Medieval Oral Literature
In: De Gruyter Lexikon
Edited by: Karl Reichl
De Gruyter | 2012

6 Oral Poetics: The Linguistics and Stylistics of Orality

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> 'And now, Tarkheena, tell us your story. And don't hurry it – I'm feeling comfortable now.' Aravis immediately began, sitting quite still and using a rather different tone and style from her usual one. For in Calormen, story-telling (whether the stories are true or made up) is a thing you're taught, just as English boys and girls are taught essay-writing. The difference is that people want to hear the stories, whereas I never heard of anyone who wanted to read the essays.

Thus writes C. S. Lewis, one of the great religious essayists of the twentieth century, in the third volume of his *Chronicles of Narnia* series (1975: 32). For Lewis, the oral storytelling styles of traditional cultures represented a natural element of his exotic land of Calormen, a great human nation to the south of the animal kingdom of Narnia. Oral storytelling also helped distinguish this narrative world from the workaday realities of English childhood and education, where essay-writing had thoroughly and inexorably replaced the art of story-telling, except, of course, in the refuge of the children's bedtime story. Later in the narrative, as Aravis continues her narrative, one of her horse audience protests her embroidering of the events. Another audience member, Bree, declares, however: 'Hush, Ma'am, hush [...] she's telling it in the grand Calormene manner and no storyteller in a Tisroc's court could do it better. Pray go on, Tarkheena' (35). For Lewis, storytelling had its own aesthetic features, ones equally as valid as those of the written essay, and sometimes far more effective in capturing and maintaining the interest of an audience. This essay explores the skills and qualities inherent in oral performance, particularly as it existed in medieval Europe. By examining extant texts from the medieval period, and relating them to what scholars know about oral tradition and the workings of oral communication in general, we can suggest some of the main features of an oral poetics at work during the era. This system of aesthetic values and norms can be seen as distinct from that associated with modern written communication, as well as that typical of 'ordinary' oral speech.

Given that sound recording technology is little more than a century old, it is obvious that we have no direct examples of medieval oral tradition, ordinary or otherwise. All works which scholars have described as 'oral' or 'oral-derived' (Foley 1991) have come down to us, necessarily, through the processes of manuscript production and copying, or through sound recordings made much after the end of the medieval period. This mediation removes us from the direct experience of expressive culture as orally performed and/or composed during the medieval period, and compels us instead to recon-

struct, as best we can, the relation between the written text and its putative oral antecedents. Are signs of the original oral work discernable in the written record? If so, how are these different from what we would have found if the work had been composed originally as a written document? Do seemingly oral features in an extant text represent a 'residue' from past oral performance, or do they reflect a written aesthetics that still values highly the modes and tendencies of prior oral art? This essay addresses these issues, examining the linguistics and stylistics of orality in general, particularly as we believe it to have existed within various traditions of oral poetry in medieval Europe.

1 Breakthrough into Performance

I began my essay with Lewis's account of Aravis in part because Lewis points to a crucial element of oral tradition which we can observe in modern verbatim or electronic recordings. It is an element which folklorists have termed 'breakthrough into performance'.[1] Ordinary speech proceeds at its own somewhat erratic pace, usually approximating to a degree the norms of a language's formal grammar, but often departing markedly from the rules that characterize language at its most idealized and formal. A speaker may hesitate, or break off altogether, lose and regain the floor, fill in pauses with words of little direct meaning, substitute vague nouns (like *thing, thingummy, doohickey* or *whatchamacallit)* for specific words, or, in multilingual situations, code-switch, or intersperse discourse in one language with terms or grammar from another. Modern sound recording has allowed ethnographers and linguists to document such actual speech in detail, revealing the degree to which spoken language differs from the standardized norms taught in schools or universities, even among people with a high degree of formal education. Amid this flow of speech, however, moments may occur when a speaker takes up the mantle of performance and launches into a different mode of verbal expression. Richard Bauman (1986: 3) describes the moment thus:

> I understand performance as a mode of communication, a way of speaking, the essence of which resides in the assumption of responsibility to an audience for a display of communicative skill, highlighting the way in which communication is carried out, above and beyond its referential content. From the point of view of the audience, the act of expression on the part of the performer is thus laid open to evaluation for the way it is done, for the relative skill and effectiveness of the performer's display [...]. Viewed in these terms, performance may be understood as the enactment of poetic function, the essence of spoken artistry.

The speaker, like the Tarkheena Aravis in Lewis's children's tale, becomes a performer, creating a new verbalization that engages the norms of a particular genre (e. g., a tale, a song, a riddle, a prayer, an incantation) and producing a performance that can be compared to others within the same tradition or personal repertoire. These distinctive speech acts display recognizable formal features and acquire a quality of temporal transcendence that promises to outlive the present moment and situation. They do so by appealing to and enacting the notion of tradition, a concept of shared norms that allows audience and performer alike to view the present performance as a piece in a long line of compar-

[1] See Ben-Amos and Goldstein 1975; Hymes 1981; Bauman 1986.

able performances stretching far into an esteemed past and living on in the present through the enactment at hand.

Given the tremendous expense and labour involved in producing medieval manuscripts – the involved processes of preparing page and ink, the toil of learning to read and write in a society with few forms of childhood education – it should not seem surprising that most or all of what comes down to us in such works can be regarded as heightened breakthroughs into performance. People simply did not use writing as a mode for idly jotting down inconsequential items, and even the marginalia on manuscript pages tended to play important, if sometimes transgressive, roles (Camille 1992). The genres displayed in such pages may vary however, with some (e. g., prose discourse regarding expenses or transactions at a particular court or church) probably coming closer to what may have been ordinary speech than others (e. g., epic songs, prayers, saints' *vitae)* whose highly artificed diction and lexicon mark them as obvious artistic creations. In any case, however, we should expect the texts that come to us from the medieval period to show signs of performative cognizance, incorporating features of word choice, metre, syntax, or imagery that seek to set off the communications as somehow special, and deriving directly from formal modes characteristic of the genres they encode. Naturally, certain elements of oral performance will not find expression in the relatively crude system for recording speech that we rely upon as written language (Tedlock 1972 and 1983). Depths and varieties of pause, vocal rhythms or tone, alternations in pace and volume: these important elements of oral expression seldom find demarcation even in modern print, not to mention in that of the medieval era. We must thus content ourselves with the rather narrow range of data regarding medieval modes of performance that have left their marks on the written page.

2 The Formal Markers of Breakthrough

To sense this artificiality, this performativity, of medieval written texts, let us examine a brief passage of medieval French poetry. The eleventh verse paragraph of the *Chanson de Roland* reads as follows:

Bels fut li vespres e li soleilz fut cler.
Les dis mulez fait Char[l]es establer.
El grant verger fait li reis tendre un tref,
Les dis messages ad fait enz hosteler;
.xii. serjanz les unt ben cunreez.
La noit demurent tresque vint al jur cler.
Li empereres est par matin levet,
Messe e matines ad li reis escultet.
Desuz un pin en est li reis alez,
Ses baruns mandet pur sun cunseill finer:
Par cels de France voelt il del tut errer. AOI.
(ll. 157–67) (Calin, 1968: 24)

The evening was clear, the sunset bright:
King Charles commands the ten mules to be stabled

> And has a tent pitched in the spacious orchard,
> In which the ten envoys are billeted;
> Twelve sergeants have attended to them well;
> They spent the night there till the break of day.
> The emperor has risen in the morning;
> The king has heard his matins and his mass,
> And then the king has gone beneath a pine
> And called his barons to conclude his council:
> He always wants the Frenchmen to advise him. AOI
> (Harrison 1970: 56)

Preserved in a single parchment copy dated to between 1125 and 1150 and known as Digby 23 of the Bodleian Library at Oxford University, the *Chanson de Roland* stands as a striking and transcendent textual rendering of medieval French epic performance, one which may have been sung with or without a musical accompaniment that has been lost to us entirely. It belongs to a wider genre of *chansons de geste,* syllabic song-poems with poetic assonance and later rhyme, often focusing on the exploits of the Carolingian era.[2] In the passage reproduced above, we see Charlemagne receiving the dishonest suit from his Moorish enemies to the south that will eventually lead to the tragic defeat of his doughty retainer Roland. It is likely that anyone of the text's era hearing this passage in its narrative context at the beginning of a Carolingian epic would easily recognize its ominous foreshadowing and sense the ironies of this gracious and good-willed evening of entertainment.

A modern reader perusing such a text for the first time, however, may be startled at its overtly artificed diction and imagery. Words and phrases recur within the text in a manner wholly different from what we associate with ordinary oral speech or from what we have come to expect in written literature. In the above example, we may note the conventionalized noun-adjective pairs: an evening that is 'beautiful' and a sun that is 'clear' (*Bels fut li vespres e li soleilz fut cler*), of visitors who remain until the break of day (*La noit demurent tresque vint al jur cler*), and of a king who starts his day off right by hearing his matins and mass (*Messe e matines ad li reis escultet*). It is easy to sense a certain stylization of action and description here that distinguishes such poetry from a straightforward narration of events. Indeed, medieval epics seem to team with such formulas, or commonplaces, which recur every time a hero, villain, or horse takes the stage, or whenever certain typical events occur. Nouns seldom go without an adjective, interactions seldom proceed without a formal dialogue. While clearly helping identify the discourse as belonging to a particular performative genre (the *chanson de geste),* and meeting the metrical requirements of the poetic/musical line, such features often seem the very building blocks by which medieval poetry is constructed.

Another medieval manuscript, a codex conserved in the Biblioteca Nacional de Madrid, and dating to the year 1307, contains the text of the Spanish epic *Cantar de Mio Cid*.[3] Replete in similar imagery and plot, the epic is also rich in poetic epithets, ones far distant from what must have been ordinary speech or behaviour during the era of the Cid Ruy Díaz (the late eleventh century) or the probable era of the poem's com-

[2] [On the *chanson de geste*, see further ch. 12 (D. Boutet) in this volume.]
[3] [On the *Cid*, see also ch. 15 (R. Wright) in this volume.]

position (the mid-twelfth century). Consider, for instance, the oration credited to a young girl when the unhappy Cid requests hospitality of her home in Burgos:

> Una niña de nuef años a ojo se parava:
> '¡Ya Campeador, en buen ora çinxiestes espada!
> El rey lo ha vedado, anoch dél e[n]tró su carta,
> con gran recabdo e fuertemientre sellada.
> Non vos osariemos abrir nin coger por nada;
> si non, perderiemos los averes e las casas,
> e demás los ojos de las caras.
> Çid, en el nuestro mal vos non ganades nada;
> mas el Criador vos vala con todas sus vertudes santas.'
> Esto la niña dixo e tornós' por su casa. (ll. 40–49)
> (Girón Alconchel and Pérez Escribano 1995: 73–4)

> A young girl of nine came before him.
> 'O Conqueror, in a happy hour you took up your sword!
> The King has sent word, his letter arrived last night,
> With a great guard and strongly sealed.
> We dare not open to you, nor give you aid for any price;
> Or else we would lose our possessions and our houses,
> As well as the eyes from our faces.
> Çid, in doing us harm you would gain nothing;
> May the Lord protect you with all of his holy faculties.'
> Thus spoke the young girl, and turned back to her house.

The passage, implausibly placed in the mouth of a little child, reflects the highflown and formulaic orations that recur throughout the text. The girl addresses the knight with a formula: *Ya Campeador, en buen ora çinxiestes espada* (O Warrior, in a happy hour you took up/strapped on your sword) a phrase which, along with the closely related *Ya Campeador, en buen ora fuestes naçido* (O Warrior, you were born in a happy hour) recurs virtually any time the hero is mentioned in the text. As such, the phrase does not function logically in an oration that is meant to turn the hero away without hospitality; rather, it seems to appear merely as an expected adjunct of the hero's name, conveying the respect and fame surrounding him. Likewise, the girl's claim that they will lose not only their possessions and houses, but also their eyes in revenge for ignoring the king's decree carries with it a quality of extreme cruelty that seems to run counter to any simple recounting of facts. The girl's blessing at the end of the oration further seems oddly out of place, particularly when coupled with her reminder that killing the family will bring the knight little glory. Crucial to the effect of the passage, of course, is the irony that the heroic and worthy Cid does not receive hospitality when so many despicable figures in epics – such as the conniving envoy from King Marsile/Marsilion in the *Chanson de Roland* – receive bountiful and generous welcomes from their hosts. Yet such is the stuff of epics, and part of the enjoyment of experiencing them comes in recognizing and appreciating the traditionality of the phrasing and formulas that fill the narrative.

A similar impression of traditionality may arise from the perusal of an anthology of English ballads, Middle English verse romances, a collection of traditional folktales, or any number of other genres that derive directly from oral tradition or that have become

part of an oral tradition before being written down.[4] Clearly, on some fundamental level, oral traditions possess a distinct set of poetic features and tendencies, ones which may strike the literate reader as all the more noticeable when viewed from the perspective of modern literary aesthetics, where a great premium is usually attached to the notions of novelty, distinctiveness of diction and image, and avoidance of repetition. The traditional text may seem at first hopelessly redundant, predictable, or clichéd. In applying such 'modern' literate aesthetic criteria to works that come to us from an oral tradition, however, the reader may forget that literate criteria are not simply 'right'; they are instead a negotiated set of stylistic values that writers and audiences have come to share over the course of centuries. And further, the reader may miss the fact that – in a Western tradition in which literacy has long been equated with the elite and fine, and orality with the peasant and plain – these literate standards may themselves have been formulated so as to distinguish emphatically the pieces of writing produced by social superiors from the oral renditions of their inferiors.

An advance in conceptualizing these differences and the possible reasons for their existence occurred in the work of the Classicist Albert B. Lord, whose *The Singer of Tales* appeared in 1960. Following in the footsteps of his teacher Milman Parry, and drawing on the intriguing essay of the French scholar Marcel Jousse (1925), Lord collected and analyzed performances of South Slavic oral epic in an effort to understand the composition and stylistics of Homer's works. In Lord's view, Serbo-Croatian oral epic displays a remarkably labile form, varying in detail and wording each time a singer performs. Examining multiple variants of the same song from the same or different singers allowed Lord to notice recurrent wording, imagery, and stylistic features that underlie the performances. Noting these apparent building blocks of the epic, Lord posited: 'For the oral poet the moment of composition is the performance. [...] Singing, performing, composing are facets of the same act' (1960: 13). Lord identified the structural units of oral poetry as the 'formula' ('a group of words [...] regularly employed under the same metrical conditions to express a given essential idea'), the 'theme' ('groups of ideas regularly used in telling a tale'), and broader narrative arcs that Lord termed the 'song'.[5] In the epic examples cited above, we can recognize the Spanish *en buen ora çinxiestes espada* as a formula, the getting and giving of hospitality in both epics as a theme, and the story of dealing with underhanded enemies a narrative arc or 'song'.

Each of these structural levels provide a performance with an air of familiarity to a competent audience, who can appreciate both the use of traditional phrasing and structuring devices as well as the occasional departure from the norms for aesthetic effect. In essence, while focusing on the means by which epic songs were composed, Lord posited and described a set of standards by which an oral performance was aesthetically appraised, an 'oral style', as Jousse had termed it. Such features are not simply the signs of a creator's work, but also the means by which the work qualifies as art within its ambient culture.

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[4] See Andersen 1985 (on English ballads); Bradbury 1998, Reichl 2002 (on Middle English verse romances); Virtanen and DuBois 2000 (on traditional folktales).

[5] See Lord 1960: 31 (formula), 68 (theme), and 100 (song). [On the oral-formulaic theory (or Oral Theory), see also ch. 2 (J. M. Foley and P. Ramey) in this volume.]

Walter J. Ong (1982) took Lord's ideas farther by positing that oral communication possesses certain features that distinguish it utterly from the written communication Westerners define as normative today. Where Lord saw formulas, themes, and narratives as formal elements of a song tradition, Ong regarded these, and other discursive features, as natural outgrowths of the state of primary orality. Written communication, Ong notes, has developed in only a tiny minority of the world's languages, and seldom achieves complete dominance, even in cultures with a high degree of popular literacy. In the Middle Ages, writing was only in its infancy as a technology, nor was it by any means widespread as a skill among individual members of society. The vast bulk of people hearing or even performing poems or songs had learned them only from oral tradition, sometimes with the mediation of a text in the distant or near past, but sometimes with no such mediation at all. Thus, it stands to reason, the practices and tendencies of orality should have dominated over those of writing.

In addition to the kinds of formulaic diction and stress on traditionality described by Lord, Ong identifies certain other features which he suggests may be typical of oral communication (36–50). Oral thought, Ong maintains, is 'additive rather than subordinative'; i. e., it tends to organize thoughts into parallel arrays linked by the conjunction *and* rather than into chains of phrases linked by various forms of subordination. Medieval texts seem highly prone to this tendency, which was facilitated in part by specialized graphemes for indicating the conjunction. The recurrent epithets and adjectives which occur in medieval poetic works can be seen, in Ong's view, as proof of the fact that oral thought is 'aggregative rather than analytic': i. e., possessed of a tendency to merge nouns with qualifying adjectives into singular, indivisible units that resist segmentation into separate components. Further, Ong posits, oral communication tends to be 'redundant' or 'copious' i.e 'ensuring adequate comprehension among an audience by explicitly repeating terms, and creating in the process texts', Ong notes, 'bloated with "amplification", annoyingly redundant by modern standards' (41). The texts are further grounded in concrete human experience or situations rather than abstractions, which are difficult to convey in a context of primary orality. In terms of emotional orientation, Ong states that orality tends to be 'empathetic and participatory' as well as 'agonistically toned': speakers approach topics with clear attitudes in mind and tend to favour narration of moments of conflict and aberration rather than those in which all unfolds as expected. Finally, oral communications tend to hold significance for the present, a tendency which Ong labels 'homeostatic'. In short, orality tends to show few of the tendencies toward distancing, abstraction, or detachment which eventually come to be associated with authoritative written discourse.

To illustrate the tendencies Ong describes, let us look at a piece of medieval prose. The medieval Welsh tale *Branwen Uerch Lyr* (Branwen, Daughter of Llyr) appears in both the White Book of Rhydderch (National Library of Wales) and the Red Book of Hergest (Bodleian Library), both dating from the fourteenth century, but undoubtedly containing material from an earlier era. It is one of the principle tales ('branches') of the Welsh *Mabinogi,* a collection of stories that hold the same kind of cultural and historical importance for Wales that the *Chanson de Roland* holds for France or *Cantar de Mio Cid* holds for Spain. At the outset of the tale, King Bendigeidfran of the Britons receives the suit of King Matholwch of Ireland for the hand of his sister Branwen. In the open-

ing scene, King Bendigeidfran and his kinsmen are sitting on a rock by the sea as the Irish approach:

> Ac ual yd oedynt yn eisted yuelly, wynt a welynt teir llong ar dec, yn dyuot o deheu Iwerdon, ac yn kyrchu parth ac attunt, a cherdet rugyl ebrwyd ganthunt, y gwynt yn eu hol, ac yn nessau yn ebrwyd attunt.
>
> 'Mi a welaf longeu racco', heb y brenhin, 'ac yn dyuot yn hy parth a'r tir. Ac erchwch y wyr y llys wiscaw amdanunt, a mynet y edrych pa uedwl yw yr eidunt.'
>
> Y gwyr a wiscawd amdanunt ac a nessayssant attunt y wayret. Gwedy guelet y llongeu o agos, diheu oed ganthunt na welsynt eiryoet llongeu gyweirach eu hansawd noc wy. Arwydon tec, guedos, arwreid o bali oed arnunt.
>
> Ac ar hynny, nachaf un o'r llongeu yn raculaenu rac y rei ereill, ac y guelynt dyrchauael taryan yn uch no bwrd y llong, a swch y taryan y uynyd yn arwyd tangneued. Ac y nessawys y gwyr attunt, ual yd ymglywynt ymdidan. Bwrw badeu allan a wnaethont wynteu, a nessau parth a'r tir, a chyuarch guell y'r brenhin. E brenhin a'e clywei wynteu o'r lle yd oed ar garrec uchel uch eu penn.
>
> 'Duw a rodo da ywch', heb ef, 'a grayssaw wrthywch. Pieu yniuer y llongeu hynn, a phwy yssyd pennaf arnunt wy?'
>
> 'Arglwyd', heb wynt, 'mae ymma Matholwuch brenhin Iwerdon, ac ef bieu y llongeu.'
>
> 'Beth', heb y brenhin, 'a uynnhei ef? A uyn ef dyuot y'r tir?'
>
> 'Na uynn, Arglwyd', heb wynt, 'negessawl yw wrthyt ti, onyt y neges a geif.'
>
> 'By ryw neges yw yr eidaw ef?' heb y brenhin.
>
> 'Mynnu ymgyathrachu a thidy, Arglwyd', heb wynt. 'Y erchi Branwen uerch Lyr y doeth, ac os da genhyt ti, ef a uyn ymrwymaw Ynys y Kedeirn ac Iwerdon y gyt, ual y bydynt gadarnach.'
>
> 'Ie', heb ynteu, 'doet y'r tir, a chynghor a gymwerwn ninheu am hynny.' Yr atteb hwnnw a aethy ataw ef.
>
> 'Minheu a af yn llawen', heb ef.
>
> Ef a doeth y'r tir, a llawen uuwyt wrthaw; a dygyuor mawr uu yn y llys y nos honno, y rwng e yniuer ef ac yniuer y llys.Yn y lle trannoeth, kymryt kynghor. (ll. 13–44) (Thomson 1976: 1–2)

As they were sitting thus, they could see thirteen ships coming from the south of Ireland, approaching them at a smooth and swift pace. The wind was behind them and they drew near rapidly.

'I see ships yonder', said the king, 'and they're coming boldly to land. Ask men of the court to arm and go find out their intentions.'

The men armed and went down to meet them. After seeing the ships up close, they were certain that they had never seen better equipped ships than those. Fair, shapely, splendid pennants of brocaded silk were aloft.

And then one of the ships pushed ahead of the others, and they could see a shield being raised above the ship's rail, the tip of the shield up, in a sign of peace. And the men drew near to them until they could hear each other's conversation. They put down boats and, as they approached the shore, greeted the king. The king could hear them from where he was on the rock above them.

'May God prosper you', he said, 'and welcome. Whose ships are these, and who is chief over them?'

'Lord', they replied. 'Matholwch, king of Ireland, is here; the ships are his.'

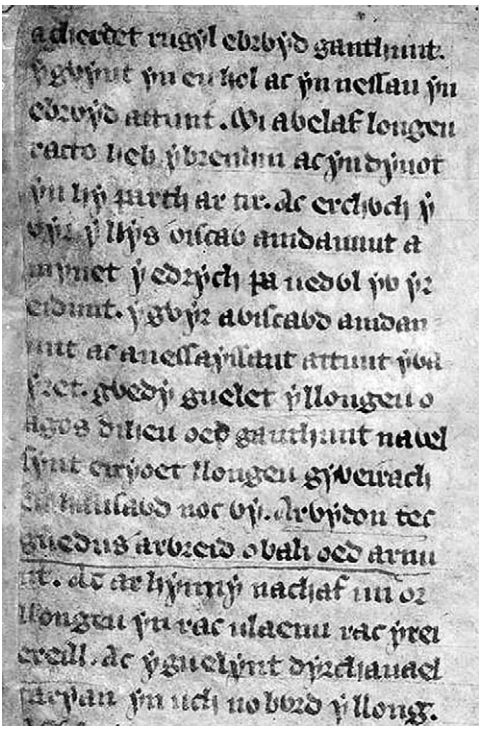
'What does he want?' asked the king. 'Does he wish to come to land?'

'He has business with you, Lord', they said, 'and he does not want to come to land unless he can accomplish his business.'

'What sort of business does he have?' asked the king.

> 'He seeks an alliance with you, Lord', they said. 'He has come to ask the hand of Branwen daughter of Llŷr, and if it please you, he wishes to unite the Isle of the Mighty with Ireland that they might be stronger.'
>
> 'Well', said he, 'let him land, and we will take counsel about that.'
>
> 'I will go gladly', he said.
>
> He landed and was welcomed. And there was a great assembly in the court that night between his retinue and that of the court. First thing in the morning they took counsel. (Ford 1977: 59–60)

Here we see, despite the significant differences in language, similar images and usage of epithets to that noted in the short passage from the *Chanson de Roland* above. Indeed, we could easily imagine little difference between the entertainment that the Irish men of the thirteen ships will receive at the court of Bendigeidfran and that enjoyed by the ten Moorish envoys at the court of Charlemagne. From the point of view of heroic narrative, of course, the moments are identical: serious suits are not addressed on the day that the envoy arrives, but rather after a night of entertainment and proper rest. The details signal to the knowing audience that a meeting of significance will unfold, and significantly, in both cases, the events which follow turn out to be of great sorrow to the kings in question. In this way, they share or presage a common story arc, just as they share similar traditional formulas and themes.



7 – *Branwen Uerch Lyr* in the White Book of Rhydderch (14th c.), fol. 10va
(*a cherdet* to *bwrd y llong* in the quotation above)

On a discursive level, however, as Ong's study predicts, we may also note striking repetitions of phrasing in the passage, so much so, in fact, that from the perspective of modern written communication the prose may seem stilted and redundant. For one thing, the text makes ample use of the conjunction *ac* (and), conforming in this way to Ong's characterization of oral communication as 'additive' rather than 'subordinative'. Referential redundancy is also evident at the very outset of the passage, where multiple verbs describing the advance of the boats recur in close succession, despite the fact that a modern reader might simply expect one mention to suffice: *teir llong ar dec, yn dyuot* (thirteen ships were coming), *ac yn kyrchu parth ac attunt* (and making toward them), *ac yn nessau yn ebrwyd attunt* (and approaching them swiftly). The issue of approaching and coming to shore recurs repeatedly in the subsequent paragraphs as well, as Bendigeidfran asks: '*A uyn ef dyuot y'r tir?*' (Does he wish to come to land?) and receives the response that Matholwch does not wish to come to land unless his suit will be successful. When finally Bendigeidfran states: '*doet y'r tir*' (let him come to land) followed by the rejoinder: *Ef a doeth y'r tir* (he came to land), one might easily have the impression that the whole issue of landing has received a surfeit of attention. The same kinds of repetitions occur in discourse connected with the ships and in the involved and formal way in which the suit is put forward, details which will become important later in the narrative, when Matholwch becomes convinced that he has been the victim of a grievous breach of protocol. We can also note the agonistic tone of the encounter, despite its great formality and friendly purpose, and the concrete situation at the heart of the encounter (i. e., that of courtship): all characteristics, Ong would contend, of the communicative workings of an oral culture.

Where Lord described such stylistic features as tools for the efficient and effective composition of songs in oral performance, and Ong saw these and other features as the natural consequence of orality as a mode of thought, scholars following in their wake have tended to view these same features as part of a conscious and aesthetically nuanced poetics inherent in the tradition itself. It is a poetics distinct from that which eventually grows up in written literature, but one of great subtlety and power nonetheless. John Miles Foley (1991), for instance, underscores the evocative power which traditional formulas and themes possess under the rubric 'traditional referentiality'. As an audience member compares a present instance of a formula or theme with others known from the tradition, a sense of the words' deeper significance arises, awakening thus in a knowing audience an apt understanding of a given narrative situation or character through the barest minimum of supplied detail. In Old English poetry, for instance, mention of ravens or predatory birds or beasts (eagles, wolves) at a scene of battle recurs frequently in the poetry that survives, and has been designated the 'Beasts of Battle' theme. Illustrative are the following lines from the Old English *Battle of Maldon,* as presented by Foley:

> Þa wæs feohte neh,
> tir æt getohte. Wæs seo tid cumen
> þæt þær fæge men feallan sceoldon.
> Þær wærð hream ahafen, hremmas wundon,
> earn æses georn; wæs on eorðan cyrm.
> Hi leton þa of folman feolhearde speru,
> gegrundene garas fleogan; (ll. 103b–9)

Then the fight was near,
glory at battle. The time was come
that men fated to die had to fall there.
An outcry was raised there. Ravens circled,
the eagle eager for carrion. There was an uproar on earth.
Then from their hands they let fly
File-hard spears, cruelly ground lances. (Foley 1991: 226)

By analyzing the broader narrative situations in which such 'Beasts of Battle' imagery typically occurs, Foley is able to point to the meanings the device seems to have carried for its original performers and audiences. He writes:

> What the theme provides [...] is a map for interpreting this particular fight and all other such encounters; heroic achievement will take place under the always impinging threat of death and desecration, the lot of all who take up arms. By summoning this extratextual, extrasituational context, the poet and tradition make whatever specific combat is occupying the center stage more meaningful, precisely because the theme deepens the present action by institutionalized reference to parallel actions in the same context. (226)

Formulas and themes become metonyms, carriers of immanence, layers of meaning conveyed in a highly effective, but by no means perfunctory, poetic diction (Foley 1991, 1995).

Mark Amodio (2004) explores similar issues in his study of English oral poetics in both the Anglo-Saxon era and after the Norman Conquest. For Amodio, as for Foley, formulas, themes, and story arcs carry deep metonymic resonances which can be viewed as part of the poetic system itself. The lexical simplex *(x-) belgan (-mod),* for instance, built on the verb 'to swell with anger', occurs in a variety of different Old English texts, ranging from renderings of biblical narratives to the epic *Beowulf* (59–61). In the nine instances of the simplex's occurrence in *Beowulf,* the words precede a scene of significant carnage. In lines 708–9, for instance, the hero Beowulf awaits Grendel *bolgen-mōd* (heart swollen with anger). As Amodio points out, Beowulf has no logical, discursive cause to be angry at this point in the narrative, and the descriptor appears to function on a different level: as a poetic signal of impending battle, a sense captured artfully in Seamus Heaney's translation of the words as 'spoiling for action' (1999: 24). Soon after (l. 723), Grendel will seize the hall's door *(ge-)bolgen* (swollen with anger), signaling the mutual enmity and rage which will mark the ferocious struggle between Beowulf and Grendel. Later still (ll. 2220 and 2304), the dragon will become *gebolgen* (swollen with rage) by the theft of a cup, and Beowulf *torne gebolgen* (swollen with anger) will prepare to meet him in battle (l. 2401), calling him out with words loosed from a breast *gebolgen* (l. 2550). In concise but powerful manner, then, use of the participle *(ge-)bolgen* allows the poet to signal a coming moment of enraged battle, in which equally committed combatants will struggle to the death.

Scholars describing these aspects of oral-derived texts often refer to the language of poems or other genres as a special form of diction or register. 'Diction' refers to specific words that are chosen as appropriate to a particular variety of communication. As Flemming Andersen (1985) has shown, for instance, ballad texts in English typically employ a distinct range of terms and epithets for typical characters and situations. Horses are called 'steeds'; young women are 'maidens fair'. Singers and audiences share these ballad

terms and employ them regularly, even when they are otherwise absent from the dialect of English typically spoken in the locale. In many cases, they can come to carry all the associations and aesthetic merit described above as traditional referentiality. The linguistic term 'register' encompasses more than merely lexical items, allowing scholars to refer to a broad range of linguistic norms that can become attached to a specific situation over time. Phrasing, syntax, and even morphology can take on distinct forms deemed appropriate to particular situations, creating generic expectations that help audiences recognize and evaluate the new performances they hear. The resulting variety of language can take on a life of its own, thriving as a *Kunstsprache* or *Spielmannsidiom* among people whose own dialects may differ considerably from each other, as well as from some other prosaic standard. As Karl Reichl (2002) has shown, Middle English verse romances seem to have developed a kind of register of this sort, one which leveled dialect differences and created a form of English characteristic of the poems. Osborn Bergin notes the persistence of a similar phenomenon in Irish Bardic poetry over a period of centuries. Writes Bergin (1984: 13):

> Practically all bardic poetry is written in one standard literary dialect, which remained almost unchanged for five hundred years. All this time the local dialects were diverging more and more, and there was no capital to set a natural standard. Yet the trained profession poet wrote in such a style that it is impossible to tell from his language to what part of Ireland or Scotland he belonged, or to fix his date even approximately. It is hard to say what they ought to have done, but what they actually did is clear. They made an artificial standard. They normalized the language by admitting into their verse only such forms and usages as had the sanction of earlier poets of high repute, everything else being rigorously excluded.

Steeped in the mystique and power of tradition, such standardized language carried with it not the stigma of a literary cliché, but the authority of a prestigious idiom, one grounded in the achievements and glories of the past.[6]

3 Mnemonic Anchors and Poetic Form

Whereas the various characteristics described above can be seen as products of the urge to perform on the one hand, and the workings of the oral mind on the other, the oral-derived works of the medieval era also tend to display mnemonic frameworks that apparently helped performers remember and reproduce them over time (Jousse 1925). Such 'anchoring' can include the fixing of words and phrases through metre, rhyme, assonance, and alliteration, as well as the arrangement of phrases into meaningful sequences or patterned arrays. Narrative arcs can become associated with conceptual anchors as well: particular proverbs or place names, activities or entities that help demonstrate and underscore the existence and details of a narrative over time. Just as with forms of redundancy or formulaic diction, these varieties of discursive anchors can become aesthetically charged in themselves: constitutive of an artistry that combines the pragmatic work of memorization and recall with the aesthetic work of transcendence and appraisal.

[6] [On Irish poetry and orality, see further ch. 9 (J. F. Nagy) in this volume.]

One of the most obvious and effective mnemonic anchors is that of metre. When combined with forms of alliteration, assonance or rhyme, metre can exert a powerful stabilizing effect on discourse, one that can help preserve pieces of poetic diction intact for generations, even centuries. Where ordinary speech may easily permit substitution or variation within utterances, metrically shaped communications exert strict control over the placement and quality of words and their relations to each other. Throughout medieval Europe, professional poets developed metrical systems that challenged the intellect as well as preserved poetry from performance to performance. Among Scandinavians, such was the case with the metres of the skalds, court poets who composed encomiums to the memory of chieftains or kings. Skaldic poems dating from the ninth century were still apparently in oral tradition by the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, when they began to be recorded in books. Consider, for instance, the Icelandic *Egils saga Skallagrímssonar,* a thirteenth-century account of a ninth-century Icelandic poet named Egil. Preserved in a thirteenth-century manuscript known as *Möðruvallabók,* as well as in some other vellum works of the same or later periods, *Egils saga* includes a wide variety of poems that had apparently existed in oral tradition before being incorporated into the saga. One such poem is credited to Egil at the age of three:

Kominn emk ern til arna
Yngvars, þess's beð lyngva
(hann vark fúss at finna)
fránþvengjar gefr drengjum.
Mon eigi þú þægir
þrévetran mér betra
ljósundinna landa
linns óðar smið finna. (Jónsson 1931: 101)

I have come in fine fettle to the hearth
Of Yngvar, who gives men gold from the glowing
Curled serpent's bed of heather [=treasure hoard];
I was eager to meet him.
Shedder of gold rings bright and twisted
From the serpent's realm, you'll never
Find a better craftsman of poems
Three winters old than me. (Smiley and Kellogg 1997: 52)

The poem belongs to the metre known as *dróttkvætt,* an eight-lined verse form favoured by skalds of Egil's day (Gordon and Taylor 1957: 317–18). Each line contains three primary-stress syllables, with the final word of the line always consisting of a primary word stress followed by an unstressed syllable (e. g., *arna, lyngva).* In the odd lines, alliteration occurs between syllables that contain differing vowels (e.g, *fúss, finna; þú, þægir),* while in the even lines, syllabic rhyme occurs (e. g., *Yngvars, lyngva; þrévetran, betra).* Such rhyme always occurs between the first and third metrical foot, never between the first and second. These various rules make it difficult to substitute any other words for those originally incorporated into the verse, and thus act as a powerful stabilizing force over time. A relatively free poetic syntax and a penchant for elaborate metaphors (termed 'kennings') helped verse makers create poetry that obeyed these considerable strictures.

Rules of similar complexity govern Irish syllabic poetry. Knott illustrates one of the favoured metres with a stanza from the sixteenth-century poem entitled 'On the Cutting Down of an Ancient Tree':[7]

Do bhíoth dhamh ag déanaimh eóil
an ghégsoin fa gar do mhaoin;
fada siar ón tírsi thuaidh
aniar uain do-chínnsi an gcraoibh.

The bough was wont to guide my way
It was a transient possession;
Far back from this land in the north I could see
In the distance the branch behind me.

In the common metre known as *rannaigheacht mhór,* stanzas consist of four heptasyllabic lines, each line ending in a monosyllabic word (Knott 1934: 13–14). The final words of the second and fourth lines rhyme (i. e., *mhaoin* and *gcraoibh)*, while those of the first and third *(eóil* and *thuaidh)* are consonate with them. There must be at least two internal rhymes within each couplet (e. g., in the first couplet *dhamh* and *gar, déanaimh* and *ghéagsoin;* in the second couplet *siar* and *aniar, tírsi* and *do-chínnsi)*, and the final word of the third line must rhyme with a word in the middle of the fourth line (i.e, *thuaidh* and *uain)*. Alliteration must occur between at least two words in each line (e. g., *dhamh* and *déanaimh),* and the final word of the fourth line *(gcraoibh)* must alliterate with the stressed word that precedes it *(do-chínnsi)*. As the above examples show, rhyme was more broadly defined in Irish than in modern English, yet the combination of metre, alliteration and required rhymes expected in the various metres used by poets exercised a considerable stabilizing influence over the poetry, helping preserve it in oral form until it could be written down, as we shall discuss in the final part of this essay. Such artistry creates both an aesthetically pleasing whole as well as a product which could be remembered and reperformed effectively over time.

In examining oral narratives collected from Native American elders at the close of the nineteenth century, Dell Hymes (1981, 2003) has revealed the powerful use of pattern numbers as a means of organizing and aesthetically shaping extended narratives, regardless of whether they can be classified as poetry or prose. In highly valued narrative performances, when items occur in a series – be it a chain of events, a string of adjectives, or a set of characters – they will often be so arranged so as to match the dominant and secondary pattern numbers of the culture. In some Native cultures of North America, narrative sequences occur in groupings of two and four. In other cultures on the same continent, however, the typical groupings are of three and five. Thus, in one culture, characters will occur in pairs or foursomes, and will undertake tasks in a sequence of four attempts, while in other cultures – as in much of Europe (Olrik 1965) – characters will tend to occur in groupings of three, and undertake tasks in series of three or five attempts. These groupings recur within narratives at the level of lines or phrases, where they help organize the flow of discourse into verses, stanzas, scenes, and acts – terms which derive from the study of poetry and theater, but which receive new analytical significance. Such groupings are sometimes set off for the listening audience by overt

[7] Knott 1934: 9; see also Bergin 1984: 51–52, 232–33.

markers like counting, but more often they are signaled subtly through repeated parallel structuring or the recurrence of certain verbal particles or other linguistic features (2003: 304). These sorts of interlinear organization can occur in conjunction with more overt devices of poetic discourse (e. g., metre, rhyme), but they may also occur in discourse that at first resembles simple prose. Hymes labels this kind of verbal performance 'measured verse', suggesting that it bridges and helps undermine the rigid differentiation of poetry and prose that has come down to us through written literature. He labels the study of such features 'ethnopoetics', a term used with some variation by earlier scholars (e. g., Tedlock 1972, 1983). A passage from the earliest recorded piece of Finnish epic can illustrate such features. An oral ballad relating the martyrdom of Finland's patron saint Henrik, preserved in a manuscript from the eighteenth century but certainly representing earlier tradition, this text closes with an image of St. Henrik in joy, while his murderer Lalli suffers in eternal torment:

Pispa enkelein kansa laulelee
Ilon virttä veisailee.
Lalli hiidesä hihtelepi
Lylynensä luistelepi
Piinan savuhun sakiahan
Sauvallansa satuttelee.
Pirut pahoin pistelevät
Helvetin heltehesä
Sielu parkaa vaivailevat.
(Kuusi, Bosley, and Branch 1977: 320)

The bishop is singing with the angels,
Chanting a verse of joy.
Lalli is skiing in Hiisi,
Sliding with his left ski,
Into the thick smoke of punishment
Striking with his ski pole.
Demons are wickedly sticking him
In the heat of hell
Tormenting his sorry soul.

Although Finnish oral epic poetry in general displays formal parallelism, in which the contents of one line find close restatement in a matched second line, this passage displays a three-part structure built atop, and partly undermining, these obligatory line pairings (DuBois 1995). Each of the three parts of the passage focuses on a different actor engaged in a particular action, expressed through a succession of verbs ending in the frequentative suffix *-lla/ä*, translated above through the English present progressive. In the first part of the passage, we hear of the contented singing of the martyred St. Henrik, encompassed in the verbs *laulelee/veisailee* (singing/chanting). The couplet is clear and balanced, and follows the rules of formal parallelism closely. In the bridging middle part, Henrik's murderer Lalli is depicted in the frantic act of skiing, signaled by the active verbs *hihtelepi/luistelepi/satuttelee* (skiing/sliding/striking), distributed over four lines. Medieval skis were of differing lengths in Finnish culture, with the longer left ski *(lyly)* used for sliding and the shorter right ski *(kalhu)* for kicking. This fact serves as a semantic resource for building a parallel line to the one which announces Lalli's skiing,

while the final verb in the section refers to the long staff or pole *(sauva)* used by skiers in place of matched ski poles. Lalli's act is located, rather picturesquely, in Hiisi, a term that refers originally to pre-Christian forest sacrificial sites, but which was eventually stigmatized as the equivalent of the Christian hell. It is depicted here with the darkness and cold of a forest grove, matching the ancient sense of the term. Finally, in the final three-line section, the poem depicts demons besetting Lalli, expressed through frequentative verbs of torture *pistelevät/vaivailevat* (sticking/tormenting) in a setting drawing more directly on the (imported) image of a flaming hell. Point of view is managed deftly in the passage, so that we can focus on each of the three situations in turn, while the parallelism of the verbs allows us to appreciate the contrasting outcomes of differing choices in life. Such interlinear groupings allow the poem to merge and shape its discourse into meaningful broader units, undercutting what might otherwise seem a jagged or perfunctory series of line pairs.

Hymes's ethnopoetic analyses have not as yet received as wide application among medievalists as have those of the Oral Formulaic school, but a number of scholars have begun to incorporate them into their frameworks, often in combination with the ideas of Lord and Ong.[8] Given the widespread nature of the phenomena Hymes describes, it is likely that groupings and techniques described under the rubric of ethnopoetics may obtain in other European traditions. In fact, certain of the tendencies which Hymes identifies as conscious aesthetic choices seem to come very close to the features which Ong attributed earlier to a seemingly innate oral psychology. The tendency for syntactic parallelism rather than subordination, for instance (Ong's 'additive' logic), as well as the recurrence of certain conjunctions or particles like *and,* may point to an aesthetic shaping, be it in poetry or in prose. Likewise, the lexical redundancy which Ong notes – the repetition of words more than once within a single sentence or passage – may, from the perspective of ethnopoetics, represent a conscious stylistic effect rather than merely an attempt to ensure oral comprehension. If, for instance, we reconsider the first section of the Welsh passage discussed above, we can note features that may have helped its creator, and audience, experience it aesthetically. Presenting it on the page as poetry helps reveal these features, as the following, accompanied with a closer English translation, illustrates:

Ac ual yd oedynt yn eisted yuelly,
wynt a welynt teir llong ar dec,
yn dyuot o deheu Iwerdon,
ac yn kyrchu parth ac attunt,
a cherdet rugyl ebrwyd ganthunt,
y gwynt yn eu hol,
ac yn nessau yn ebrwyd attunt.

And as they were sitting thus,
they descried thirteen ships
coming from the south of Ireland,
and making for them
sailing freely, swiftly along,
the wind at their backs
and they swiftly drew near.

[8] See, e. g., Zumthor 1972 and 1983; Foley 1995; Niles 1999; Amodio 2004.

Where this passage may have seemed at first clumsy and artless, ethnopoetic analysis reveals its careful shaping, and the uses made of parallelism and repetition in a discourse far different from what we may think of as prose today.

4 Mnemonic Anchoring through Content

The mnemonic anchoring achieved by metre, alliteration, rhyme, and parallelism may also occur through the medium of content. In the Welsh tale of Branwen discussed above, an angry Bendigeidfran pursues his former in-law-turned-enemy Matholwch across Ireland. The latter crosses the Shannon and destroys the bridge, banking on the magnetic stones at the bottom of the river to block the Britons' pursuit. The gigantic Bendigeidfran is not to be stopped, however, and lies down across the river as a bridge for his men. The troops place planks on top of him and march across to victory. The passage depicts Bendigeidfran's act as follows:

> 'Arglwyd', heb y wyrda, 'ti a wdost kynnedyf ur auon, ny eill neb uynet drwydi, nyt oes bont arnei hitheu. Mae dy gynghor am bont?' heb wy.
> 'Nit oes', heb ynteu, 'namyn a uo penn bit pont. Mi a uydaf pont', heb ef.
> Ac yna gyntaf y dywetpwyt y geir hwnnw, ac y diharebir etwa ohonaw. (ll. 291–95)
> (Thomson 1976: 11)

> 'Lord', said his men, 'you know the peculiarity of the river, that none can go across it – nor is there a bridge over it. What do you advise for a bridge?'
> 'Nothing, except that he who is chief shall be a bridge', he replied. 'I will be a bridge.'
> Then was first uttered that saying, and it has become proverbial.
> (Ford 1977: 67)

Bendigeidfran's statement, transformed into the proverb 'Like a bridge over troubled waters, I will lay me down', helps anchor the narrative, so that the saying – whenever it occurs – leads a listener to recall the narrative events, while the events of the narrative in turn help gloss and explicate the saying. John Miles Foley (1994) has pointed to a similar use of proverbs in South Slavic epic: they increase the traditional weight of the performance while helping extend the life of the proverb in oral tradition as well. The same sort of mnemonic anchoring can be observed in skaldic kennings, in which a single poetic epithet can encapsulate and recall an entire myth or heroic narrative. Thus, according to Snorri Sturluson, the kenning for gold *haddr Sifiar* (Sif's hair) derives from a complex tale in which the trickster Loki cuts off all of the goddess Sif's hair as a prank (Jónsson 1931: 122–25). Sif's husband, the god Thor, threatens Loki with death until he promises to engage dwarfs to create new hair for his wife. In the process, Loki assists in the creation of a variety of important implements of the gods, and ends up vindictively and humorously maimed by the dwarfs. Again, as with the Welsh proverb, the single kenning signals an entire narrative, while the narrative in turn confers meaning upon the otherwise cryptic metaphor, one useful in constructing verses that conform to the considerable requirements of skaldic poetry.

A further variety of content-based mnemonic anchors occurs in catalogues or listings, a characteristic particularly popular in medieval Welsh and Irish narratives. The

same tale of Branwen discussed above is credited as containing one of the three most unfortunate slaps in the history of Britain, one of the three most fortunate interments of a corpse, and one of the three most unfortunate disinterments as well. The Irish tale of Mac Datho's Pig *(Scéla mucce Meic Dathó)* describes the landowner Mac Datho's home as one of the five chief hostels of Ireland of its time:

> Is <s>í sin in chōiced bruden ro·boī i nHērinn isind aimsir sin, ocus bruden Da-Derg i crích Cūalann ocus brudan Forgaill Manaich ocus bruden Me[i]c Da-Rēo i mBrēfni ocus bruden Da-Choca i n-īarthur Midi. (Thurneysen 1935: 1)
>
> This was one of the five chief hostels of Ireland at the time, and there was the hostel of Da-Derga among the men of Cualu, and the hostel of Forgall Monach, and the hostel of Da Reo in Brefne, and the hostel of Da Choga in Westmeath.
> (Cross and Slover 1936: 199)

Each mentioned hostel had its own tales and history, making the listing likewise a catalogue of potential tales, helping the storyteller keep track of a repertoire related to each. Such cataloguing works in a certain sense like metre and alliteration or rhyme, pulling into aesthetic 'equivalence' (Jakobson 1960) items of narrative that might not otherwise be regarded as related, and creating a new system of affinity between them that helps both explicate and recall the items included. This process, which Roman Jakobson (1960: 358) describes as the projection of the principle of equivalence from the 'axis of selection' into the 'axis of combination', lies at the heart of all poetics.

The tale of Mac Datho's pig provides illustration of a further mnemonic anchor favoured in medieval narratives: the association of tales with particular places and placenames. Thus, Ailbe, the exceptional hound of Mac Datho – the cause of a fierce conflict between rival kingdoms – becomes the source of the placename Mag n-Ailbi (the plain of Ailbe), while the place where its head falls after its death becomes known as Áth Cinn Chon (ford of the hound's head). The placenames again anchor the tale to the concrete environment, while the narrative helps explicate what might otherwise seem confusing names. The same use of onomastics recurs in many other medieval traditions, including the Icelandic sagas.

5 From Anchors to Attractors

Although features such as metre, rhyme, alliteration, classification and association certainly could exert considerable control over poetic utterances, the very conventionality of these features could lead in turn to a loss of specific detail. Folklorists examining the process of poetic transmission have noted the tendency of unique words or details in a song or tale to become replaced over time with more conventional ones. In time, as Tristram Coffin (1957) points out in his study of Anglo-American ballads, a unique historical account can become transformed into a thoroughly familiar and conventionalized rendering, containing little detail that would distinguish its narrated events from those of other songs or tales. Further, where pattern numbers can help a performer recall and recreate a series of events or details in performance, the aesthetic appeal of these numbers can easily force divergent series into adding or losing elements so as to conform

to expectations. Unique or obscure characters or obscure places can similarly be replaced by more famous ones, a process known as 'narrative attraction', that can lead to particular deeds being credited to actors who may have lived centuries before or after the events in question, or in places far distant from where the legendary accounts stipulate. These effects can be regarded as the natural byproducts of the poetic and mnemonic systems operative in oral tradition, and certain medieval genres, such as the lyric song, display a high degree of conventionality which may be understood in relation to this process of transmission and change (DuBois 2006: 142–48). In those cases in which we are able to compare medieval epic or romance with drier historical accounts of the same events written closer in time to the events themselves, we frequently find alterations of detail or form which reflect these unspoken but powerful organizing tendencies. The poetics of medieval orality did not simply clothe events in an outward form suited to easy recall; rather, the events were often reshaped substantively into aesthetically effective and satisfying forms.

6 Acts of Composition

Assuming the responsibility of performance – breaking through – was a serious act in medieval culture, where the right to speak was regulated by strong considerations of class and decorum, and where verbal performances were carefully and rigorously evaluated. Performers who learned to enact valued genres artfully were praised for their skills and could at times build careers in a court or district. Novice performers, likewise, could be subjected to considerable training before taking the stage. Medieval literature often preserves legendary memories of particularly effective singers or poets, sometimes describing their careers in extended narratives, as the above discussion of *Egils saga* shows. Where such accounts occur, they tend to depict the act of composition as an involved skill, sometimes divinely granted, sometimes earned by dint of hard work. In any case, these acts of composition seem markedly different from the somewhat automatic creative work we might assume from an initial reading of Lord's great *Singer of Tales* or which we might at first assume from a lack of awareness of the aesthetic features of oral-derived works. Three examples illustrate this point and complete our essay.

In his eighth-century *Historia ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum* the Venerable Bede includes an account of the first man to adapt Anglo-Saxon heroic poetry to Christian themes.[9] A humble cowherd named Caedmon avoids taking up the harp out of embarrassment at his lack of musical skill. While sleeping in the cowshed, he sees a mysterious being (possibly an angel), who orders him to sing. When he awakes, he is able to perform a new religious hymn, a song of praise for God and his act of Creation as narrated in the Book of Genesis. Subsequently, Bede tells us, Caedmon became a member of the local monastic community and continued his newly found gift of poetic composition. His fellow monks read or related to him accounts from the Bible and these he reflected upon by himself until creating a poetic rendering. John Niles (2006) links this account to a

[9] Colgrave and Mynors 1969: 414–21. [See also ch. 4 (K. O'Brien I'Keeffe), pp. 122–27, and ch. 5 (J. Harris and K. Reichl), pp. 146–47 in this volume.]

more widely known Irish tale type 2412B 'The Man Who Had No Story' and suggests that Bede is here adapting a common folktale in order to make a point about religious poetry. Mark Amodio focuses similarly on the fictive qualities of the account, noting that 'If Caedmon did not exist, someone would have had to invent him' (2004: 25). He represents, in other words, a narrative point of origin for a new tradition of vernacular religious poetry that had become popular in England at the time of Bede (the eighth century) and after. Although, as these scholars point out, it is unwise to read the story of Caedmon as a straight historical account of an Anglo-Saxon poet's career, it is nonetheless useful to note that the depiction of poetic composition here is not one of creation through performance, but rather, of thoughtful meditation followed by a later performance.

The same two-part process is evident in the account of Egil Skallagrímsson's composition of the poem known as *Hǫfuðlausn,* or 'Head Ransom'. According to the account contained in the *saga,* Egil is magically drawn to the shores of Scotland, where his arch enemies King Erik Blood-axe and his queen Gunnhild have come to power.[10] Realizing that he has strayed into his enemies' hands, Egil goes directly to their court at York, where his friend Arinbjorn sues for his life. Arinbjorn promises that Egil will compose a long stanzaic poem (termed a *drápa)* of twenty stanzas in honour of Erik in order to restore good relations between them. Erik begrudgingly consents, and Egil is sequestered in a room by himself for the night in order to compose the poem. During the night, Egil is disturbed by a twittering bird – apparently the angry Gunnhild in magic disguise – until Arinbjorn chases the bird away and guards the poet's window for the rest of the night. In the morning, Egil has completed the poem, which he duly recites for the king, thus ransoming his head through poetic skill. A similar process of quiet composition followed by later performance occurs later in the saga as well, when Egil remains in seclusion in order to compose a lament for the death of two of his sons.[11]

In his *Memoirs of the Marquis of Clanricarde* of 1722, Thomas O'Sullevane presents a fascinating account of the training process of poets in eighteenth-century Ireland. The description has been discussed in detail by Osborn Bergin (1984: 5–7). According to this account, young men who wanted to make their way as court poets joined a kind of seminary for rhetoric, where they received daily instruction in poetic form and structures and were then given an evening assignment:

> The said Subject [...] having been given over Night, they work'd it apart each by himself upon his own Bed, the whole next Day in the Dark, till at a certain Hour in the Night, Lights being brought in, they committed it to writing. Being afterwards dress'd and come together in a large Room, where the Masters waited, each Scholar gave in his Performance, which being corrected or approv'd of (according as it requir'd) either the same or fresh subjects were given against the next Day. (6)

The poems thus created would be later performed by a different professional, a reciter *(reacaire)* with skills in oral delivery. Bergin suggests that this custom must have been very archaic in the eighteenth century and probably represents a continuation of medie-

[10] Jónsson 1888: 212–24, 350–6; Smiley and Kellogg 1997: 108–18.

[11] Jónsson 1888: 282–7; Smiley and Kellogg 1997: 149–58. [Compare also ch. 5 (J. Harris and K. Reichl), p. 154.]

val methods. In any case, it is difficult here to separate 'orality' from 'literacy', in that the mode of composition employed both in sequence. Nonetheless, it appears essential that the composition occur orally, and not through a process mediated by the new technology of writing. Perhaps this manner of creating a poem represents a medial stage between the oral composition described for Caedmon and Egil, and later, purely literate modes more familiar to poets ('writers') of today.

All three of these accounts share a rather wistful tone, as if to underscore the fact that the competences displayed by the poets in the texts were no longer commonplace within the literate milieu of the admiring scribes or authors of later centuries. New competences had replaced them, even while writers looked back with respect and sometimes envy on an era in which artistry consisted not in textual erudition but in the ability to create and convey works of beauty and significance through the transient strains of the human voice. Perhaps they, like Lewis's Bree, appreciated above all the performance of verbal art in the 'grand [...] manner' that orality affords.

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