a master of traditional art. Niles discusses the variety of compounds formed in the two poems on given base-words, and shows that the striking originality of the diction of *Beowulf* may be the product of the traditional mode of composition, and hence that the unique compounds may be considered part of the traditional vocabulary.

The second aspect of the diction of *Beowulf*, the lack of originality of the compositional elements of the unique compounds, is also a product of traditional oral-formulaic technique. In the following discussion I compare the use of repeated first elements in the unique nominal compounds of *Beowulf* and in selected literary poems to demonstrate that the *Beowulf* poet used traditional elements and traditional techniques to form his unique diction. It is not so much a question of the traditional poet being restricted to a particular set of limiting words or particular base words through formulaic systems. The poet, whether literary or traditional, is not limited in his choice of compound elements; at least in the case of the oral poet, however, if he finds a particular first element useful

once, he is unlikely to discard it.⁵ Any analysis of the unique compounds in Anglo-Saxon poems must deal only with broad statistical trends and not with specific elements of the diction. If we had more than the extant thirty thousand lines of Anglo-Saxon poetry, it is likely that many of the compounds now seemingly unique would appear in other poems. Many of the unique compounds in *Beowulf* indeed occur in other Germanic literature, for example, in Old Norse (Kellogg 1965:72):

Anglo-Saxon	Old Norse	Translation
<i>beaduserce</i>	<i>boðserke</i>	“battle-shirt”
<i>earmbeag</i>	<i>armbaugr</i>	“arm-ring”
<i>eormengrund</i>	<i>jormungrund</i>	“vast-earth”
<i>handbona</i>	<i>handbani</i>	“hand-slayer”
<i>herewæd</i>	<i>hervað</i>	“war-dress”
<i>medoærn</i>	<i>mjoðrann</i>	“mead-hall”

While many of the unique compounds might be repeated if there were more material, many of the compounds that occur only in poetry, and in only a small number of poems, may not have been part of the common poetic vocabulary but may have been coined independently by two or more poets. This study of the first elements of unique compounds is therefore important only in its broad results; the exact derivation of a particular compound, except in special circumstances, cannot be determined.

I have selected a number of Anglo-Saxon literary poems for comparison with *Beowulf*. The *Phoenix* is a poem of 677 lines from the Exeter Book manuscript. The first 300 lines are a close translation of a Latin poem, *De Aves Phoenixe*, and the rest of the poem is an allegorical interpretation apparently original to the author (Greenfield 1965:16). Benson analyzed this poem in his response to Magoun, and it is an admirable example of the Anglo-Saxon literary style. At least four other poems are of clear literary origin. These are the signed poems of Cynewulf: *Juliana*, *Elene*, *Christ II*, and the *Fates of the Apostles*.⁶ While an oral poet may be literate in the sense that he can compose his poems by the oral-formulaic technique and simultaneously commit them to writing (resulting in what Lord [1960:29] calls an *oral autograph text*), Cynewulf’s use of his sources and the way in which he wove his runic signature into the poems indicate that he was composing in the literary manner.

⁵ The edition of the Anglo-Saxon poems used in this study is Krapp and Dobbie 1931-53. In my analysis I make frequent use of the glossary in Klaeber 1950, and espec. Bessinger 1978.

⁶ For a thorough discussion of Cynewulf and his poetry, see Calder 1981.

The diction of the *Phoenix* and Cynewulf's poems share certain distinctive characteristics. Despite the disparate length and subject matter, they have the same density of unique nominal compounds. There are 133 unique compounds in the 2,601 lines of the Cynewulfian corpus—that is, about one unique nominal compound every twenty lines. There are 32 unique nominal compounds in the 677 lines of the *Phoenix*, or about one unique compound every twenty lines.

The *Phoenix* and the Cynewulfian corpus are also similar in their degree of originality in the first elements of unique nominal compounds. Some 42 of the 133 unique compounds in the Cynewulfian corpus have first elements that occur in no other compounds in that corpus. Another 55 compounds, or 41 percent, have first elements that do occur in other unique compounds in the corpus. In the *Phoenix*, 23 unique compounds have first elements that form no other compounds in the poem, and only six, or 19 percent, have first elements that occur in other unique compounds in the poem. While the figures for the *Phoenix* are much lower than those for the poems of Cynewulf, the amount of material is much smaller. The first 700 lines of *Elene* yield figures quite close to those for the 677-line *Phoenix*. We can be reasonably certain that had we an amount of material from the author of the *Phoenix* equivalent to that from Cynewulf, the figures would be essentially the same.

It appears that Cynewulf and the author of the *Phoenix* formed their unique compounds by analogy to pre-existing words. Even with the limited amount of material available, the proportion of unique compounds with first elements that form other compounds within the text is quite high. But the proportion of first elements that form *more than one* unique compound is much lower. The literary poets exhibit a high degree of originality in the coining of new compounds, in that they do not tend to form at the most more than two or three, and rarely more than one, new compound with a given first element. Furthermore, the first elements with which they comprise unique compounds tend to occur in other compounds both in their own poems and elsewhere in Anglo-Saxon literature.

The unique nominal compounds in *Beowulf* stand out in sharp contrast to those in the literary poems. There are, first of all, many more of them in *Beowulf*, not only in absolute terms but in density as well: 509 distinct unique nominal compounds in the 3,182 lines of *Beowulf*.⁷ One unique compound occurs on the average every six lines; the average in the literary poems is one in twenty. Only 88 of the 509 unique nominal compounds have first elements that occur in non-unique compounds in the poem. Another 378, or 74 percent, of the unique compounds have first

⁷ Brodeur (1959:7) identifies 518 unique substantive compounds; I have excluded the nine participial compounds from my analysis.

elements that occur in another compound unique to the poem. Especially in contrast to the poems of Cynewulf, where only 41 percent of the unique nominal compounds share a first element with another unique compound, or the *Phoenix*, where the figure was 22 percent, it seems clear that the originality of the unique compounds of *Beowulf* does not extend to their compositional elements. The greater number of unique compounds in *Beowulf* is characterized not by a greater but by a lesser degree of originality. Unlike the literary poems, where the unique compounds are formations by analogy, the compounds of *Beowulf* may well have taken shape in the process of oral composition as the products of formulaic systems.

This difference in composition is clear from the pattern of distribution of repeated first elements among the unique compounds. In the *Phoenix*, no first element occurs in more than two unique compounds. In the Cynewulfian corpus, only three of the 99 first elements in unique nominal compounds occur in more than three: *gast-* (“spirit”), *here-* (“army”), and *sweord-* (“sword”). *Here-* occurs in six non-unique compounds in the poems of Cynewulf. In *Beowulf*, by contrast, 32 first elements, or 14 percent of the first elements that form unique compounds in the poem, occur in more than three such compounds. Of these, only two form more non-unique compounds than unique in *Beowulf*. Furthermore, the first elements that seem in general to serve as intensifiers, and hence influence the essential idea expressed by the compound the least, occur in large numbers of unique compounds in *Beowulf*:

First Element	Unique Compounds	Found Only in Poetry
<i>beado-</i> (“battle”)	8	2
<i>gar-</i> (“spear”)	4	6
<i>heado-</i> (“battle”)	8	3
<i>heoro-</i> (“sword”)	5	–
<i>here-</i> (“battle”)	12	2
<i>hild(e)-</i> (“war”)	20	1
<i>inwit-</i> (“evil”)	7	2
<i>mægen-</i> (“might”)	5	2
<i>wæl-</i> (“slaughter”)	13	4 (3 in prose)
<i>wig-</i> (“war”)	10	4

These patterns, especially in contrast with the literary poetry, provide evidence of formulaic systems in the substantive compounds of *Beowulf*. The contradiction between artistic and elevated diction on the one hand, and cumbersome compounding on the other, can thus be resolved with the conclusion that the style of *Beowulf* is a traditional product of an oral-formulaic compositional technique.

This interpretation of the style of *Beowulf* conflicts with the widely held view that the *Beowulf* poet formed his compounds with an eye towards particular effect in their immediate contexts, as Stanley Greenfield suggests (1965:75):

The better scopcs could and did use their stocks of words, formulas, and themes individualistically. One of the methods by which the Old English poets achieved originality was the coining of compounds, as the *Beowulf* poet's immense wealth of newly minted compound words attests. In a larger way, originality in the use of formulas and themes depended upon the degree of tension created between the traditional associations evoked by these stylizations and the unique applicability they had in their specific contexts.

A number of influential scholars have examined various aspects of the diction of *Beowulf* from this perspective, arguing in each case for the aptness of the compounds in context.⁸ These studies are all based explicitly or implicitly on the assumption that *Beowulf* is a literary work. Both assumptions, of literary or traditional oral composition, can account for the observable use of compound elements; artistic effect cannot be used as an argument for either one. A term may seem apt or ironic in its immediate context, but such an effect is subjective and could be coincidental if the diction and style are traditional.

The first elements of the compounds do not lack significance even if the diction of *Beowulf* is traditional. In traditional poetry the significance of a particular element would not be a function of its immediate context, but of the theme, the type-scene, the entire poem, or the tradition itself.⁹ When those scholars who view *Beowulf* as a literary work consider the meaning of compounds outside their immediate contexts, the conclusions are compatible with the hypothesis of traditional style. In her most recent study, for example, Brady studies compounds in "the broader context of an entire passage or even of different passages appearing hundreds of lines apart."¹⁰ Gregory Nagy's observations on the Homeric tradition hold true, I think, for *Beowulf* and the Anglo-Saxon poetic tradition (1979:3):

Did the poet really *mean* this or that? Did he really *intend* such-and-such an artistic effect? My general answer is that the artistic effect is indeed

⁸ See espec. the similar approaches of Bryan 1929 and Storms 1957; also Brady 1979, 1983.

⁹ For a definition and discussion of "theme" in oral traditional poetry, see Lord 1960:68-98. Fry 1967a provides a good discussion of the concept as it is applied to Anglo-Saxon poetry.

¹⁰ Brady 1983:200; see also Magoun 1949.

present—but this intent must be assigned not simply to one poet but also to countless generations of previous poets steeped in the same traditions. In other words, I think that the artistry of the Homeric poems is traditional both in diction and in theme.

An examination of the way in which particular poets formed unique compounds in other poems can provide further insights into the nature of the Anglo-Saxon oral tradition. One poem in particular, *Genesis A*, seems to include passages in the traditional style alongside clearly literary verse. *Genesis A* is for the most part a close paraphrase of some Latin Vulgate version of *Genesis*. Although there are numerous passages interspersed throughout the text of *Genesis A* that do not correspond to anything in the Latin texts, there are only two major additions: an extended introduction (ll. 1-111) and the “War of Kings” passage (ll. 1982-2101). The most recent editor of the poem (Doane 1978:87) points out that

In the parts of the poem “freely” developed, the compounds are as frequent and exuberant as any in the corpus. These compounds are, however many, not characteristic of the poem as a whole, and occur frequently only in the “free” portions.

It should be interesting to examine the “free” passages of the poem along with selected passages that correspond to the known Latin versions, and to compare the diction of these passages to those of *Beowulf*, the *Phoenix*, and the poems of Cynewulf. I will discuss the style and diction of four passages from *Genesis A* of approximately equal length. The amount of material is too small for statistical treatment, but despite this limitation we can see definite differences among the four passages.

The first 111 lines of the poem are a non-biblical passage introducing standard Hexameral topics, such as the fall of the angels. It contains 14 unique nominal compounds, or one unique compound every eight lines. Of the 14 compounds, five have first elements that occur in other compounds in the passage. Only two of the unique compounds, *helleheaf* (38a) and *helltrega* (73b), share a first element.

The Sethite genealogy takes up 138 lines (ll. 1104-1242a). This passage is remarkably faithful to the original in structure and nomenclature, yet, according to Doane, it shows considerable formulaic inventiveness; what elaboration exists “stems from the traditional poetic stock, rather than from the exegetical tradition” (1978:251). The passage is apparently formulaic only in the sense that all of Anglo-Saxon verse is so. It contains seven unique nominal compounds, or one every twenty lines—the same density as the poems of Cynewulf and the *Phoenix*. Of the seven unique compounds, five share first elements with other compounds in the passage, and no two unique compounds in this passage have first elements in common. The stylistic similarity of the compound diction in

this passage and the literary poems confirms John W. Butcher's (1987) analysis of the diction and formulaic structure of the Sethite genealogy; he concludes that the poet used invented diction and original ideas as well as traditional formulas.

The third passage, the "War of Kings" (ll. 1960-2101), appears to be traditional in diction and style. Before line 1982 the expansions are solidly based on the Biblical text; thereafter, the Anglo-Saxon narrative is an entirely "free" expression of the theme of battle (Doane 1978:69). In this passage there are 27 unique nominal compounds, or one every five lines, a density even higher than that of *Beowulf*. Sixteen of the unique compounds share their first element with another compound in the passage, and eleven have a first element in common with another unique compound. The repeated first elements reflect, for the most part, the theme of battle: *folc*- ("nation, army"), *guð*- ("battle"), *hilde*- ("battle"), *orleg*- ("war"), and *wig*- ("battle").

At the end of the preserved portion of the poem comes the sacrifice of Isaac (ll. 2846-936); it is unclear whether the poet ever intended to carry the story of Genesis beyond this point. Robert Creed (1969) argues, using Magoun's approach, that this passage is highly formulaic. It contains five unique compounds in 90 lines, or one compound every eighteen lines, a density close to that of the Sethite genealogy, Cynewulf's poems, and the *Phoenix*. Only one of the five, *wuldorgast* (2813a), shares a first element with another compound in the passage.

The introductory passage, the Sethite genealogy, and the sacrifice of Isaac all show a low degree of originality in their coinage of new compounds and a high degree of originality in the elements that make up those compounds. The first elements of the unique compounds in these passages tend to be elements found in compounds commonly used in prose, and in common compounds used by the poet in the same passage, yet the poet tends to form only one unique compound on a given first element. These passages thus share a common style with the literary poems. The compounds in the "War of Kings" passage, on the other hand, have all the features of traditional style found in *Beowulf*: high degree of originality in the diction coupled with a relatively low degree of originality in the compound elements. Examining the first elements of compounds yields results with material too scant to exhibit formulaic systems in which the base words are constant.

It appears that the author of *Genesis A*, if indeed the poem was the work of an individual, was both literate and skilled in the traditional compositional technique. Even in the part of the poem that corresponds closely to the Vulgate, the poet composed in a direct fashion without conscious reinterpretation of the biblical text. Doane compares two passages, ll. 192-98a and 1504b-5, 1510b-17, that correspond to passages

closely related, both verbally and structurally, in the Vulgate. He concludes that the Anglo-Saxon passages are too much alike for the poet to have been consciously looking for different ways to express the same Vulgate statement, yet too different for the poet to have been consciously attempting to reproduce the similarity of the Vulgate passages (1978:81, n.77). Nevertheless, as Butcher shows, the poet's choice of words was not dictated merely by metrical expediency. In both the "free" introductory passage and in his paraphrase of the text of *Genesis*, the poet composed in a literate fashion, using traditional phrases perhaps, but not habitual formulaic thought; the text thus has the superficial formulaic quality of the *Phoenix*, the *Cynwulf* poems, and the *Meters of Boethius*. When the poet came to the war of kings, he expanded his source freely in the traditional style, using formulaic style and diction. He may have taken advantage of traditional thematic material to indulge his skill in this compositional technique.

Before line 1725 there are six references to the literary source of the poem: for example, *þæs þe us secgað bec* ("as books tell us," 227b, 1723b), and *us gewritu secað* ("the writings [Scriptures] tell us," 1121b). The latter half-line is repeated twice later in the poem (2565b, 2612b). Between ll. 1723 and 2565, however, there are five occurrences of the verb *gefrignan* ("to hear tell of"), the classic evocation of oral tradition with which *Beowulf* begins: *Hwæt, we Gardena in geardagum / þeodcyninga þrym gefrunon* ("We have heard of the glory of the kings of the spear-Danes in ancient times").¹¹ The first such instance is *þa ic aldor gefrægn* (1960a), which introduces the War of Kings, and *þa ic neðan gefrægn* occurs in this passage as well. Although literary poets do make use of such references for stylistic purposes, I feel this abrupt transition is further evidence of the poet's switch into the traditional oral-formulaic mode. Here indeed is a case of a literate poet who could compose in the traditional manner; the two compositional styles, however, remain distinct.

The paradox of originality in the diction of *Beowulf* has served as a point of departure for this discussion of several aspects of the Anglo-Saxon oral poetic tradition. Brodeur states that it is only through the assumption of his literacy that one can explain the difference between the *Beowulf* poet's art and that of any other Anglo-Saxon poet (1959:5). I have tried to show that the differences can also be explained by the thesis that he was, literate or illiterate, at home in the oral tradition. In neither case is the poet the slave of his tradition; in either, he is capable of high art. The

¹¹ See Magoun 1953 for a discussion of the phrases involving *gefrignan*.

traditional style of Anglo-Saxon oral poetry was fresh and vigorous, different from, but not inferior to, the art of the literary poets.¹²

University of California, Los Angeles

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**Phemius' Last Stand:
The Impact of Occasion on
Tradition in the *Odyssey***

Carol Dougherty

When Odysseus and Telemachus finally take their stand against the suitors in Book XXII of the *Odyssey*, Phemius, the poet who has been entertaining the suitors in Ithaca during Odysseus' absence, makes a single attempt to save his own life. He begs Odysseus not to kill him because he is a poet (344-49):

γουνουμαί σ', Ὀδυσσεύ· σὺ δέ μ' αἶδεο καί μ' ἐλέησον·
αὐτῶ τοι μετόπισθ' ἄχρ' ἔσσεται, εἴ κεν ἀοιδὸν
πέφνης, ὅς τε θεοῖσι καὶ ἀνθρώποισιν ἀείδω.
αὐτοδίδακτος δ' εἰμί, θεὸς δέ μοι ἐν φρεσὶν οἶμας
παντοίας ἐνέφυσεν· ἔοικα δέ τοι παραεῖδειν
ὡς τε θεῶ· τῷ μὴ με λιλαίεο δειροτομήσαι.

I beg you, Odysseus, respect me and have pity on me. For you will have trouble in the future if you slay a poet, I who sing for both the gods and men. I am self-taught and the god has inspired me with all kinds of songs. It is fitting for me to sing for you as for a god. For these reasons, do not be eager to kill me.

We immediately notice the poet's reference to both the divine and human spheres: Phemius sings for gods and men; he is both self-taught and inspired by the gods. In this passage, as in others, Homer uses the motif of divine intervention to emphasize the extraordinary aspect of Phemius' expertise as well as the general manifestation of the gods in all things mortal.¹ Often a divine teacher is introduced to explain a mortal's excellence at a particular skill or craft. Nestor, for example, in the *Iliad*

¹ For discussion of this passage within the context of the dual motivation that Homer so often attributes to human activities, see Lesky 1961:30-32 and, more recently, Edwards 1987:19, 134-35.

encourages Antilochus before the chariot race held in Book XXIII; he reminds him that he owes his skill to the gods (306-9):²

Ἄντιλοχ', ἦτοι μὲν σε νέον περ ἑόντα φίλησαν
 Ζεὺς τε Ποσειδάων τε, καὶ ἵπποσύνας ἐδίδαξαν
 παντοίας· τῷ καὶ σε διδασκέμεν οὐ τι μάλα χρεώ·
 οἴσθα γὰρ εὖ περὶ τέρμαθ' ἐλίσσέμεν·

Antilochus, indeed Zeus and Poseidon have loved you although you are young, and they have taught you all kinds of horsemanship. And so there is no great need to teach you, for you know well how to round the turning-posts.

Divine inspiration or teaching, however, does not completely rule out the human component. The gods have provided Antilochus with the skill of horsemanship, but in order to be truly successful, Antilochus himself must know how to apply that skill to the needs and circumstances of each individual race. Neither Nestor nor anyone else can teach him that. This same distinction applies to Phemius' description of poetic skill. The poet does more than merely acknowledge the combined forces of divine inspiration and human intellectual capacity. In addition, he calls our attention to the two key elements of oral poetics. He contrasts the traditional element of oral poetry, that which the god inspires, with the demands of the individual occasion, which the "self-taught" poet himself controls.³ Albert Lord, drawing upon the research that he and Milman Parry conducted on the South Slavic oral tradition, describes the oral poet in these same terms (1962:184):

He is the carrier of the tradition; he composes the songs. He must be sensible of both occasion and audience, but it is ultimately his skill or lack of it which will please, instruct, move to tears or laughter, or incite to action. The fate of the songs is in his hands. He may corrupt a good story, or he may enhance and set right a story which he received from the tradition in a corrupt state. He is no mere mouthpiece who repeats slavishly what he has learned. He is a creative artist.

Wilhelm Radloff, in his preface to the fifth volume of the *Proben der Volksliteratur der türkischen Stämme* (1990:83-84), characterizes the Kara-Kirgiz oral poet similarly; he describes the singer of epic songs as an improvising piano player who

² Cf. *Iliad* 5.51-52; 5.59-61; *Odyssey* 1.384-85; 7.109-111.

³ Martin (1989:xiii) addresses this issue of the "interplay between traditional narrative material and the poet's spontaneous composition."

creates a mood by putting together various courses, transitions, and motifs with which he is familiar, and he thus creates the new from the old he knows. The singer of epic songs proceeds in the same way. Through extensive practice in reciting, he has a series of themes [*Vortragsteile*] available, if I may so put it, which he assembles in a manner suitable to the development. These themes are the descriptions of certain incidents and situations, such as a hero's birth, the growing up of a hero, the praising of the weapons, . . . and many other things. The singer's art is to order all these ready-made themes [*Bildteilchen*] and to link them by means of newly composed verses.

In the *Odyssey*, Phemius describes his own craft just this way. His reference to his divine source designates the vast poetic tradition in which he works—his familiarity with many types of scenes and formulaic building blocks. But as an oral poet, he innovates within that tradition, and this is a skill which goes beyond what the gods give a poet—this he teaches himself over time as he gradually learns to adapt each new song to its specific occasion and audience. In other words, the god inspires Phemius with the poetic tradition, but he is self-taught when it comes to making each song suit its occasion.

Phemius acknowledges his place in the tradition of Greek heroic poetry by explaining that the god has inspired him with all kinds of songs (θεός δέ μοι ἐν φρεσὶν οὔμας / παντοίας ἐνέφυσεν). By “god,” Phemius surely means a Muse or Apollo, the deities specifically associated with the poetic tradition.⁴ In Greek poetry, the divine persona of the Muse typically represents the oral poetic tradition in its broadest sense.⁵ The Muses provide the poet with his material; they help him capture part of the traditional past within his particular song. As the daughters of Mnemosyne, the Muses reflect the important function of memory among oral societies, for not only does oral poetry “memorialize” famous deeds, but a creative memory is an integral part of the process of oral

⁴ The scholiast on this line (22.347) equates θεός with ἡ μουσα (Dindorf 1855). Within Greek literature, poets are flexible in acknowledging their connection to the divine aspect of poetry. The “givers” or “teachers” of poetry to poets are alternately referred to as Apollo, one or more Muses, or simply θεός. These are not substantive alternatives but simply represent metrical or stylistic variation within a fluid tradition. See, for example, the opening of the *Odyssey*, where the poet first appeals to the Muse (μουσα) and then nine lines later addresses her as “goddess, daughter of Zeus” (θεά, θυγάτηρ Διός).

⁵ See Sperdutti 1950 on the nature of the relationship between Greek poetry and the divine.

composition.⁶ In addition, the Muses are the oral poet's source of inspiration and talent; they teach poets to sing.⁷ Finally, they provide the bard and his song with authority and credibility.⁸

The divine Muse personifies the essence of the oral poetic tradition, and in this capacity, she teaches the poet his craft. Both Homer and Hesiod use the verb "teach" (διδάσκω) to describe the professional training of a poet or orator. In the *Theogony*, the Muses teach Hesiod their fine song as he tends his flock on Mount Helicon (22-23):⁹

αἶ νύ ποθ' Ἡσίοδον καλήν ἐδίδαξαν ἀοιδήν,
ἄρνας ποιμαίνονθ' Ἑλικῶνος ὑπο ζαθέοιο.

They once *taught* Hesiod their fine song while he was tending his flocks beneath divine Helicon.

In Book VIII of the *Odyssey*, Odysseus conveys the highest praise on Demodocus, the poet who entertains the Phaeacians, by exclaiming that either a Muse or Apollo taught him (487-88):¹⁰

Δημόδοκ', ἔξοχα δὴ σε βροτῶν αἰνίζομαι ἀπάντων·
ἢ σέ γε Μοῦσ' ἐδίδαξε, Διὸς πάις, ἢ σέ γ' Ἀπόλλων.

Demodocus, I praise you above all mortals. Either the Muse, child of Zeus, has taught you, or Apollo.

In the first book of the *Odyssey*, when Telemachus calls an assembly in Odysseus' absence, Antinous taunts him about his new-found oratorical

⁶ Cf. Notopoulos (1938), who stresses the importance of memory in any oral poetic tradition, but tries to tie memory too specifically to the use of formulae. When composing/performing, the poet draws on a broader concept of "memory" in connection with its associations with the traditional origins of song.

⁷ Cf. Murray (1981:89), who argues that the Muses "symbolize the poet's feeling of dependence on the external: they are the personification of his inspiration."

⁸ Cf. Allen 1949:49; he argues that the power of the Muses is not only inspiration; they are the possessors of all knowledge. Taking a slightly different approach, Svenbro 1976: 16-45, esp. 32, suggests that we interpret the Muses as a religious representation of social control. The Muses help the poet tell the kind of story which his audience will approve and appreciate.

⁹ Cf. *Works and Days* 662: Μοῦσαι γὰρ μ' ἐδίδαξαν ἀθέσφατον ὕμνον αἰεῖδειν (For the Muses taught me to sing their song of great beauty).

¹⁰ Cf. *Odyssey* 8.480-81 for a similar formulation. The significance, if any, of this alternative (Muse or Apollo) is unclear. See Murray 1981:91, n.25.

proWess (384-85):¹¹

Τηλέμαχ', ἦ μάλα δὴ σε διδάσκουσιν θεοὶ αὐτοὶ
ὑψαγόρην τ' ἔμεναι καὶ θαρσαλέως ἀγορεύειν.

Telemachus, surely the gods themselves teach you to be arrogant and to speak boldly.

Homer and Hesiod use the verb διδάσκω to represent poetic or oratorical teaching, and ordinarily within the Greek tradition, we expect the teacher to be divine. Phemius, however, while he does mention that the god “programmed” him with all kinds of songs, appropriates the teaching verb for himself. He is “self-taught” (αὐτοδίδακτος). To be self-taught, however, does not mean, as has been suggested: “I have no teacher.”¹² This misleading translation can perhaps be traced to the often cited parallel from a Kirgiz singer of Central Asia who describes his art in a manner very much like that of Phemius and which has been similarly interpreted (Radloff 1990:84):¹³

I can sing any song there is because god has planted this gift for singing in my heart. He supplies my tongue with the word without my having to search for it. I have not learned to sing any of my songs; everything gushes out of my insides, out of myself.

The two formulations are undeniably similar; each poet designates the two

¹¹ In the *Iliad* (9.442-43), Phoenix, although mortal, explains to Achilles that his father, Peleus, asked him to be Achilles’ teacher in word and deed: τοῦνεκά με προέηκε διδασκέμεναι τάδε πάντα, / μύθων τε ῥητῆρ’ ἔμεναι πρηκτῆρά τε ἔργων (For this reason he sent me to teach you these things: to be a speaker of words and doer of deeds).

¹² Most scholars have taken αὐτοδίδακτος to mean that Phemius has no teacher and/or that he has not copied the songs of another poet. See, for example, Thalmann 1984:127; Murray 1981:97; Schadewaldt 1959:78-79; Kirk 1985:51. The concept of copying another poet’s song, however, belongs to a literate society and is not relevant to a discussion of oral poetic composition. See, instead, Svenbro 1976:11-16 on the “multiformité du chant,” and later (45), where he contrasts the fluid improvisational technique of the true oral poets who must continually respond to the demands of their audience with the rigid memorization and recitation of the later rhapsodes once the epic texts have been fixed by writing: “Ils [the rhapsodes] n’étaient plus *autodidaktoi* comme Phémios.”

¹³ Dodds (1951:10) cites this parallel in his discussion of the Phemius passage as does Finkelberg (1990:303). Both scholars understand the two components of these passages as a reiteration of one aspect of oral poetry: Dodds thinks that αὐτοδίδακτος reinforces the poet’s reference to the divine source of poetry, and Finkelberg believes that inspiration reflects the poet’s individual creativity within a tradition.

necessary and complementary components of his art. The god represents his inspiration, his unending source of song material, but in addition to this divine inspiration, each poet mentions his own innate ability to innovate within his inherited tradition. The Kirgiz poet has no teacher; Phemius is self-taught (*αὐτοδίδακτος*). But neither poet is boasting that he does not sing the songs of other poets, because, as Radloff argues in his discussion of this question (86):¹⁴

Songs do not exist at all during the period of the authentic epic. There are only subject areas that are sung about, as the Muse, that is the singer's inner singing power, inspires him. He never sings other people's poetry; he always composes himself as I described in a detailed manner above.

Instead, both Phemius and the Kirgiz poet refer to their ability as poets to work within the existing tradition in order to create new songs in the manner of the improvisational pianist. Phemius does not say that he has not learned any of his songs. Instead he claims to have taught himself—and there is a critical difference. Translating *αὐτοδίδακτος* to mean that Phemius has no teacher misses the force of *αὐτός* in the compound, which emphasizes the role of the self in the action.¹⁵

While every oral poet must be fluent in the tradition, the true test of an oral poet's skill is his ability to sing the right song at the right time. Like the charioteer who, drawing upon his god-given skill, must run each race as the conditions dictate, the poet must be able to manipulate the vast tradition to fit any given poetic occasion, and for this skill the poet depends only upon himself. Most important, he must tailor his song to each particular audience.¹⁶ To take just one contemporary parallel, we can see

¹⁴ For his earlier discussion of composition, see 85-86.

¹⁵ Cf. Liddell-Scott-Jones s.v. *αὐτός*: "In Compos.: 1. of or by oneself, self- . . . , as in *αὐτοδίδακτος*. . . ." Chantraine (1968:143-44) explains that the first term of *αὐτός* compounds expresses essentially the idea of something by or for oneself: "par soi-même, à soi seul, de soi-même." Cf. Frisk 1960:191-92. Other Homeric compounds with *αὐτός* include *αὐτόματος*, "self-acting," and *αὐτάγρετος*, "chosen by oneself." The adjective *αὐτοδίδακτος* is rare in early and classical Greek; the only other occurrence is in Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* (991), where it is used to refer to a spontaneous utterance, one deriving from the self.

¹⁶ Cf. Radloff 1990:85; see also Scott (1989), who discusses the different kinds of storytellers in the *Odyssey* and develops a profile of the Homeric bard or storyteller. Among other characteristics, he argues (384) that Homer's storytellers are presented as improvisors rather than reciters of memorized texts. See also Martin (1989:5-10), who persuasively argues that Homerists must learn to appreciate the important role that the audience plays during any oral performance; he cites evidence from Cretan, Romanian,

from performances of Xhosa praise poetry of South Africa how critical it is for an oral poet to be able to react to the needs of each occasion. An *imbongi* is a tribal poet who composes spontaneous eulogistic poetry for the tribal chief. His job requires fluency, knowledge of tribal history, and an ability to express the truth as he and the tribe see it. But the distinctive feature of the *imbongi* is that he can recite poems without having prepared them beforehand. *Imbongi* means “the poet who praises, an improviser” (Opland 1983:58). S. M. Burns-Ncamashe, a Rharhabe *imbongi*, when asked whether a poet repeats verbatim poems that he has memorized, explains (*ibid.*:61):¹⁷

Well, in some cases they repeat more or less the same phrases, but with new phrases each time, because usually izibongo [poems] do include a description of the appearance of a person or thing, and naturally, since the appearance doesn't change, you'd always refer to a man with that long nose or thin legs and so forth—he'd still have them, you know, a big tummy and so forth. So, in addition to the appearance, then there would be the events that may have taken place which would be included naturally in the subject of the izibongo.

The poet's ability to respond on the spot to the demands of a particular occasion, his skill at adapting the poetic tradition to please a specific audience is, I contend, what Phemius means by the phrase, “I am self-taught” (αὐτοδίδακτος δ' εἰμί). Within the specific context of Phemius' speech of self-defense, Homer has isolated two separate elements within the poetic tradition—“self” and “poetic teaching”—and combined them to form an adjective, αὐτοδίδακτος, that signifies a poet's ability to respond on his own to the needs of a given occasion.¹⁸ On this occasion, fighting for his life, Phemius reminds Odysseus of his status as a singer and of his potential long-term value to Odysseus as a court poet. He is self-taught and the god has inspired him with all kinds of songs. For this reason, alive, Phemius will always be able to sing the praises of god-like Odysseus (ἔοικα δέ τοι παραίδειν / ὥς τε θεῶ). The god has granted him access to the poetic tradition (θεὸς δέ μοι ἐν φρεσὶν οὔμας / παντοίας ἐνέφυσεν), but more important, since Phemius is

Philippine, and Kirgiz traditions.

¹⁷ Another Xhosa poet, when asked if he makes up what he is singing replied (72-73): “It comes just of its own. As a matter of fact, with me it's the occasion that inspires itself in me. Then the words automatically come.”

¹⁸ It is interesting to note that αὐτοδίδακτος is a *hapax legomenon* in the Homeric corpus, and although the evidence is far from conclusive, it is tempting to conjecture that the term was “invented” for this particular occasion, and thereby, by its very invention, reflects the adaptive skill that it is intended to designate.

αὐτοδίδακτος, he has the ability to reinterpret the past tradition on each and every occasion in order to keep up with the song-worthy events of the present and future. Phemius will never become obsolete; his poetry will never be out of date.

At the court of Phaeacians, Odysseus remarks that a god must have instructed Demodocus because he has sung the story of the destruction of the Greeks at Troy so convincingly (8.489). At Ithaca, Phemius, however, downplays his debt to the tradition and instead foregrounds his own poetic contribution. Phemius emphasizes his own participation in the art of poetic composition, not the lack of help from another. In so doing he acknowledges the impact of occasion on tradition.¹⁹ The profiles of the two poets complement each other; all good poets must have both talents, and we can apply this profile of the Homeric bard to the central poet of the poem, Odysseus, as well. It is clear from the lying tales in Books XIII to XIX that Odysseus knows how to work within the tradition to tailor any one particular tale to the needs of its specific occasion and audience. He tells four different stories upon arriving in Ithaca; each incorporates material from his adventures as told in Books IX to XII, and each varies in detail depending upon whether he is addressing Eumaius, the suitors, or Penelope.²⁰

We have already seen evidence of Phemius' ability to respond to his audience in Book I of the *Odyssey*. When Penelope complains that she does not want to hear about the recent troubles of the Greek fleet returning from Troy, Telemachus defends Phemius' choice of songs (351-52):

¹⁹ I do not see the portraits of Phemius and Demodocus as competing in any real way, or as foils to Odysseus the poet, but rather as individual glimpses at the figure of the oral poet, glimpses that are meant to be taken as parts of the whole. As Leonard Muellner has pointed out to me, Odysseus alludes to the importance of the poet's self in the Demodocus passage as well. After praising Demodocus and suggesting that he was taught by the Muse, Odysseus says that Demodocus told the story of the destruction of the Greeks at Troy as if he were present himself (αὐτὸς παρεὼν) or had heard it from one who was (8.489-91). In comparing Phemius' speech of self-defense with Odysseus' assessment of Demodocus' poetic expertise, we can see the important similarities, and we can recognize Phemius' account of the oral poetic process as the marked version. Although not strictly relevant to this discussion, it is perhaps worth mentioning that within these two "signature" passages, each poet has his name etymologized. At 8.472, Homer introduces Demodocus as Δημόδοκον λαοῖσι τετιμένον. At 22.376, once Odysseus agrees to spare Phemius, he refers to the poet as πολύφημος ἀοιδός.

²⁰ Odysseus' story to Athena: 13.256-86; to Eumaius: 14.192-352; to the suitors: 17.419-44; to Penelope: 19.165-202; 221-48; 262-303. If we take the *Odyssey* as we have it as representative of Odysseus' poetic tradition, then, in the final books, we can see how he manipulates the themes, motifs, and episodes of that tradition as is needed. Cf. Trahman 1952 for a discussion of the various lying tales which Odysseus tells in Books XIII to XIX within the context of oral poetics.

τὴν γὰρ ἀοιδὴν μᾶλλον ἐπικλείουσ' ἄνθρωποι,
ἢ τις ἀκουόντεσσι νεωτάτη ἀμφιπέληται.

For men praise that song more, whichever is newest to those listening.

Phemius, Telemachus explains, knows just what the suitors want to hear; he sings the songs that are newest (νεωτάτη). Within an oral tradition, the force of this adjective does not, however, refer only to the novelty or the “hot-off-the-press” aspect of Phemius’ songs but is perhaps better understood as meaning “most suited to the occasion.” We must be careful not to equate “newness” in an oral tradition with our general notion of innovation as the goal of the modern creative artist, as something never before seen or heard. “Newness” better designates the present occasion to which the poet responds in comparison with the “old songs” of his predecessors. Andrew Miller, in an article (1982) on Pindar’s epinician ode, Nemean Eight, discusses newness (νεαρά) in the context of the jealousy and other intense emotions that incredibly relevant stories and themes can produce in the immediate audience of an epinician song. He mentions this scene in Book I of the *Odyssey* as an example of how Phemius’ material, the return of the Greeks from Troy, is particularly relevant and painful for Penelope whose husband has not yet returned.²¹ Precisely because of its topicality, however, the same song is pleasing to the suitors. Because he is αὐτοδίδακτος, Phemius can cater to the interests and tastes of the majority of his audience and will always sing the right song, the one that men love to hear most. In sparing the poet’s life, Odysseus recognizes that, for this reason, Phemius will never fail to match his own exploits with comparable songs.

In a non-literate society, oral poetry preserves the heritage of its people and their image of the past. But in order to continue and survive, an oral tradition must also be flexible enough to accommodate changes and new ways of life, for poetry preserves only what is valuable for the present needs of the culture.²² The individual poet’s craft reflects this same tension. He draws upon the traditional themes of the songs belonging to his community, yet he adapts each song to a new and different poetic context.

²¹ Miller 1982:113-14: “νεαρά refers, then, neither to originality in mythic narrative nor to ‘new song’ in general but to a specific category of subject matter.” See also Nagy 1990:55, n. 19 and 69, where he argues that in Pindaric diction the concepts of *neo-/nearo-* (in contrast to *palaio-*) refer not to the novelty of the theme but to the *ad hoc* application of the myth to the here and now of those who attend and are the occasion of performance. He also applies this observation to *Odyssey* 1.351-52.

²² On the social function of memory and forgetting in non-literate cultures, see Goody and Watt 1981:27-68, espec. 28-33 and Ong 1982:46-48. For a discussion of these issues with specific reference to Homer, see Morris 1986:86-91.

Phemius' death-averting description—self-taught and divinely inspired — captures exactly this dialogue between tradition and occasion in oral poetic composition.²³

Wellesley College

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²³ I would like to thank Richard Martin, Gregory Nagy, Leonard Muellner, Leslie Kurke, Lisa Maurizio, and the anonymous reviewers for *Oral Tradition* for their help in the preparation of this article.

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Tradition, But What Tradition and For Whom?

Ruth Finnegan

*The Milman Parry Lecture on
Oral Tradition for 1989-90*

It is an honor and pleasure to be invited to give the 1989-90 Parry Lecture. In trying to analyze the concept of “tradition” and how it is used I hope that—as I will go on to elaborate further later—I have chosen a subject in keeping with the insights and approaches that we owe to Milman Parry. I intend to introduce the questions in my title¹ by some comment on the word “tradition” itself. This term and its adjective “traditional” have long been central concepts in my own discipline of anthropology, are constantly used to differentiate and classify phenomena, and, of course, are basic both to the title of this journal and to the Center for Studies in Oral Tradition that sponsors it. And yet “tradition” is also a concept that raises many puzzles. My plan, therefore, is to discuss some of the problems and assumptions behind the uses of “tradition” and “traditional” and their importance for scholarship, then go on to comment on some new moves in a number of disciplines—in particular anthropology, folklore, and oral history—that are now jointly making us reassess these once-basic terms. After that I will be returning again to Milman Parry.

Some Meanings and Uses of the Term “Tradition”

“Tradition” is a commonly used word—and, like many common words, elusive. Precisely because it is usually taken for granted as basic and so—in a sense—“obvious,” it has often for that reason not been discussed. It is instructive to look at the word in the standard reference works and dictionaries and find how often it is missing (missing, that is, in the sense of having an entry of its own—it does of course appear within

¹ Loyal readers of *Oral Tradition* will realize that my title deliberately parallels that of Henige’s recent discussion (1988).

discussions of other terms). One looks in vain between “trading stamp” and “Trafalgar” in the *Micropaedia* of the current (1974) edition of the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, for example, or between “trade winds” and “Traducianism” in *Chambers Encyclopedia* (1973). Similarly, there are no entries in *Colliers Encyclopedia*, the standard and still authoritative *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences* (1968), or the recent *International Encyclopedia of Communications* (Barnouw 1989).² There are *some* entries to be found, however. The *New English Dictionary* (the “Oxford English Dictionary”) has a predictably full and helpful entry, and the term is also well discussed in the 1964 *Dictionary of the Social Sciences* (Gould and Kolb 1964) and, with characteristic vigor, in Raymond Williams’s *Keywords* (1983). In the supposedly superseded (but still pertinent) *Encyclopaedia of the Social Sciences* (Seligman 1935), Max Radin concludes a critical discussion with the very modern-sounding comment (67):

In all its aspects it [tradition] retains enough of its primary characteristics of vagueness, remoteness of source, and wide ramification to make it seem peculiarly strong to those who have recourse to it and peculiarly weak to those who mean to reject it.

These and other dictionary entries reveal clearly that here is a term that is both value-laden and of varied application. The often-used and relatively neutral general meaning of “tradition” as a general *process* of handing down, particularly by word of mouth, is almost always noted. But there are also the contrasting, more concrete senses in which “tradition” refers to the *content* of what is thus handed down, either this content generally (sometimes vaguely defined as “custom” or anything that is “old”) or, significantly, just *some* selection from this content (selected, naturally, according to current assumptions about the value—or sometimes disvalue—of what is selectively thus labeled “tradition” or “traditional”). There are also more specific meanings of “tradition” that spill over into the general flavor of the term: the unwritten codes or body of teachings in certain world religions, for example, or one of the “ideal type” sources of authority in Max Weber’s typology (where it is opposed to that of “rational” and of “charismatic” authority).

Amid this variety, three main points emerge particularly forcefully from the various dictionary entries and usages: 1) “Tradition” has a number of *different* meanings, in particular referring both to process and to product, and with broader and narrower applications; 2) although sometimes on the face of it neutral, the term is apparently also used (and

² There is, however, an excellent discussion of the concept in Barnouw 1989 in the “Folklore” entry by Richard Bauman.

manipulated?) in an emotive sense, not seldom linked with deeply felt and powerful academic, moral, or political values; and 3) despite the differences, there *are* recurrent themes, even though the precise definition or identification of these features—and hence of what is to be counted as “tradition”—may not be thoroughly agreed upon. These are the ideas of a) unwritten or oral transmission (but what exactly *this* implies is, likewise, not always agreed upon); b) something handed down and *old* (but how old and in what sense varies); and c) *valued*—or occasionally disvalued—beliefs and practices (but whose values count and why seems to vary).

It is of course easy enough to take almost any important term and show that it has several meanings and is not used consistently. But my intention in this quick introductory summary is not to demolish the term, but the more positive purpose of indicating that there are problems with it that are well worth looking at explicitly. Here we have a concept, in other words, that has more complexity to it than is normally realized when it is encountered as an apparently limpid defining property. Indeed, the reason I think the points above are worth noting is that these characteristics of a word—especially the wider and narrower applications, the varied meanings, and, above all, the implicit evaluative connotations—are precisely those that signal terms that need to be unwrapped with special care, caution that has not always been shown in the scholarly usage of the term “tradition” in the past. The recurrent features and applications of the word “tradition” (and “traditional”), therefore, should alert us not only to its importance for the kinds of topics which have interested many scholars both in the past and in the present, but also that its applicability is a complex, loaded, and not fully agreed-upon matter—and thus the more worth discussion.

The first point to strike one in any examination of the usage of “tradition” and “traditional” is how basic the terms have been to several scholarly disciplines and how this centrality has linked with wider values both in these disciplines and in the cultural and political processes of which they formed part. This is so particularly (though not exclusively) in the disciplines of anthropology, folklore, and (in a rather different way) sociology, where the concepts of “tradition” and “traditional” have been central to the subjects, almost part of their definition.

Let me elaborate a little. For although this is not the place for a history of these disciplines (nor do I have space for a lengthy consideration of this complex subject), some brief comments can put the later discussion in some perspective. Anthropology began by being defined as the study of “primitive” societies. The original background to this perspective was the common nineteenth-century metaphor of a one-way evolutionary ladder on which all societies could be placed, the industrial European cultures being

obviously at the top (and in particular, of course, that of Victorian England), non-European and colonial peoples at or near the bottom. The latter were envisaged as still at the “early”—primitive—stages from which the developed and now *nontraditional* nations had started but had by now left behind (although “survivals” of these older stages could sometimes be detected).

The pictures of these “earlier” cultures being more “traditional” in the sense of having remained at a more primitive and less advanced stage also linked with influential social theories being developed in the nineteenth century as one way of making sense of—and finding a new identity within—what were perceived as the vast developments currently taking place in society in the Industrial Revolution. These theories took many and varied forms, but one emerging thread within them was the distinctions they commonly drew between “us” (the industrialized, the Victorians) and “them” (the non-European and colonized, far away both historically and geographically). It was the latter that constituted the subject matter of anthropology, and the effect of the influence of such “classic” social theorists as Weber, Durkheim, Marx, and Tönnies (still powerful figures in social science) was to imply a binary divide between two basically different types of society: the one non-industrial and characteristically marked by *Gemeinschaft*, religion, emphasis on unchanging tradition from the far past, collective norms, face-to-face and oral communication, lack of change, and closeness to nature; the other typified by *Gesellschaft*, rationality, literacy, individuality, change, and the artificial contractual relationships viewed as typical of urban living within Western industrial civilization. The first “type” was—and is—often broadly and short-handedly dubbed “traditional” and the fit subject for anthropology; the second “modern” and to be studied by sociologists.

Although the *necessary* coincidence of these various factors or even their precise incidence had not been empirically or systematically demonstrated, these oppositional contrasts appeared to have the force of incontrovertible truth. Thus it could be commonly assumed without question that any society that could be called “traditional” in any one of these senses must also be “traditional” in the others too, that literacy *always* goes with individuality or change, for example, while oral forms of communications never do, or that if something can be termed “tradition” in one sense—an established custom, say, or formulated orally rather than in writing—it must always attach the other properties of being old (“from time immemorial” is the favorite phrase here), unsuited to modern urban and industrial living, and necessarily resistant to change.

This then formed the background to the initial development of anthropology as a discipline, closely associated with “traditional” culture and all the characteristics that were supposed to go along with this

abstraction. It is true that within the social sciences this binary view of human culture is now under challenge, with both new moves in social theory and our own changing social and political experiences in the latter part of the twentieth century. But outside social science it still often holds sway (indeed sometimes within it too, owing to the still revered “classical” status of nineteenth-century social theorists) and certainly formed one dominating thread in the comparative interpretation of the nature of cultures and their manifestations in a world frame. As such it provided an apparent rationale for the distinctiveness of anthropology as the discipline that studied “primitive” or “traditional” society, the two terms being taken as synonymous.³

It is doubtless no accident that both the development of anthropology and the particular associations among “tradition,” backwardness, and lack of change coincided with the particular historical experiences of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the expansion of Western commerce and education, and the imperial experience as a whole. It made sense—and, it has been argued, was not inconsistent with the interests of the dominant powers—to regard colonized areas such as Africa as essentially “old” and unchanging, marked by immemorial and natural “tradition” rather than “history”—places to which the West could bring change, literacy, and enlightenment. Anthropology’s task was to document the “traditional” forms, so that even when changes were taking place, anthropologists—it was assumed—needed to look to the “original” and authentically “traditional” aspect. So it was naturally those, rather than the more urban, contentious, or obviously changing elements, that long formed the subject of anthropological fieldwork; anthropological reports concentrated on the “traditional” kinship practices, “traditional” religion, the “traditional” political system, and so on. This was also an appropriate focus during the British colonial policy of Indirect Rule through local “traditional” authorities. The anthropologists could, among other things, help to identify and interpret who these were—indeed in some cases, it may be that they cooperated unconsciously with the rulers and/or local pressure groups in defining or reinforcing particular positions of power as “traditional” authorities. All in all, for many years the subject of anthropology and the context in which it operated highlighted the concept of “tradition” (and “traditional”) as central to the kind of phenomena and culture which it described, a concept that was in earlier years most often assumed to be clear and accepted enough to demand little critical discussion.

Folklore is another discipline that in the past has largely been defined

³ It is, incidentally, because I reject the validity of this supposed binary divide between societies that I also question the old separation between anthropology and sociology built on it.

in terms of studying “tradition” and the “traditional” (it is sometimes also associated with the related concept of unwritten transmission). Although folklore tends to differ from anthropology in concentrating mainly on Western rather than “aboriginal” peoples, it too started from evolutionist models, and for a long while looked mainly to “survivals” and “relics” left over from the earlier strata of the far-distant past. Most modern professional folklorists have moved away from the simple unilinear model of progress, but even so the concept of “tradition” and of being “old” remained—and to some extent still remains—central to most self-definitions of the subject.⁴

The concept of folklore, and with it of tradition, also played a significant role in nationalistic movements. Herder’s Romantic philosophy of the *Volk* and the idea of a folk tradition existing deep in the soil and the souls of the people were taken up as the basis for asserting their own pride and national identity distinct from those other nations or cultures by whom, previously, they had been dominated. This phenomenon forms the background to many of the great collecting efforts in, for example, Finland in the nineteenth century, Ireland in the early twentieth, or some ex-colonial countries more recently. In such nations in particular (though not only there) one of the contributions to creating their own national identity was the discovery—or, it may be, the formulation and reconstruction—of their “traditional” epics, songs, or narratives (see, for example, Wilson 1976, Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983:13f., and Honko 1988).

So if we look at these earlier usages and experiences of the concept of tradition and ask “what tradition?” and “tradition for whom?” at least one set of answers directs us to its *usefulness* for certain historically specific purposes. Notions about the nature and applicability of tradition were used to define and differentiate academic subjects; interpreted in a certain way the concept located “us” and “our” experience in the wider context of world history; it encapsulated a rationale and a set of ideals that could be associated with Western imperial, commercial, and business expansion in other countries of the world and were apparently supported by anthropological findings about the traditional institutions in those countries; and it provided a vision and a sense of confidence for the newly integrating nations of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, first in Europe, then in Africa, Asia, and the Pacific.

It is scarcely surprising that this emotive concept—that is, the

⁴ See for example the 21 definitions of “folklore” in *Funk and Wagnalls Standard Dictionary of Folklore* (Leach 1972), which first appeared in 1949 but was recently reprinted and is still consulted as an authoritative reference work. Amid the many different viewpoints, it has been pointed out, the single most prominent theme is that of “tradition” (Utley 1961). See also Bauman’s comments (1989a) on the centrality of tradition in folklore.

complex set of ideas clustering under this umbrella term—should be related to its times, deployed to serve cultural, intellectual, and political purposes. But the point is worth noting, if only because it gives more critical perspective on the term, reminding us to pay attention to its contexts of use and to those who used it, rather than just taking it at face value as a neutral and self-standing concept.

Recent Developments in the Study of Tradition

Against this background it is interesting to examine the more recent attitudes to the concept in a number of academic disciplines, for the emphases and scope of anthropology, folklore, and, indeed, the social sciences more generally are changing—as the world is too. In this section I want to comment briefly on some of these changes and their relevance for the associated developments in the analysis of the nature and working of “tradition.”

As in any intellectual endeavor, there are different strands and a mixture of concurrent approaches. But it is probably fair to say that one powerfully developing trend across a wide range of social science disciplines is to question the older concept of “tradition” as unquestionably central to certain cultures or situations, and take a more critical and investigative approach not only to the processes underlying what are labelled “traditional” but also to the whole concept of “tradition” and how to study it. And if one aspect of the concept is its connotations of *value*, then it is becoming accepted that studying it also entails raising questions about *whose* values are being singled out, and for what purposes.

To set this in context it is worth commenting briefly on some recent developments within anthropology and folklore—those disciplines, in other words, that in the past were assumed to be the special caretakers of the study of tradition. Here it has become increasingly acceptable to study *new* and changing institutions rather than just those that could be deemed “old,” to consider urban as well as rural environments (there is now, for example, the emerging branch of study known as “urban folklore”), and to include the interaction between oral and written forms as potentially equally as interesting as these separate modes of human communication once believed to be “pure” and “authentic.” This expanding scope is in part because there has been little choice if the disciplines are to continue. In the modern world the spread of urbanism, industrialism, and literacy has become so visible within a global cultural context that it is now an even less practical proposition than before to insist on seeking only the far-off and “traditional” forms or to ignore “change” as abnormal anywhere but in the West. It is therefore now increasingly the practice to accept that cultures

are indeed changing and to turn to applying already established methods—in particular those relying on face-to-face investigation through fieldwork—to the study of contemporary situations, including in this effort both the modification and development of older traditions and the rise of new ones. As well as responding to a changing world, these same disciplines have also been developing newer theoretical approaches to the concept of “tradition” and its study. These take a number of forms that are particularly relevant to our discussion here.

First, there is now more interest in questions of artistry and individual expression than before when the stereotypes of “communal” culture and lack of change within cultures or contexts defined as “traditional” often precluded the apparent relevance of such questions. So instead of “tradition” or “traditional” as the common description of, say, local African or Pacific songs or stories, we now more often hear about their individual creators or audiences. And when the term “tradition” is used it is more often in the sense of the established conventions of a particular genre—whose usage then needs to be described—than of the earlier generalized and passive sense of tradition (with a capital “T” as it were, apparently needing no further elucidation). “Tradition” in *this* context is now applied to both oral and written forms, and to new and older genres, the emphasis often being on the way creators and performers exploit the constraints and opportunities of the genre, perhaps in innovative or individual ways. The similar emphasis on performance also fits with this trend (see, for example, Bauman 1989a,b,c). Since *how* something is performed is often now seen as part of what makes it a work of art, delivery skills and their handling by performers and audiences become a matter for study, most appropriately by field observation supported by tape recorders rather than merely by paper and pencil transcription. “Tradition” is increasingly seen as manifested—and thus demanding study—in aesthetically marked performances by individuals rather than as made up just of verbal content that could be handed down through the ages or fully captured in a written text.

A second developing interest is in oral-written interactions and the processes of change generally. “Mixed” situations and genres are now starting to be regarded as worthy of study in their own right, accepted as no less “natural” and “authentic” than the supposedly “pure” cultures or genres sought for in earlier approaches. It is no longer assumed that something “oral” must always exist in an insulated, separate, and older “traditional” world differentiated from “modern” industrial and literate situations, or that any interaction between them is strange or inappropriate as out of keeping with the West-centered unilinear direction of development. Change and interaction can now, for *all* cultures, be taken as normal rather than (in the case of the overseas ones) as unusual or strained.

The *study* of changing traditions is correspondingly now becoming more and more acceptable. For although the concept of “tradition” is still associated with the idea of something old and established, it is no longer taken for granted that this necessarily implies old in the sense of several centuries, far less “time immemorial.” Indeed, the questions now followed up when something is classified as “tradition” or “traditional” are often those like “*how* old?” or “old in what sense?” or “in whose eyes?” And scholars now increasingly think of it as an open—and interesting—question *what* age something needs to be, and in what circumstances, before it can rightly be spoken of as a tradition.⁵ Some reputed “traditions” turn out to have been established quite recently—remember the rapidity with which new fashions often spread!—with their relative youth not infrequently forgotten by the participants. In this sense the *age* of “tradition” has now become accepted as a relative rather than an absolute matter (something worth investigating rather than just taking for granted). Furthermore, since traditions do not spring up fully fledged or remain the same forever, the specific changes in traditions throughout their history as well as at any one point of time are now taken to be proper matters for empirical research.

A tradition, furthermore, has to be *used* by people for it to continue to exist. And whether in artistic, personal, or political contexts, this actual *usage* may be as liable to exploit, to modify, or to play with tradition as to follow it blindly. Traditions, it has become clear, are constantly open to change—indeed “Tradition is change” is one recent uncompromising summary (Honko and Laaksonen 1983:236)—and, correspondingly, are open to interpretation, development, and, on occasion, manipulation by those who follow or control them. In all these aspects their changes and developments are now recognized as fit objects of study, so that the blanket category of “tradition” or “traditional” can no longer be assumed to be a clear-cut mark of differentiation or definition without a further qualification making evident which particular aspects or which specific historical situation is being referred to.

These more recent approaches to the study of tradition do not apply only to newly undertaken research; there has also been critical reassessment of earlier studies. Because older ideas of the divide between the “traditional,” collective, and communal on the one hand, and the modern, individual, and rational on the other are now challenged, conclusions based on this model are now up for questioning. Thus we have to look again at those older reports that conveyed the message of “traditional” cultures as all being essentially the same or as equally characterized by the age-old

⁵ For some general discussion see Shils 1981, Williams 1983, and Henige 1982:2-3. Dundes takes the rather different line that establishing a tradition is less a matter of time than of its establishment and circulation in multivariate forms (1984:158).

transmission of “traditional mores” and lack of change, the “Africa has no history” syndrome. Now that the historians have gotten seriously to work, it has become clear both that such conclusions were based on highly selective reporting (if not sheer ignorance) and that there is in fact plenty of scope for research not into generalities about “traditional” societies and their “tribal traditions,” but into specific cultural developments and changes.

Similarly, the apparent “evidence” from older research that “traditional” stories or poetry from, say, Africa were produced collectively, had no individual authors, dated back to the long-ago tribal past, and were thus radically distinct from more recent compositions is now regarded with caution, perhaps due as much to the collectors’ stereotypes as to hard evidence, their arguments being circular rather than empirical. The texts we have were, after all, transcribed and represented by individual researchers and/or their trained assistants and “native informants,” participants in the research process perhaps all influenced by current models of what to expect and present. And since, as is now well established in recent scholarship, no written text based on oral delivery is a limpid and one-to-one representation of the original performance, some conscious or unconscious editing—some constructing—by these compilers, recorders, and transcribers must always lie behind the transcriptions that have been made available to us.⁶

This means that when a tale or poem or custom is said in the sources to be “traditional,” we can no longer feel confident that we know what is meant by that term or—even if the researcher gives some fuller explanation—that we can accept the statement at its face value. In other words, the term “tradition” and “traditional” in scholarly accounts almost always needs deconstructing through such questions as: “traditional” in what sense? is it necessarily old? or collectively composed? or passed on passively without individual manipulation? *who* created it in whole or in part? how has its editing and interpretation affected the evidence, and with what assumptions or for what purpose? The upshot of considering such questions seems to be that all traditions are likely to be in one way or another constructed or exploited by individuals and interested parties (although not always with conscious deliberation). The study of these processes is thus of interest as one significant but unsurprising element in human culture.

A parallel approach is to be found in the influential *The Invention of*

⁶ See the extensive discussion on the construction of texts in Fine 1984. This point is currently taken very seriously by most professional folklorists and others. As Barbara Herrnstein Smith points out (1981), it applies even to the innocuous-seeming plot summaries that appear in type- and motif-indexes. For further examples and discussion of this process in Pacific oral tradition, see Finnegan 1988: ch. 6.

Tradition, edited by Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (1983), in which they include argued accounts of how “traditions” popularly taken to date back for centuries as a “natural” fact of life were in a sense “invented” in quite recent years: the Scottish Highland tradition, British royal rituals, “tribes” and “traditional chiefs” in Africa, and much of the “folklore” of the European nationalist movements. It is too simple to dismiss these traditions as “faked”—for they exist and are (often) valued. But this lends yet further support to the same general argument that if something is classifiable as “tradition” the scholar’s role is to analyze and study the specifics of the practices and ideas and changes associated with that tradition—and of why it has been so classified and by whom—rather than just accepting it at face value. Since all traditions are in one sense constructed by human beings, the *processes* of their formation and manifestation—rather than just the traditions as given *products*—become an appropriate and interesting subject of study.⁷

This emerging emphasis in the study of tradition has been further reinforced by the current tendency in social science and history to take a rather cynical approach to questions of power and self-interest. A recurrent question is now often “to whose benefit?”—a question that, it is now recognized, can equally well be applied to the subject of tradition. At the least, there is now much greater awareness that behind the development and continuance of any tradition, there are likely to be specific political processes and interest groups. Traditions, so goes the more recent view, are not inevitably held in common to the equal good of all, but are equally likely to be manipulated and controlled for the benefit of certain groups—or, at the least, to reflect (perhaps unconsciously) the interests of those in power. Further, particular traditions may be seen differently by different groups within a society (another reason for questioning the older unified concept of “tradition”) or be the subject of disputes between contending interests. “Tradition,” in other words, is *used* for a whole series of disparate purposes (to cover up and so conceal change or disagreement perhaps as often as to reflect consensus or stability). Thus, in a way very different from earlier views of tradition as a separate and insulated independent entity, tradition is intimately bound up with the normal social and political processes of any society—indeed is part of them—and must be studied within the same framework. And if so it makes very good sense to at least *ask* of every claim for the “traditional” nature of something: “traditional in what sense?” and “used for what and for whose benefit?”

These reassessments of “tradition” and its study have, in my view, been to the good. Scholars have been moving away from “great divide” contrasts and evolutionist models, as well as from West-centered

⁷ For some further examples or analysis of this process see, for example, Finnegan 1988: ch. 6, Cohen 1989, and Gailey 1989.

preconceptions that imposed a uniform category of “traditional” on those people deemed as yet outside the Western status, and replacing these older approaches with a more differentiated interest in specificities, in changes, and in traditions seen in their historical and political contexts. It is true that these are *tendencies* rather than single unified theories, and they have not necessarily been fully accepted by all scholars (this indeed is perhaps from another viewpoint just as well, since what any field surely needs is a diversity of theories rather than one single agreed-upon approach), but in general terms these trends now seem to be well to the fore in the contemporary study of tradition.

There are costs as well as the obvious benefits, however, in these recent tendencies, some of them painful ones. One is that terms that once seemed to provide a clear classification for particular cultures or phenomena (“tradition,” “traditional”) now elude us or at least need more investigation than was once assumed—if indeed they refer to anything very clear and differentiated at all. Instead of the earlier certainties we may have to settle for curiosity, continuing investigation, and, sometimes, an awareness of ignorance. Second, the once-accepted academic divisions of labor have become unsettled. Since one function of the older concepts of tradition and traditional was to define disciplinary boundaries for academics and administrators, the newer approaches thus mean that previous distinctions become uncomfortable. There is no quick solution to this problem, but in practice what has often happened is a continuation of older academic affiliations under the same labels (a good example of the continuance of tradition on the surface, masking the changes underneath?). But at the same time there is a much greater preparedness to be critical of the concept and uses of these terms despite their older centrality,⁸ going along with a general enlarging of scope, some hesitation about the older disciplinary divisions, and an increasing emphasis on interdisciplinary perspectives.

. . .And in Oral-Formulaic Studies

My focus so far has been on recent developments in the study of tradition within anthropology, folklore, history, and the social sciences generally. But let me now come to the further interesting point, which will by now have become obvious to readers acquainted with recent work in oral-formulaic studies, that most of these very same developments can be found there too. Once again, not all scholars take the same approach, but

⁸ See for example Dan Ben-Amos’s recent analysis (1984) of the seven different senses of “tradition” used in folklore.

the changes have been marked enough among some leaders in the field to be counted as a definite tendency in the present and a trend to watch for in the future. In these developments this journal of *Oral Tradition* and its editor John Miles Foley have been particularly prominent. So too, if not all in exactly the same directions, have been—among others—Alain Renoir, Jeff Opland, and Albert Lord himself.⁹ Thus there are many trends within oral-formulaic studies that I both welcome and recognize—and indeed feel part of. Let me delineate briefly how I see these and how they to some extent parallel the developments I described in the previous section.

The argument is increasingly to be heard that not all “traditions” or “traditional” poetries are necessarily the *same*. There is, after all, not just one identifiable thing called “oral tradition” nor even “oral traditional composition.” As Foley argues in the context of presenting the exciting new developments in oral-formulaic studies, different societies, languages, prosodies, or “mythic repositories” must produce different “oral traditions” (1986:13), so that modern oral-formulaic scholarship is now concerned with the “Protean morphology” of tradition as much as—or at least as well as—with setting up “the rules of the overall grammar” (14). Foley further reinforces this point in the admirable conclusion to his 1988 survey, where he highlights the move away from the earlier stress on similarities to an interest in specific contrasts between traditions in terms of their particular poetic practices, genres, and textual status (109):

We can afford to set alongside the exciting similarities among literatures and individual texts a complementary account of their necessary differences, thus assembling a comparative profile that does justice to each of the comparanda in addition to furnishing a sense of the whole.

Following on from this, the scope has now often widened to include more research on “modern” as well as historical traditions, and in building on these too when constructing more general analyses as well as (if still a little subservient to) the particular example of South Slavic epic so elevated by Parry and Lord. Along the same lines are recent encouragements to more fieldwork on contemporary traditions (see Foley 1988:110 and various examples published in *Oral Tradition*), which in turn has extended research to include more on processes of change, interplay between genres, interactions between audiences and performers, performance conventions, and varying interpretations—questions more easily explored in in-depth

⁹ As Renoir points out in his recent book (1988:ch. 4), Lord has often been to the fore in qualifying and developing the theories so powerfully propounded in his *The Singer of Tales* (1960). This is a case, perhaps, not so much of changing his original views as of his being part of a more general and developing intellectual movement that he has also helped to form.

field studies than in archive texts. These questions have in turn fed back into the more conventional studies of historical texts, so that there too new assessments and new investigations can now be undertaken.

An interest in personal artistry has always been one feature of the oral-formulaic school (often ahead of other disciplines in this respect). There was a sensitivity, arising no doubt from the Yugoslav fieldwork, to the contribution of individual singers, well exemplified in Lord's appreciation of the art of Avdo Medjedovic' (Parry and Lord 1974). This emphasis seems to have been expanding even further in recent years—and extending beyond just the Slavic example—with more detailed studies of how individual artists manipulate and build on the traditional conventions (see, for example, Foley 1986, Orbell 1990). Here too oral-formulaic analysts can be seen as part of a wider trend—which they themselves have played a part in creating.

It is significant too that the journal *Oral Tradition*'s editorial brief includes the “relationships between oral and written traditions,” illustrating a similar interest to that found in other disciplines in the interactions and blends between oral and written forms. Unlike some of the earlier oral-formulaic publications that presupposed a possibly insurmountable divide between oral and literate modes—so much so that a particular style could be taken as evidence for allocating a given text to one or the other category—the current focus seems to be more and more on “transitional” texts. As elsewhere, the varying ways in which orality and literacy interact are coming to be accepted as a *normal* process and hence questions about how this works in specific contexts have, equally, become a normal subject of study.¹⁰

There seems to be somewhat less interest among oral-formulaic scholars than others in the arguably more political and divisive facets of tradition (this impression may of course merely be my own ignorance of relevant work). But given the increasing influence of this approach elsewhere, my guess is that it may only be a matter of time before such questions are taken up in oral-formulaic contexts too. Here also the newer moves may have painful consequences. Once again the older once-certain terms are no longer so clear. The labels of “tradition” and “traditional” now have to be approached with caution, and the field of study that these terms once served to delimit no longer has unchallenged boundaries. At the very least, the boundaries now demand more investigation than once seemed at all necessary, so that the claimed property of being “traditional” now needs explanation and justification rather than just its bare assertion. Once again, there are no easy answers. But a response in terms of

¹⁰ See, for example, the essays on “oral tradition in literature” in Foley 1986 (particularly the fascinating accounts in Lord's essay) and on transitional texts in Foley 1987.

tolerating a variety of different approaches, including interdisciplinary and open-ended ones, is probably the sign of the times here too.

What Tradition from Milman Parry?

Let me wind up by going back to Milman Parry and relating his contribution to the argument I have been putting forward so far. One standard way of regarding Parry is naturally as the progenitor of “the oral theory”—the traditional ancestor, as it were, the Homeric *och’ aristos hapantôn* as Foley puts it in the dedication to Parry’s memorial volume (1987). As such we also of course have to see Parry too as a child of his times. So even while we salute him for the brilliance that started off a great intellectual movement with wide ramifications for later scholarship, we have to remember that he naturally shared some of the earlier assumptions and attitudes about tradition that would now be questioned from the viewpoint of modern work.

However, the point I want to emphasize about Milman Parry is a different one. This is to stress *not* the possible outdatedness of some of his views, but, on the contrary, how modern he seems to be in so many ways. His basic approaches and insights are still remarkably relevant for the new perspectives of modern scholarship. Further, I would stress not just the way he was prepared to question some of the older ideas of his time—though that too is an example worth noting—but also his *positive* contributions.

First and most remarkable was his use of fieldwork. Parry wanted both to understand specificities and to put them in a wider comparative perspective. In this respect he followed a strategy that would also be highly congenial to many modern scholars: that he should first thoroughly understand the specific culture that he wished to use as the basis of the wider generalities. For him the key to this was apparently lengthy and detailed field investigation, the “starting point for a comparative study of oral poetry” (Parry 1971:469). As he himself seems to have been well aware, arguing mainly “on the basis of a logical reasoning” from Homer was not sufficient foundation; he wanted to supplement this—indeed to see how far the “hypothesis” suggested by the study of Homer could be verified—by observing and studying the practice of a “still living oral poetry” (Parry and Lord 1954:4-5).

The specific details of his field methods are apparently not very fully written up (nor are they in many anthropological publications, I may say). But from what I can glean from passing remarks (Parry 1971:xxxv ff. and ch. 17 by Albert Lord), his thoroughness and approach in terms of both observation and questioning seem truly impressive. Unlike some

researchers—even quite recent ones—he was not content merely to make a brief trawling expedition for a collection of texts nor to rely on “haphazard and fragmentary” reports from others (Parry and Lord 1954:4), but followed his first summer visit (1933) with a longer field period of over a year (1934-35) so as to observe the singers in action and performances in context.

He and his collaborators were also very modern in their use of state-of-the-art recording devices—updating them, indeed, over the years to make the work more convenient and effective. Again unlike researchers for whom recording and technology seem to become unquestioned ends in themselves, Parry took a reflective and self-critical approach to their deployment, and also built pertinently on his recordings for his analysis. Indeed, it was Parry’s pioneering and imaginative use of audio recordings that strikingly revealed the textual variability and significance of performance in oral poetry, a basis and benchmark for so much later fieldwork and analysis.

Note too the contemporary-sounding stress on observing and analyzing not just texts—the products of “tradition”—but the *processes* behind these products. In this context he is still in the forefront of modern scholarship—indeed has played, and still plays, a crucial part in forming it. In contrast to approaches that I queried above, Parry seems *not* to have been primarily concerned with the “old” nor with antiquarian ventures to preserve “surviving” products from the far past. Rather he explored the active practice of the poets and how the living tradition of oral poetry actually worked in a specific culture and genre, “the study of the *functioning and life* of an oral narrative poetry” (quoted in Parry and Lord 1954:15 [quoted in Foley 1988:32], italics added). His aim was to investigate

the actual practice of the poetry. . . . We can learn not only how the singer puts together his words, and then his phrases, and then his verses, but also his passage and themes, and we can see how the whole poem lives from one man to another, from one age to another, and passes over plains and mountains and barriers of speech—more, we can see how a whole oral poetry lives and dies (quoted in Parry and Lord 1954:5).

Once again, such statements have an emphatically modern ring in their stress on active processes—*how* poems were composed and transmitted rather than just the analysis of texts on their own. What is more, he was able to go some way, together with Lord, in achieving these aims and elucidating the issues for others. Like Parry, modern scholars are now once more returning to the need to look not just at verbal products but the practices that form and exemplify them.

Another modern preoccupation is the emphasis on observing and

annotating *performance* (see discussion and references on this above). Parry's terminology and detailed analysis may not be identical to that of more recent scholars, but the overall impetus is indeed similar, for not only did he take serious account of the way the performance situation influenced—indeed in a sense constituted—the artistic event, but he also apparently interpreted performance in the wider sense that included more than just its *verbal* content. This aspect is now provoking considerable discussion among scholars of oral performance, but there are still relatively few who, like Parry and his associates, have followed the “best practice” of recording and presenting the musical as well as the verbal elements of performance.

It is also interesting to note Parry's interdisciplinary approach, in the sense at least of a preparedness to learn from the most recent work (including sources not at first sight the most obvious ones), and to be critical of some of the accepted wisdom of the time. His own views too developed out of the more philologically focused analysis of texts to include broader comparative and field-based questions. As he explains himself, he modified his own approach away from a sole focus on the concept of “traditional” to that of “oral”—and to the idea of an oral poetic practice that could be a living one, a move both preparatory to and, no doubt, further informed by his dedication to field investigation.¹¹

We could do worse than go back to these approaches—these very modern approaches—of Milman Parry's. In other words, perhaps we should neither be satisfied just to criticize some of Parry's more dated notions (although there is a place for that) nor be so hooked on the *specific* findings from the particular culture and genre he studied that we ignore the more general *strategies* that lay behind his study (in some ways arguably more modern than those of some of his followers). In place of the older and often cited tradition of Parry as the discoverer of *the* model of oral traditional poetry and its oral composition based on his South Slavic analogy, now is the time to applaud those scholars who are instead developing the tradition of Parry as a scholar prepared to use up-to-date field methods to explore and test his ideas, to study a specific genre in depth with its own specificities, to look at living practices, not just texts, and to build on the latest interdisciplinary insights.

What about Parry's more general and comparative aspirations? It may be fair enough to query—and I have done so in the past—the universalizing aims implicit, perhaps even explicit, in his overall philosophy, his aim of “obtaining evidence on the basis of which could be drawn a series of generalities applicable to all oral poetries” (Parry and Lord 1954:4). If the assumption is that one should search for universal

¹¹ For good descriptions of the nature and development of Parry's thought, see especially the introduction to Parry 1971 and Foley 1988:chs. 1 and 2.

laws or uniform style across *all* oral poetries, this is surely by now an outdated program—but still, what a vision! We can still be rightly inspired by the comparative perspective in Parry’s work—not content just to study one genre in its specificities (essential though that initial step may be) but to go on from this specific focus to see it in a wider cross-cultural framework and use the insights from one study for a deeper understanding of others. Indeed, it could be argued that modern trends in the study of tradition have intensified rather than removed the vision behind that basic aspiration. We can learn from Parry’s own study, as well as from other parallel cases, not so much to seek for general laws as to look to questions about recurrent features in processes and performances that can help us to understand more sharply the variety of ways in which traditions—and especially the varied traditions of oral formulations—are manifested throughout the world.

Conclusion

So the tradition to inherit and develop from Parry should be, I would argue, not so much his *specific* studies of Homer or of epic nor even the particular case that, together with Albert Lord, he so well investigated in the field, but rather his underlying aspirations and strategies. And it is for us later scholars to both build on and develop this tradition—after all, the best traditions are the flexible and modifiable ones, not those that are frozen unchanged—and to do so in the widest comparative framework, informed by the insights of modern scholarship, as Parry was in his time. Above all, we can follow up his very modern tradition of giving due attention to investigating specifics as well as generalities, of looking at tradition and traditional forms not as distinctive *things* nor as age-old products of the past but as researchable in living *practice*, and of taking a critical and searching—as well as comparatively-oriented—approach to investigating the manifestations and uses of that intriguing and appealing and sometimes treacherous concept “tradition.”

The Open University

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**Rules for Art
in Oral Tradition**

*Three Position Papers
by*

Frederick Turner
Carl Lindahl
and
Robert Kellogg

Proceedings from the 1988 Modern Language Association section

Toward an Evolutionary Ontology of Beauty

Frederick Turner

Though the idea of aesthetic rules is objectionable to modernist art theory, it seems increasingly clear that we are being forced toward an understanding of the oral tradition at least, and perhaps the arts in general, as generated by biocultural rules that are culturally universal, rooted in our neurogenetic makeup, and to be ignored only at the cost of artistic failure. At the very least, human artists need a tradition to resist and subvert; at most, that tradition must be tuned to our nervous systems and continuous with the last phases of our evolution, in which we reached our present form as mammals, primates, and human beings.

The study of the oral tradition has usually carried an unspoken assumption: that it is allowed its humble but secure place in the humanistic academy on condition that it recognize the superior qualities of freedom and novelty possessed by the literary tradition. Genuine literature—so goes the conventional wisdom—is free from the primitive constraints of folk art. (Devotees of the oral tradition might mutter that it is better to have such constraints, but they still accept the distinction.)

However, recent research on the culturally-universal three-second line of human poetry, and on the neuroanatomical and neurochemical substrate of this phenomenon, together with similar studies of narrative and other fundamental literary forms, suggest that the rules discovered by oral research extend beyond the specifically oral.¹ The three-second information-processing cycle embodied in the poetic line also shows up in the learning of sign language and reading as the first language of children born deaf, and in American Sign Language poetry. The rules of such cultural universals do not belong to a particular cultural technology, nor even to one particular sector of the sensory cortex, but rather are embedded in the developmental process of the whole brain, and lie ready at birth as a genetic competence awaiting the cultural stimuli that will bring them into action. These rules apply just as much to civilizations with advanced material technologies as to traditional societies. Certainly they

¹ Much of this research is summed up in the first two and the last chapters of Turner 1986.

are more easily noticed and investigated in traditional societies; the slower pace of change in such societies allows more time for the aberrant and sterile products of rule-violations to be weeded out—rough edges are smoothed by oral transmission, the bugs are ironed away. The voice of public opinion is more clearly and immediately heard by the artist, and the greater unity of such societies brings to the fore classical examples of the rules well used. But though they are muffled and obscured in advanced technological civilizations, the rules still apply.

If this hypothesis is correct, its implications for mainstream Western literature and the other arts are enormous. Just as much as in a traditional culture, contemporary Western artists must learn the deep rules of their art if they are to speak to the human brain in its own terms.

What kind of rules are they? Part of the modernist fallacy is that rules are necessarily constraints or prohibitions that prevent one from doing something that one would otherwise be free to do. It is vital to understand that the rules of human art are of a different kind. Essentially they are the instructions for the use of tools without which vital elements of the artistic activity cannot be achieved at all; they are “open sesame” that permit us access into the realms of human creativity by activating prepared neural competencies. The rules include those of poetic meter, harmony and melody, narrative, performance, gift-giving and ritual sacrifice, the reflexive dramatic operator that enables us to model another person’s point of view (and his model of our point of view) within our own, and others designed to open up our visual, plastic, and performative capacities.

The rules, it must be emphasized, primarily specify a process, not a product. (The metrical expertise—the understanding of the rules—that went into the poetry of Pound and Eliot resulted in a poetic music even when the result was technically free of verse.) In genres where process and product are hard to distinguish, especially in performance, where the audience’s presence and reaction are essential, mistakes can easily be made. A case in point is the Augustans’ misinterpretation of Aristotle’s *Poetics*, whereby Aristotle’s correct identification of the need for the dramatic *process* to be immediately present to the audience was codified as an injunction limiting the *product* within the three unities.

The rules, moreover, specify not only a process, but a generative process, one which affects its own course by various subtle feedbacks. Both narrative and poetic meter require artist and audience to continually adjust the course of the artwork according to emergent properties generated by the artwork itself. This accounts for the extraordinary richness and freedom of true works of art, often to be seen most gloriously in works created within highly structured traditional oral societies, like the Greece of Homer. Thus to neglect the rules is not to set oneself free but to abandon the generative and innovative process of feedback by which

freedom is attained. Without conscious aesthetic processual rules, the artwork—if it can be called one—will fall into one of two automatisms, the automatism of the random, or the automatism of some other rule, one that if conscious is not aesthetic (reflecting, perhaps, political or economic interests) and if not conscious then compulsive and inflexible.

How did the aesthetic rules arise? Clearly they are the result of that long period of gene-culture coevolution during which the human stock domesticated itself into the unique world-altering form that it takes today. The moment that ritual performance came to be partly transmitted by cultural learning—was not passed down solely through genes—a potent method was opened up whereby the species' culture could exert an overwhelming selective pressure on its gene-pool: success in the ritual would ensure greater reproductive success, and thus the preferential survival of those aesthetic, intellectual, and emotional traits demanded by the ritual. The gifted descendants of the ritually adept would in turn be capable of innovating greater subtleties and variations in the ritual, which would in turn demand higher neural capacities of its participants. (I believe we may even see a remnant of the selective process in certain aspects of sacrifice and scapegoat ritual.)

The new work on the neurochemistry of aesthetic and ritual experience confirms the physiological basis of many of the aesthetic rules. Poetic meter adds a whole new pattern-recognizing capacity to the linguistic decoder of the left brain, a capacity which carries with it a reward of pleasure for the poetic task. A subjective sensation—beauty—tells us when the process is going right and the product is as it should be. The aesthetic is a neurochemical recognition system, embedded by evolution in our genes, to be activated by a live cultural context (especially, as child-development researchers like Colwyn Trevarthen maintain, by mothers or other primary caregivers).

But to use such language as “recognition,” “going right,” “is as it should be,” implies that there is a real objective target for the aesthetic activity. The rules of the process are clearly aimed at something, something whose recognition and use might be of enormous value to the species, commensurate with the huge expenditures of metabolic and economic resources that aesthetic activity incurs. My final suggestion is that the aesthetic rules are designed to help us recognize, harmonize with, and contribute to the deep creative tendency or theme of the universe itself, the process and principle by which the universe continues freely to generate novelty and complexity. Evolution itself, both in the limited biological sense and in the larger cosmic sense that it is acquiring from the new cosmological physics, is a large expression of that theme. Evolution is indeed a feedback process, cycling through the successive phases of a reflexive algorithm: variation (by mutation or recombination), selection,

and heredity (which acts as a conservative ratchet, preserving what has been gained in the first two phases and setting up a new generation upon which they can go to work again).

The new science of dynamical chaos, non-linear processes, and self-organizing and dissipative systems, which is based on very elegant feedback models of physical process, perhaps gives us an even more general glimpse at the target of aesthetic activity. This new science provides a view of the universe, of which classical evolution is one case, as free and creative, and whose products—the delicately self-similar shapes of trees, the whorled paisleys of turbulence, the organized complexity of snowflakes—are immediately recognizable as beautiful. Traditional aesthetics, as they are found in the oral tradition, embody a set of rules for recognizing the creative process at work in the universe and for continuing it in new and human ways.

University of Texas-Dallas

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The Oral Aesthetic and the Bicameral Mind

Carl Lindahl

Ancient epic presents worn faces, but seldom shows the minds they hide. In the world's oldest story, emotions surface visually, unaided by revelations of the characters' thoughts: "tears streamed" on the face of Gilgamesh as he mourned his best friend. The hero wept "six days and seven nights" until his face, "weathered by cold and heat," became "like that of a man who has gone on a long journey" (Gardner and Meier 1984:166, 168, 210, 212). Ancient epic depicts gigantic actions without naming their causes and motivations. "Like a lioness whose whelps are lost," grieving Gilgamesh "paces back and forth"; "he tears off. . . and throws down his fine clothes like things unclean" (*ibid.*:187-88). In *The Iliad*, written down a thousand years after *Gilgamesh*, grieving Achilles groans like "some great bearded lion when some man. . . has stolen his cub" and dirties his clothes, scattering "black ashes over his immortal tunic" (Lattimore 1951:18.23-25, 318-23).

Throughout the first millennium of surviving literature, epic explained love, death, strength, and suffering as the products of monstrous gods—present sometimes as voices, sometimes in the full vision of their godhead. Such descriptions and images lead Julian Jaynes—in his book, *The Origin of Consciousness in the Breakdown of the Bicameral Mind* (1976)—to posit that the ancients could describe their own bodies, but could not examine the content of their own minds; that they performed actions without knowing their motivations; that, because of the dual nature of their thought processes, they habitually hallucinated the voices and forms of the gods that directed their actions. Such poems as *Gilgamesh* and *The Iliad* are therefore the *literal* records of what ancient people experienced—accounts little altered by fiction, faulty memory, theology, imagination, or artistry.

Jaynes presents epic imagery as the major surviving evidence of the era of the bicameral mind, when the "hallucinatory area" in the right lobe of the brain—corresponding to Wernicke's area in the left—generated poetry and visions, producing an archaic and incomplete form of consciousness. As Wernicke's area now generates speech, the hallucinatory

area generated inner voices. Signals from the hallucinatory area seemed to come from outside the body; thus they were interpreted in life and in literature as voices and visions of divine beings that controlled human fate. Actions were portrayed without motivations and heroes' minds were not inspected because people were not yet conscious of their own consciousness. Only when Wernicke's area and the left cerebral hemisphere began to exercise the greater power and the hallucinatory area became more or less vestigial did the process of introspective consciousness begin.

Yet there is another sort of evidence that cannot be ignored. The same sort of imagery cited by Jaynes as proof of preconscious thought is found universally in archaic *aural* literature—whenever recorded—as well as in most recently recorded *oral* art, wherever practiced in the world. The “incomplete” perceptual record of *Gilgamesh* and *The Iliad* can be simply explained as part of an oral aesthetic, an aesthetic rooted in the fact that all oral poets share certain imperatives: they must always *perform* their work, and in so doing engage constantly the imagination of their audiences.

Roger D. Abrahams proposes a list of three imagistic universals in oral art: 1) overstatement and understatement, 2) concrete and specific language, and 3) translation of idea and emotion into action and symbol.¹ All three generate such imagery as is found in *Gilgamesh* and *The Iliad*. Consider two stanzas, one from a nineteenth-century English ballad, one from a recent Afro-American blues. In the ballad, a mourning man lets his plan of action express the nature of his grief:

I'll do as much for my sweetheart
As any young man may;
I'll sit and mourn all on her grave
For a twelvemonth and a day.²

In this floating blues stanza, a man dramatizes his wife's greed:

¹ Abrahams and Foss 1968:7-11. Abrahams confines himself principally to the study of British-American oral poetry, but I have applied his analysis to the poems of the thirteen cultures represented in Finnegan 1978. Although there is considerable variation from culture to culture (e.g., Yoruba and Hopi artists almost invariably translate emotion into action and symbol, while Eskimo poets tend to express emotion more directly), all thirteen cultures translated idea and emotion into action and symbol with notably greater frequency than the literary poets (Wordsworth, Shelley, Whitman, and Longfellow) I examined for purposes of comparison.

² Stanza 2 of “The Unquiet Grave” (Child 78) in a version recorded in Friedman 1956:32-34. For a brief discussion of the power of this ballad to express indirectly the mixed and otherwise unspeakable emotions of mourners, see Lindahl 1986.

She takes all my money, throws it against the wall;
She gives me what sticks and keeps what falls.³

Both passages employ understatement and overstatement, but in a very specific way, overstating action to the point of near-parody but leaving no room for explanation or emotion. Moreover, both images are concrete expressions of ideas that could as easily have been rendered abstractly. Thus, both images fulfill Abrahams' final criterion, which could be called the master trope of oral art: the translation of idea and emotion into action and symbol. This is the most concise way of expressing how all three rules produce their effects.

Another way of saying the same thing is that oral poetry tends to be *unglossed*: listeners are presented a striking picture, but each must individually caption it, and draw personal conclusions concerning the ideas and emotions implicit in the poem. There is evidence that oral artists not only avoid, but *disdain* the glossing of their images. Bluesmen and blues fans have commented on the lack of artistry in the blues imitations of the Rolling Stones:

The Stones don't understand how you sing the blues. They don't understand that when you sing about drugs, you really mean sex, and when you sing about sex, you really mean drugs. They mix things up and mess up their songs. They don't have any self-control.⁴

So the oral image, exaggerated as it may seem, is in reality subject to the strictest control: in its presentation of emotion and in the metaphorical encoding of its message—a message that is meant to stop short of the direct expression of the thoughts and feelings that gave rise to the song.

Perhaps the most important explanation for the prevalence of the unglossed oral image lies in the needs of the audience, the ultimate determinant of what songs are sung again and again. Worldwide accounts attest that the audience exerts life-and-death control over a traditional song. In various contexts, unimpressed listeners will shout down a performer, or fall asleep, or simply walk away. In some traditions the inattentiveness of

³ Tampa Red is among the many blues musicians who have performed this floating stanza.

⁴ Paraphrase of personal communications made to me by blues fan Arthur Kempton and musician Earl Strayhorn during an interview in April 1969 in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Among the blues artists I have consulted, concrete, uncoded imagery is regarded as a major option, but not as an imperative—while some artists express emotion directly in their lyrics, others prefer indirection.

one listener will end the performance for all.⁵

The oral artist's objective, then, is to overcome the passivity of the audience, to ensure their complicity and support in creating a successful performance. Artist and audience increase their opportunities for mutual engagement by creating a certain aesthetic system, a metaphorical language that ensures that something important will remain unsaid, requiring further interpretation. More than merely leaving room for listeners to "fill in a blank," un glossed imagery allows a significant range of response. As Andrew Welsh has noted (1978:76), "the more precise the poetic Image, the less we can limit with prose definitions the meanings and emotions involved in it."

Whenever researchers have taken the time to know oral artists, it has been shown that the same people who perform concrete, externalized songs—translating idea and emotion into action and symbol—are more than capable of introspection, that they are acutely conscious of the workings of their own minds, and that they can explain very articulately what is going on in their heads and hearts. But it is simply not their aesthetic choice or rhetorical strategy to make such explanations within their performances.

This point is made dramatically in Betsy Whyte's recording of the ballad "Young Johnstone" (Child 88). This Scottish singer presents the song in a restrained, almost ethereal voice, despite the fact that it describes a murderous central character. In the progress of this song, Johnstone—whose "first instinct," states Francis J. Child (1882-98:II, 288), "is as duly to stab as a bulldog's is to bite"—kills his sister's lover, then his own lover, and finally himself. Johnstone's actions, like those of Achilles and Gilgamesh, are concrete and exaggerated. Betsy Whyte's characters do not look into themselves, and as she sings—almost matter-of-factly—she leaves no impression that she wishes to examine their minds. Yet as soon as she stops singing she adds her own interpretation in emphatic, emotional tones:

I've forgotten the last wee bit, but—I know the end. They were supposed to be lying together on the floor, [solemnly] dead. But—it was [emphatically] *true*. It was really a true—ballad. Well—usually when they said they were true in these old times, they *were* true. He was *jealous* o her, you see, he was this *type*, you would have tae understand the Johnstons to ken that type. . . .⁶

⁵ Among the best records of audiences forcefully editing tellers and singers of tales are Lord 1960:esp. 14-17 and Dégh 1969:49-53, 71-119. See also Abrahams 1972.

⁶ Betsy Whyte's version of "Young Johnstone," as well as her comments on the song, are recorded in "The Muckle Songs: Classic Scots Ballads," Tangent TNGM/D, Scottish Tradition 5, recorded through the auspices of the School of Scottish Studies,

Betsy Whyte has obviously lived with this song. In her mind, there is no doubt of its meaning, and hers is not a meaning that most outsiders, including Child, would be likely to infer. Her personal and emotion-filled reading demonstrates beyond doubt that she is fully capable of supplying feelings and motivations for the ballad characters. But, again, not one hint of this interpretation emerges in her sung presentation. Betsy Whyte has chosen to separate what she considers to be a great song from her deeply personal experience of it.

In suppressing her own vision of Johnstone, Betsy Whyte is filling a great communicative need. Recent psychological experiments, though far from settled on a single interpretation, point toward, if not yet inevitably to, the following conclusions. First, an oral image is much more likely than a visual image to spur an audience to create mental images. Second, listeners will respond more quickly and dramatically to concrete than to abstract language. Third, listeners will also remember concrete images longer than abstract ones. Finally, the images that listeners remember longest and most vividly are voluntary—that is, images that emerge from one’s own imagination rather than in response to the specific instructions of a speaker. Taken together, these findings suggest that sharp but sparse and open-ended oral images will create the strongest and longest-remembered response of any form of poetic communication.⁷

To bolster his claim that the ancients could not read their own minds, Julian Jaynes can offer no more powerful evidence than concrete poetic imagery—the same kind of unglossed pictures favored by today’s aural artists. Yet contemporary singers possess great powers of introspection; they simply recognize that the strength of their art lies in avoiding interpretation. In explaining how she performs such dramatic ballads as “Mary Hamilton” (Child 185), Almeda Riddle (West 1986) insists on distance: “Get behind the song. If you get behind it, they’ll see it. If you get in front of it, they’ll just see you and get disgusted.” The listener’s greatest power is the power to be suggested to. Only by thus empowering the audience does the oral artist maintain the right to perform.

University of Houston

Edinburgh. An accompanying booklet provides a transcription of Betsy Whyte’s remarks. Emphasis is found in the original transcription; I have slightly altered the punctuation of that version.

⁷ These four conclusions are supported by the following articles: Begg et al. 1978; Dickel and Slak 1983; Doll 1983; Jamieson and Schimpf 1980. See also Morris and Hampson 1983:240-99.

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Literary Aesthetics in Oral Art

Robert L. Kellogg

The earliest vernacular texts from medieval Europe exhibit many features of oral-formulaic composition. They are also, however, like the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, quite bookish in other respects. They have been preserved in codices that exploit the book's ability to organize and preserve a single, unified, stable text of considerable length. That the earliest vernacular texts represent a collaboration between the two cultures, oral and literate, is becoming a received opinion among medievalists.

In the case of Germanic poetry, the sharing of a common body of myth and legend by Germanic peoples who by the tenth century were widely dispersed points to the origin of their traditions in pre-migration Europe and hence to a considerable period of time during which they existed in oral tradition. Even later in Romance texts, the formulaic quality of the *Song of Roland* and the *Poem of My Cid* suggests that they too were the products of literary cultures in which the inherited rules of oral art played an essential role. Identifying the boundaries in these texts between their allegiances to oral and to literate culture is an interesting project and one that may be essential in making progress toward understanding the rules of oral art in early medieval vernacular texts. Perhaps I can illustrate the idea with an example from thirteenth-century Iceland.

The principal manuscript in which the so-called Poetic Edda has been come down to us is *Codex Regius* 2365, 4°, now happily in Reykjavík after a long residence in the Royal Library of Denmark, from which its name is derived. This book was well thought out. Although it is a collection of poems on what were even then considered to be old traditional subjects, it has been organized as a book, carefully arranging the material into a structured literary whole. It begins with a poem that Snorri Sturluson called *Völuspá*, telling of the creation of the world and the gods and prophesying their destruction. Following *Völuspá* are ten more poems associated with supernatural beings. Then come the legendary- mythological poems about the Völsungs, which make up the balance of the book. To help the reader understand these poems in their context, someone (the "Compiler" of *Codex Regius* 2365 we could call him) has written a

few prose notes and comments. We may easily infer that the whole idea and production of this manuscript was dependent on a climate in thirteenth-century Iceland of widespread interest in the myths and legends of pagan antiquity. The Compiler's style in his prose pieces is similar to that of Snorri Sturluson in his *Edda* or to the style of some of the legendary prose sagas such as *Völsunga saga*. Where these two works overlap with the Eddic collection the similarity is very close indeed, sometimes *verbatim*. Occasionally, however, the Compiler is superior, both in phrasing and in the inclusion of significant detail.

Because of the close textual similarities among *Codex Regius*, Snorri's *Edda*, *Völsunga saga*, and other manuscripts of the Eddic poems (including even a few instances of the Compiler's prose), it would be impossible to identify the Compiler with the scribe of *Codex Regius*. The Compiler is a more distant figure whose work, by and large, is being copied. The scribe may here and there have performed the Compiler's function, of course, but the surviving body of very similar texts is too large and complexly related to each other to permit any one of them to be considered the original, including even the idea of a structured anthology that we find in *Codex Regius*.

To the Compiler we owe the writing out of poetic texts that have in some unknown manner been derived from oral traditions. Their formulaic structures of expression are consistent with oral composition. To complicate matters, however, the fact that some of them were known by titles suggests an existence for some period of time as fixed texts, in the manner of traditional Scandinavian dance texts, which remained in oral tradition until the nineteenth century.

We are chiefly indebted to the Compiler for the succinct summaries of occasionally indispensable background information that he provides in prose. His narrative prose is of two kinds. In the first type, he adopts a narrative voice identical to that of the narrator of the poems, telling enough of the story in prose to lead seamlessly into the verse, either a whole poem or a part of a poem. He does not even mention the poem as such, but just moves the narrative back and forth from his prose to the poetry, presumably inherited by him from oral tradition. The Compiler is also capable of stepping out of the fictional world and referring, from outside, in the voice of a thirteenth-century scholar, to the poems as poems. At the beginning of a poem that is sometimes called *Oddrúnargrátr* he briefly identifies Oddrún and her circumstances and then adds, "About this story it is here told in verse." Similarly, he writes before the poem *Atlakviða* that Guðrún Gjúkadóttir had avenged her brothers, *svá sem frægt er orðit* ("as has become well known"), and then adds a few words later, "About that, this poem is made." These two voices may of course derive from two separate sources, but that is something we are never likely

to know. The second, scholarly voice has several shadings, from the kind of collector's note I have just quoted to a greater ideological remove from the old material.

The Compiler refers several times in his comments to “heathen times” or “antiquity” (the word is *forneskja* in Icelandic), and to “old stories” (*fornar sögur*). He is aware of himself, in other words, as occupying a boundary between two worlds—his own rational, scholarly, literary world and the more fantastic world of ancient myth and legend from which the poems have come down. At the end of the second poem of Helgi Hundingsbani, one of those heroes like Völundur the Smith and Sigurður, whose association with valkyries makes him a transitional figure between gods and men, the Compiler's intellectual and aesthetic allegiances are divided. He wants both to preserve the story and to dissociate himself from it. He writes:

It was a belief in heathen times that men could be reborn, but that is now called old wives' foolishness. Helgi and Sigrún are said to have been reborn. He was named Helgi, Prince of the Haddings, and she was Kára, the daughter of Halfdan, as is told in the poem *Kárukjóð*, and she was a valkyrie.

Neither the poem *Kárukjóð*, by the way, nor other tradition of Kára has survived. It is characteristic of this time and place (but nonetheless remarkable) that the Compiler should be able to mention a traditional poem—one that contains old wives' foolishness—by name. The very last words of his book are in a similar scholarly vein. At the conclusion of the vast myth of gods and heroes his work has recreated, he says merely, “This poem is called the old *Hamðismál*.”

The Compiler's book, *Codex Regius* 2365, 4°, is an important document in the history of Germanic myth and legend. It is especially remarkable that a scholar would have taken such pains to recover and preserve traces of a prehistoric and pagan past as late as the thirteenth century. His work shows that he was conscious of occupying an intellectual position between “modern” thirteenth century rationalism and the fantasy of heathen times. This consciousness was not unique with him. It was part of the movement in which he worked and is characteristic of Snorri Sturluson and of most of the anonymous writers at this time in Iceland, especially the “compilers” of the legendary sagas, the so-called *fornaldasögur*. There may be similar instances in most of our earliest vernacular narratives.

I am reminded, to conclude, of a moment early in *Beowulf*, when the Danes in their desperation make offerings to idols, and the narrator says “Such was their custom, the hope of heathens” (178b-79a). Unlike the much later Icelanders, however, the *Beowulf* writer elaborates the point

with high seriousness, condemning heathen belief then and (by implication) now. Still, it is a subtle instance of what is more obvious in the Icelandic: the presence of a medieval poetic sensibility whose allegiances and whose art stretch between two worlds.

University of Virginia

About the Authors

Ryan Bishop is completing his Ph.D. in Anthropology at Rice University in Houston, Texas, where he also teaches English at the University of St. Thomas. In addition to his publications on academic subjects, Mr. Bishop publishes fiction. He was a Fulbright lecturer in English and literature in Yugoslavia in 1987 and 1988.

Assistant Professor of Greek and Latin at Wellesley College, *Carol Dougherty* is especially interested in issues of cultural history. She is currently authoring a book entitled *The Poetics of Colonization*.

Ruth Finnegan is Professor in Comparative Social Institutions at the Open University, England. Her primary publications include *Limba Stories and Storytelling*, *Oral Literature in Africa*, and *Oral Poetry*. Her most recent work is *Literacy and Orality: Studies in the Technology of Communication* (1988).

Robert Kellogg, Professor of English at the University of Virginia, is known for his coauthorship of the landmark study *The Nature of Narrative* (1966), his joint edition of Books I-II of *The Faerie Queene* (1965), and numerous articles on medieval English and Germanic literature. Readers of *Oral Tradition* will be familiar with his article "The Harmony of Time in *Paradise Lost*" in the *Festschrift* for Walter Ong (2, i).

Koenraad Kuiper is Professor of Linguistics at the University of Canterbury, Christchurch, New Zealand. He has published articles on the oral-formulaic techniques employed by livestock and tobacco auctioneers, race-callers, and ice hockey commentators.

Professor of English and Serbo-Croatian Literature at the University of Sarajevo, *Svetozar Koljević* has published widely on modern and contemporary literature as well as on traditional and heroic poetry. His study *The Epic in the Making* (1980) provides the best English-language guide to the literary history of the Serbo-Croatian epic.

Carl Lindahl is Professor of English at the University of Houston. He has published widely on folklore in English literature, most notably *Earnest Games: Folkloric Patterns in the Canterbury Tales*. He is currently co-editing *The Encyclopedia of Medieval Folklore*.

Jeffrey Alan Mazo is a Ph.D. candidate in the Folklore and Mythology Program at the University of California, Los Angeles. He has published an essay on myth and cultural change in medieval Scandinavia and has two entries forthcoming in *Medieval Scandinavia: An Encyclopedia*.

William D. Sayers has written extensively on ancient and modern Irish literature and has published a number of comparative studies in which he explores the influences of Old Norse, Latin, and Old French literatures on that of Old Irish.

Frederick Turner is Founders Professor of English at the University of Texas-Dallas. His article "Performed Being: Word Art as Human Inheritance" in the inaugural issue of *Oral Tradition* has sparked considerable response in the journal's symposium feature. Among his most recent books is *Natural Classicism*.