BEOWULF: A WRITTEN OR AN ORAL POEM?

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INTRODUCTION

'Beowulf' has long been considered a written poem, and it is my intention to suggest that it may in fact be of oral origins. The work of Milman Parry and Albert Bates Lord on the Homeric poems has shown fairly conclusively that the 'Iliad' and the 'Odyssey' have been misunderstood for centuries. By comparing these epics with twentieth century Yugoslav songs, Parry and Lord discovered that Homer was most likely an oral singer of the same style as the Yugoslav guslar, Avdo Mešedović. Such a discovery, strengthening as it does Parry's a priori thesis, had enormous implications in literary studies, since the way was now open for the re-examination of other older works of unknown origin. So, in 1953, Francis P. Magoun wrote an essay called 'The Oral-Formulaic Character of Anglo-Saxon Narrative Poetry', in which he suggested the oral nature of 'Beowulf'. But since then speculation on the creative typology of the poem has become inconclusive, inconsistent, and confused. I intend to show how the work of Homeric scholars, especially of Parry and Lord, is culturally and creatively relevant to Old English studies, and in this way to suggest the orality of 'Beowulf'.

Oral poetry is the product of non-literate cultures in which man is closer to the objective world than in what
Marshall McLuhan calls print cultures. Oral poetry is near to myth and ritual, and has not yet reached the state of discourse or *logos*. The word as a symbolic representation of the thing has not over-ridden the ontology of the universe as an animistic and humanly comprehensible sphere of energy. Besides these mythological implications which first invested the singer with shamanistic powers and then with the honour of both describing and prescribing for his society, oral poetry served the purpose of entertainment and relied on a close transaction between bard and audience. A print culture relies on a different relationship, one that is more impersonal and which emphasizes the split between thought and action. Typed words in a book exist as a sort of currency between author and reader, but are in themselves inert. Spoken words are, by contrast, a living commerce between singer and audience; there is no time lag, tone lag, or intention lag between performance and delivery. So, oral poetry may be said to close the void between thought and action since the two are brought together. There is no crystallization or suspension of the word as there is in a print culture. The considerations of an oral poetry must therefore be radically different from those of written poetry, since the creation and expression and artistic environment in a non-literate culture are unique.
By summarizing the work of Parry and Lord, and by qualifying their studies with more recent essays (Chapter I), I endeavour to show how classical scholars discovered that Homer was probably an oral poet. From their use of textual analysis and literary comparison, it is possible to derive a method for work in other spheres of potential orality. In Chapter 2, I evaluate the use that can be made of Homeric scholarship in Old English studies, especially in consideration of 'Beowulf'. Critics have tended to claim Parry's descriptive hypothesis indiscriminately, or to dismiss it because it is about Greek poetry and not about Anglo-Saxon poetry, and is therefore inapplicable. Others, of course, have held staunchly to the view that 'Beowulf' was written by a literate, educated man who was possibly influenced by Virgil's 'Aeneid' as much as by older Germanic verse. I believe that Parry's theories about the Homeric poems, theories so often substantiated by his experience of oral singing in Yugoslavia, should not be viewed as rules for the establishment of a non-literate poetry but should rather be seen as a description of the special qualities that he located first in Homer and then in present-day Yugoslav bardic verse. Parry continually emphasizes the value and unique character of tradition throughout his work, and his realization of the cultural quiddity of the 'Iliad' and the 'Odyssey', reflecting as it does the nature of the
poet and his method of creation and his audience, should not be mistaken for an assertion of rules. The continual respect that Parry shows for the tradition is evidence of his belief that all traditions are different although they may display some similar characteristics. The word-for-word application of his theories and descriptions of oral verse (Homeric) to other cultures (for example, Anglo-Saxon) does not cohere with his concept of the specific nature of each poetic ethos. Nor does the method of bringing selected facets of his ideas to bear on a poetry seem honest or systematically and structurally methodical. I have taken an alternative course, because I believe Parry's work is of definite use in spheres outside Homeric verse. I have tried to consider each of his key ideas in relation to 'Beowulf', concentrating on the fact that the Old English and Homeric traditions are different, although possibly sharing the similarity of being non-literate. By continually bearing in mind the nature of the Germanic tradition, I hope it is possible to form a description of 'Beowulf' that is schematically based on Parry's description of the 'Iliad' and the 'Odyssey' without mistaking differences in verse type for differences in creative processes. Because Homer has been more or less proved to be a bard, his verse should not be taken as a standard against which other oral poetries must measure favourably in order to be seen
as oral. I hope that I show 'Beowulf' in its Old English and Germanic context so that it loses neither the nature of its tradition nor the characteristics that hint at its orality.

Chapter three follows 'Beowulf' through in more detail, discussing each of the major areas in which Parry (in his Homeric and Yugoslav studies) found evidence of mnemonic and therefore of oral composition. I attempt to describe 'Beowulf', characterizing it firmly before dealing with it from the viewpoint of the oral hypothesis. In this way I hope to establish the poem in its own tradition and to avoid the misapplication of Parry's "rules". By using Parry's headings, I am utilizing his system without prescribing his ideas. I prefer to see his work as descriptive, and for this reason I think description of 'Beowulf' is needed before any consideration of its orality or literacy is begun. I believe that the poem could well be of oral origins. I arrive at this conclusion because of the discovery of many mnemonic devices in 'Beowulf', because of the traditional and heroic tone and content of the verse, and because of the structure of the verse line and story line. Objections raised against the orality of 'Beowulf' usually do not take the Germanic tradition into account and rely for foundation upon the Greek tradition. Magoun and other exponents of the oral nature of 'Beowulf' seldom see the poem in its own right and so miss many of
its features. I believe that, seen in its own context, 'Beowulf' says much for itself and speaks for its own orality.

Chapter four is a description of the type of society that produced 'Beowulf', and depends upon a discussion of the Christian content of the poem for an indication of early dating. Since there is evidence of a Germanic oral tradition (for example, in Tacitus), the earlier the dating of 'Beowulf' the better for my hypothesis. Other Old English poems display varying acquaintance with the heroic ethos and with Christianity, and in a brief comparison of some of these and 'Beowulf' I hope to show that 'Beowulf' is one of the earliest Anglo-Saxon poems extant, and is thus nearer to the oral tradition, probably in fact partaking of it. The technique and tone of the poem having been discussed, I now examine several textual problems (Chapter five) in order to suggest that they cease to be problems once we accept 'Beowulf' as an oral poem. The reduction of problems in 'Beowulf', along with other evidence and suggestions, lead me to conclude (Chapter six) that 'Beowulf' is probably an oral poem, transcribed and preserved in one of the several ways which I describe, passing through at least two stages on its passage to the final manuscript. I attempt to criticize 'Beowulf' as an oral poem by using values foreign to a literate print culture. I establish and use a new critical terminology in Chapter six because
the entire technique and performance of oral verse displays values and relationships that are not found in written literature. My attempted criticism of 'Beowulf' is, therefore, an affirmation of its orality and an indication that there is more to be done in the field of the evaluation of oral poetry.
CHAPTER ONE

Homeric Scholarship: the Discovery of an Oral Literature

Introduction

The concept of an oral tradition in literature is strange to people bred in an atmosphere of writing, books, and scholarly research. Literacy as an integral part of life leads to preconceptions about knowledge. It tends to presuppose accuracy and immutability in works of art: when a painting is finished it retains its shapes and colours as perfectly as possible within the limitations of this physical world, when a sculpture is sculpted it has achieved a definite outline and amalgam of planes that will exist until they are destroyed. All artefacts comprehended in this way are intact and absolute until they are partially or completely destroyed. So it is with literature.

Since the passing of the copyright laws, works no longer are in such danger of being purloined and plagiarism is less of a threat than it was to, say, Shakespeare and Ben Jonson, Marlowe and Spenser. But these are all modern concepts. Now, when a novel is published it declares itself absolutely in the form it takes within its covers; errors are amended in erratum slips or in a second edition. The author, named, known and paid, can read his printed novel and see this final product of his creative processes
in concrete form. Readers are informed of the writer's name and are certain that what they read can be read by the author also, who can vouch for the work's authenticity. A few centuries ago, the concept of originality took a different form, not of Ezra Pound's "make it new", but of originality within the limitations of nature. In the Christian tradition, the possibility of originality is inhibited because of the belief that Adam inherited all knowledge and by the Fall lost it - though still intelligent, man can now only recover what he had once known. This type of fatalism is reflected in the words of Khakheperresenb, an Egyptian poet four thousand years ago, who said that everything had already been said, and in Ecclesiastes I ix, "There is nothing new under the sun". But Francis Bacon, in the Advancement of Learning (1605), put forward the theory of the progress of knowledge which admitted the possibility of originality without this involving a sacrilegious disrespect of nature as the sole source of the original. To Shakespeare, originality did not necessarily involve the creation of a whole new work of art, but the elaboration, enrichment and psychological amplification of an already existing story, for example, his beautiful retelling of Antony and Cleopatra which he knew from the much less grand Life of Mark Antony by Plutarch.

1. Walter Jackson Bate The Burden of the Past and the English Poet p.3.
Composition for Shakespeare and his contemporaries was more open to plagiarism than to authors this century, because of the closeness of composition to performance, the lack of copyright laws, and the habit of circulation of manuscripts. These facts suggest that the linking of author to work was established, much more so than in the Middle Ages, but that the epistemological argument against originality, which regards all men as homogeneous, was still holding sway over the concept of the heterogeneity of men and the schismatic nature of history. It seems, therefore, that as we move back in time, the notion of a work of art as having an absolute existence, unchangeable because of the nature of its composition and publication and because of its affinity to its author, is undermined. During the Middle Ages, there is a typological division into monastic literature and learning, derived from the establishment of Latin-orientated monasteries in Britain, and into vernacular literature and learning, derived from the continental fatherlands or from the Celtic tribes who mostly moved to the fringe areas of Britain. Amongst the Latin writings our sensibilities will remain largely at ease since these works stem from ages of classical scholarship, from essayists, philosophers, theologians, tragedians, comic writers, scientists, and poets. But amongst the vernacular works the ethos is entirely different, and the origins are lost in the mists of unrecorded continental antiquity. It seems
to me, however, that something of these origins can be recovered by finding an age that produced vernacular poems of a similar style to the Old English epic poems, but whose traditions have been more fully studied, and by tentatively allowing the discoveries in the more fully documented age to be applied to this unknown one.

Parry and 'The Traditional Epithet in Homer'

For us to comprehend the implications of an oral formulaic poetic tradition, bound as we are by the limitations of our conceptions about writers and books, we need some modern equivalent. Milman Parry and his aide and follower, Albert Bates Lord, provided this by their several travels, together and separately, to Yugoslavia and the Balkans to study the oral poetry of the Novi Pazar singers. These studies were conducted to explore the extent of the oral background in Homer, and to open up the implications of an oral tradition in any literature; in the field of comparative studies Parry and Lord's Yugoslav experience pointed to the autonomy of the oral epic. Parry, while in France, was influenced by Mathias Murko who studied oral Yugoslavian poetry, and by Antoine Meillet who asserted the heavily formulaic nature of the Homeric poems. Parry had begun to be aware of the traditional nature of Homeric diction as early as 1923 when he presented his Master of Arts thesis ('A Comparative Study of Diction as one of the Elements of Style in Early Greek Epic Poetry'); his doctoral dissertation, 'The Traditional Epithet in Homer' (1928), continues
to study the diction of the poetry and leads him to crystallize a definition of formulae:

"In the diction of bardic poetry, the formula can be defined as an expression regularly used, under the same metrical conditions, to express an essential idea". 2

This doctoral thesis lays down the foundations for oral studies and defines the tools with which oral poetry works, but the ramifications of Parry's work are not fully comprehensible until after 1933 when he first went to Yugoslavia and moved from a priori speculations on oral poetry to an empirical understanding of it. However, it is in 'The Traditional Epithet in Homer' that Parry (following the studies of Hermann, Lachmann, Wolf and Wood, and so on) introduces the nature of oral composition and poetry, and that is why I think a summary of this dissertation is essential.

Parry first stipulates the necessity of trying to place oneself in sympathy with the age which one is studying and quotes a passage from The Future of Science by Ernest Renan:

"How can we grasp the physiognomy and the originality of a primitive literature...unless we enter into the personal and moral life of the people who made it; unless we place ourselves at the point of humanity which was theirs, so that we see and feel as they saw and felt; unless we watch them live, or better, unless for a moment we live with them?" 3

2. Milman Parry 'The Traditional Epithet in Homer' p.13
N.B, All of Parry's essays referred to are in The Making of Homeric Verse: The Collected Papers of Milman Parry, ed. Adam Parry.
3. ibid. p.2.
This indicates Parry's recognition of the fact that value judgements about written and oral literature are damaging to an intelligent appreciation of either genre. His contention seems to be that in order to comprehend Homeric poems, one must drop dogmatic ideas which define what an epic should be, or what a literary and complex poem should be, or what a "primitive" oral poem should be, and instead let the works speak for themselves within their ethos. All art forms survive within the boundaries of their time and style and audience. Appropriateness may justifiably be the key to success in certain ages and styles, rather than inspiration. If we are shackled by a belief that literature is inspired, that the words are given, that the meanings are delivered because we are possessed by some spiritual being (this possession is the meaning of Plato's term *enthusiasmos*) or because our minds receive from their environment or their unconscious, we will not like to think that Homer was an oral poet working in what may appear to be an uncreative medium. Parry, wary of evaluative terms, discusses the mechanics of the noun-epithet phrase to discover why it is so abundantly present in Homer. He is not concerned whether it should be so abundantly present since such a study would be a denial of the autonomy of the poems as oral traditional compositions. In discovering metre to be

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the main influence on the Homeric traditional epithet
he is asserting the mechanical processes of line-
formation: the metre of all formula types is such as to
fill the space between the caesura and the beginning or
end of a line -

\[
\text{Iliad' 1 1-2}
\]

- ν ν dactyl
- - spondee
- νν - last two feet

The word-groups underlined by a solid line are to be found
elsewhere in the poem unchanged, and the broken lines
indicate phrases which are of the same type as others,
(and the metre and parts of speech are the same). 5

Formulae are these units created by caesuras within the
hexametrical line; Parry says

"In every noun-epithet formula [for example Peleiadeo
Achilleos as above] there are two elements, of which
one is fixed and the other variable. The fixed element
is the substantive. Apart from its variation in the
genitive and dative plural, it has always the same
metrical value, and this predetermined value is what
the poet must reckon with. The variable element is the
epithet. It can be assigned whatever metrical value
the poet chooses, and it can begin or end pretty much
as he wants."

Homer and Homeric Style' p.301.
6. Milman Parry 'The Traditional Epithet in Homer' p.84.
Parry considers that Homer was not concerned with finding original epithets but with perfecting the tradition by the best possible use of the accumulated formulae: within his thesis, Parry seems to subscribe to the thoughts of those who do not care to trail along after the demon of progress -

"... the bards had no hesitation in applying to any hero an epithet which at some point in time had first been ascribed to one particular hero. It was used a first time for this one person; then it was used again for the same person, when the rhythm allowed it and made its use easy. Then the bards applied it to other persons whose names were of the same metrical value with that of the original owner."

The functionism of the epithetic system is demonstrated in Parry's analysis of generic epithets:

"It is evident that the existence in Homeric diction of this system of generic epithets capable of being applied to any hero must inevitably involve a choice of epithets not according to the character of the hero, but according to the metrical value of his name."

Parry goes through lists of heroes, heroines, peoples, the Achaeans, ships, horses, men, and shields to illustrate this, and concludes that

"... once it is established that a given noun-epithet expression forms part of a traditional system designed for the use of a given noun, or in other words that it is a fixed epithet, we can be certain that this audience, long before they ever heard the 'Iliad' and the 'Odyssey', were too familiar with the expression to think of finding in it any particularized meaning ... no noun-epithet formula which certainly forms part of a traditional system of noun-epithet formulae can contain an epithet whose meaning is particularized."

7. ibid. p.87
8. ibid. p. 95
9. ibid. p. 130
The apprehension of the traditional and utilitarian aspects of formulae which Parry is displaying here is moving him towards another major area of oral studies: epic economy - E.R. Dodds sees as one of Parry's main contributions to an oral conception of the Homeric poems his demonstration that

"...for each of 37 leading characters in the two poems the poet has a stock descriptive phrase of exactly the same length, extending from the caesura to the end of the line, normally only one such phrase for each (on the principle of 'epic economy')." 10

An example of epic economy is the formula

\[
\text{poluméthis} \quad \text{Odysseus}
\]

which is used eighty-one times whenever this particular length of footage in this particular case is required.

Apart from the mechanics of oral-verse composition, which Parry discusses here by implication in his affirmation of the appropriateness of certain epithets and epithet phrases to the metre, the thesis reaches out beyond the poet's mind as it deals with his stock formulae, to the audience who expected and demanded epithets but paid them no attention. This explains what appear to be "unmotivated" epithets. Because of this close interaction between the poet and his audience, which is comparable only to the interaction between the modern writer and his

published work, Parry makes the startling (to modern minds) statement that "Homer sacrificed precision of thought to ease of versification". Because a literary writer is producing a finished art product, that can be held in one's hands and repeatedly read and studied, his attentions are drawn mostly to careful construction, fine lines, and the absolute existence of the words in fine black type. If the major relationship is not between the writer and the art product, but between the poet and his audience, the concerns are going to be different, the style restricted by different considerations. Thus oral poetry will exist momentarily, to create an immediate effect, to stir ready emotions, and will require different skills from the slow process of written, and often re-written, works. To the literary mind these different labours may seem to kill all modern literary values, such as originality, deep character portrayal, plot complexity, and painstaking revision; the values of an oral tradition are entirely dissimilar, based upon metrical appropriateness, fluidity of telling, continuity of story, and less so upon those results of revision, that finesse of style which we tend to consider so supremely important. If a poem is sung as it is composed, and disappears into the void of silence again, its epithets are bound not to be often particularized, but to be carefully wrought for other reasons -

11. Milman Parry 'The Traditional Epithet in Homer' p.84
"For him [Homer] and for his audience alike, the fixed epithet did not so much adorn a single line or even a single poem, as it did the entirety of heroic song ... epic lines without epithets would have seemed to them like a heroic character without his traditional attributes."

Care over the lines is an integral part of the Homeric style because of the necessity created by oral delivery for precision and flow, for economy and scope, that is, for the correct metrical patterns to be delivered in a line that carries the story forward or adds to its heroic colouring. Thus Homer displays creative merits within the oral genre: these lie in his skilful use of generic and fixed epithets (the stock of traditional epithets learnt by the bard) and the application of particularized epithets (the freedom of composition within the oral tradition). To use a particularized epithet, the poet had to have available an alternative epithet of the same metre as the usual epithet with which to replace it.

("When we find two or even more epithets or noun-epithet formulae of the same metre used with the same substantive, we can sometimes see that the poet is deliberately choosing a particular word in view of the immediate context" 13).

To creatively use a generic or fixed epithet, the poet combined both his technical skill and his acknowledgement of the audience's response to produce an evocation of heroic style and the heroic ethos:

"... for them [Homer and his audience] a generic epithet was simply one of the ennobling words of the language of poetry, essential to the tradit-

12. ibid. p.137
13. ibid. p.155
-ional style, but embodying an idea which their indifference put on the same level of importance as the ideas of other generic epithets.\textsuperscript{14}

The fact that some epithets are particularized complies with modern evaluative literary criticism, with the Flaubertian conception of the mot juste, and Parry's mention of it may lead to the mistaken idea that he is trying to endow Homer's oral epics with values that do not apply and cannot apply to this non-literary tradition. His concluding remarks stress the nature of the traditional epithets of Homer within their Homeric context, clearly marking them off from modern evaluations of originality and so forth:

"(1) Fixed epithets are used in accordance with their metrical value and not in accord with their signification; (2) they are traditional; (3) they are always ornamental; (4) they are often generic. And these four characteristics are ... interdependent. The traditional epithet would not be possible if the bards had not wanted them in a great variety of metrical values. The ornamental meaning is not possible in an epithet which is not traditional. And the generic meaning is not possible in an epithet which is not ornamental.\textsuperscript{15}

Non-oral writers like Pindar, Apollonius and Virgil particularized their epithets, so that in fact they include no ornamental epithets that are present in the works because of metrical and traditional necessity.

This summary of Parry's doctoral thesis, interspersed with my own reading of it, shows how he wished to keep the Homeric poems within their own context as much as possible,

\textsuperscript{14.} ibid. pp. 150-51
\textsuperscript{15.} ibid. pp. 165-66
without damaging them by the application of modern preconceptions and impositions. His concern at this point is largely for the excellence of the oral tradition which is shown in his respect for it, for the metrical foundation of the formula within the hexametrical line, for the conditions of oral composition which exist between the bard and his audience, and for the nature of their epithets, their true function.

Parry's Essays

His next essay, 'Homeric Formulae and Homeric Metre', deals more with the bard's concern with thematic material and his adaptations of style to content and vice versa:

"... The technique of the use of formulae consists on the one hand in the modification of formulae so as to adapt them to the expression of ideas more or less like those of the original formulae; and on the other hand in making different combinations of them". 16

He explains how

"... in the course of time there came into being series of formulae from the most simple to the most complex types. These series were what the apprentice bard heard in the verse of his masters, and he learned them and remembered them easily because of their resemblance to each other. Later, when he himself began to compose in heroic metre, he was guided by this resemblance between one expression and another, just as had been his predecessors from whom he had learned the style in which he sang. On the model of one word he chose another; he drew a new expression from an already existing expression; and he formed whole clauses and sentences from clauses and sentences like them. It is therefore on this sense of resemblances that the creation and the survival of formulae, as well as the technique of their use, 17 depends."

17. ibid. p. 197.
Parry at this point is stressing the extreme importance of the interconnection between formulae, which is leading him towards a discussion not only of the nature of the traditional Homeric epithet and its function within the hexametrical line, but also towards an awareness of the great scope of the formulaic vocabulary and the gradual structuring of themes from individual formulae. The traditional and essentially Homeric nature of the formulae is emphasized:

"Only by unconsciously following the sense of style formed in us by our familiarity with modern literature, can we imagine that Homer could have discarded an established artifice in order to invent a line which would have contrasted violently, by its originality, with the traditional expressions surrounding it." 18

Parry continues to discuss the traditional origins of formulae in his essay 'The Homeric Gloss: a Study in Word-Sense', which defines a gloss as

".. an element of vocabulary which has either no correspondence, or at best a remote one, with any element of vocabulary in the current language of an author's public." 19

It is significant that the glosses in Homer are mostly ornamental epithets (Parry defines ornamental epithets as: "adjectives used attributively and without reference to the ideas of the sentences or the passages where they appear") 20; the repeated use of the ornamental epithet,

18. ibid. p.206
which we know from 'Homeric Formulae and Homeric Metre' suggests the presence of a formula ("A formula declares itself by its frequency" 21), leads to the supposition that the fixed epithet within the formula is there not because of the meaning but because of the metre, and since the gloss is archaic within its linguistic context, it must be of traditional oral poetic background. Parry says

"The epic poets over the generations guarded those words which, though they had passed from current usage, were yet metrically convenient, or, to be exact, were now metrically indispensable." 22

This particular essay points in several directions: it insists on the presence of traditional elements in Homer, of traditional elements within formulae, and also suggests that Homer was preceded by a long oral-formulaic tradition, thus providing some basic hypotheses from which dating or comparative dating, at least, of these epics, could be carried out. This essay also heads towards an aesthetic appreciation of the 'Iliad' and the 'Odyssey' in terms of the poetic effect rather than of the mechanics of the poetry:

"..the ornamental epithet does not have a separate existence. It is one with its noun, with which it has become fused by repeated use, and the resulting noun-epithet formula constitutes a thought unit differing from that of the simple noun only by an added quality of epic nobility"; 23

23. ibid. p.249.
the indifference of poet and audience to the specific nature of these epithets does not detract from the ennobling effect the epithets have upon the heroic style.

Extending beyond the structure of formulae once more, Parry, in 'The Distinctive Character of Enjambment in Homeric Verse', discusses Homer's perfection within the limits of the traditional style in which he worked and to which he aligned himself; and in 'Studies in the Epic Technique of Oral Verse-making' examines all the implications of this genre. In the first section of this essay, entitled 'Homer and the Homeric Style', he defines a formula as

"a group of words which is regularly employed under the same metrical conditions to express a given essential idea" 24

(this has not changed significantly from the definition he gave earlier in 'The Traditional Epithet in Homer'), and states the principle that

".. the formulas in any poetry are due, so far as their ideas go, to the theme, their rhythm is fixed by the verse-form, but their art is that of the poets who made them and of the poets who kept them". 25

This essay looks at the composition of oral verse largely from the viewpoint of the oral poet who knows his grammatical tools, and their limitations and usages; also it differentiates between oral (formulaic) poetry and literary (non-formulaic) poetry, seeing that Hesiod, the Homeric

Hymns, elegiac poetry, Attic tragedy, and classical poetry after the fifth century greatly lacked formulae in comparison to Homer, and that if formulae were present they were not there in order to help the poet with his verse-making but were simply imitations of Homeric style, for example in Apollonius Rhodius and Virgil's 'Aeneid'. A quantitative analysis of formulae in the opening lines of both the 'Iliad' and the 'Odyssey' is given, showing the presence of entire formulae repeated in the poems, or of formulae whose "type" is repeated later. The bare statistics of Parry's analysis are not important in themselves, but they are extremely important if they indicate why there are so many formulae. Parry demonstrates how the hexametrical line that Homer uses has great scope and variation in the way it can be filled: the formulae of an oral poet's stock are evidently as varied in metre and length as are the many potential combinations of feet within the line. A list of examples of one type of formula is given to indicate the extent to which Homer had a formula for each metrical need:
After the fifth foot and a half: 

πάθεν ἀλγεα (twice)

After the fourth foot:

ἀλγεα πάσχει (10 times)

ἠλευθέρως ἔχονται (4 times)

πήματα πάσχει (7 times)

πήμα πάθησιν (3 times)

After the third foot and a half: 

πάθον ἀλγεα θυμῶι (6 times)

χαλέπ ἀλγεα πάσχη (4 times)

ματέρ ἀλγεα πάσχει (4 times)

ματέρ ἀλγε' ἔχοντα (4 times)

μακα κήδε ἔχουσιν (4 times)

μακα πολλα παθόντα (4 times)

μακα πολλα μογήσας (4 times)

After the third foot:

ἀλγεα πολλα μογήσας (4 times)

ἀλγεα πολλα πάθομεν (4 times)

After the trochaic caesura of the third foot:

πάθ ἀλγεα δυ κατα θυμῶι (twice)

ἔχοντι περ ἀλγεα θυμῶι (twice)

κακῶς πάσχοντος ἐμειο

ὅτι βομεν κακα πολλα

After the second foot and a half:

πάθεν ἀλγεα δυ κατα θυμῶι

χαλεπδυ δε τοι έσσεται ἀλγος

(Pg. 311)
Parry, from his conception of oral poetry and the proof he finds in the text, postulates that the utility of the oral-formula method lies in the role played by analogy—this,

"... as a guide to the poet in his choice of terms is one which, we shall see, can be fully understood only when one sees the relation between the play of sound and the thought of the poet, but at no moment should one forget that the use of like formulas is a direct means of overcoming the difficulty of expressing ideas in hexameters" 26

An important assertion in this essay is the following:

"... This formation of the traditional diction belongs, of course, to a time far earlier than that in which Homer lived, but the making of the diction is in no way different from a single poet's use of it. One can say that the Singer, in a recitation of a few hours, repeats the history of his style, for it is the play of sound which guides him in his grouping of the formulas, quite in the way that it had guided poets of an older time in their making of them". 26

In the second essay of 'Studies in the Epic Technique of Oral Verse-making', 'The Homeric Language as the Language of an Oral Poetry', Parry extends his vision from formulae to that which was to become important in his theory on the making of Homeric heroic verse: theme. Within the themes of a poem, formulae can be interchanged, added, or excluded during each singing; and as a poem, or its story, moves through time and region it will gradually acquire new linguistic elements. The poem, sung after these processes of change, will include archaic, new, and foreign elements; these changes, for instance in dialect, may account for some

26. ibid. p.312
27. ibid. pp.323-4
of the meaninglessness or metrical falsities that are evident in transcribed heroic poems. It is natural for such changes to occur where the rhythm is not much damaged, when the phrases from another dialect or from a time when the spoken language was different, are included. Parry posits this in 'Traces of the Digamma in Ionic and Lesbian Greek' as an explanation for such forms as frea, gan, and doo in 'Beowulf', where the metre calls for an older or Anglian disyllabic form.

Parry and Yugoslavia

From understanding the necessity of the traditional epithet in Homer's hexametrical lines, Parry has moved to a broader conception of formulae as including both generic and particularized epithets, and as being constructions other than noun-epithet conjunctions - they must include functional elements as well as descriptive ones in order for the lines to continue their story and in order for the formulae to work within the themes. The importance of themes has to be dealt with once formulae are perceived as necessary and forward-moving; and the economy and scope of the oral method have to be understood if the presence of formulae and themes are recognized as the necessary elements of oral composition.

The bulk of Parry's influential discussion deals with (a) formulae, (b) themes, (c) economy and scope, and is
to be found in *Serbo-Croatian Heroic Songs*, which Lord is editing and publishing; otherwise Parry's essays during and after his visits to Yugoslavia are the sources of his experience with oral poetry. The essays 'The Traditional Metaphor in Homer' and 'Whole Formulaic Verses in Greek and South Slavic Heroic Song' were both published in 1933, the year of Parry's first visit to Yugoslavia, and the second bears strong witness to his discoveries there. All of his theories, formed in the scholar's ivory tower, now confront the acid test of experience and are amazingly substantiated by it. Both Homeric and South Slavic verses are broken into units by diaereses and caesurae, the Yugoslav much less flexibly than the Greek and therefore having less scope for a multiplicity of combinations in the lengths of its formulae. This restriction accounts greatly for the superiority of the Homeric poems over the Yugoslav ones (that Parry collected). However, the principle of verse construction is essentially identical, with the same types of formulae and themes in use in both. An example of the likeness is found in the following list that Parry gives:
Homer

τὸν

to him

τὴν

to her

τοὺς

to them (m.)

τὰς

to them (f.)

5' αὖτε προσέειπε

gain spoke

(πολύταλος δίος Ὀδυσσεύς (3 times)
much enduring divine Odysseus

(θεὰ γλαυκώπις Ἀθήνη (14 times)
the goddess grey-eyed Athene

(μέγας κορυφαῖολος Ἡκτόρ (thrice)
great flashing-helmed Hector

(κατὰ ἀνδρῶν Ἀγαμέμνων (5 times)
the king of men Agamemnon

(Γερήνιος Ἰππίτας Νειστώρ (168)
the Gerenian horseman Nestor

Southslavic

( nahod Simeune (11, 13, 5
( the foundling Simeon

( njemu (11, 28, 1
( to him

( njojzi (11, 28, 1
( to her

( njima (11, 28, 3
( to them

( srpski car Stjepane (11, 28, 3
( the Serbian emperor Stephen

( Kraljeviću Marko (11, 55, 2
( the King's son Mark

(Pg. 379)
'Whole Formulaic Verses in Greek and Southslavic Heroic Song' discusses the themes and patterns that go to make up the heroic nature of these poems, for example the movement of time and the movement of characters and the prowess of brave men. Parry shows how the devices for introducing and elaborating the themes are similar in the poetries of both Homer and the Southslavic bards, for example

καὶ μὲν ὕψησας ἔπεα πτερόεντα προσηδα (49 times)
And addressing him he spoke winged words

Πάκ μυ ποδε τίθο γοβορίτι (11, 44, 50)
And quietly she began to speak to him.

Pg. 380

δέσετο τ' ἡλιος, σκιώνυτο τε πάφαι ἀγυμα (7 times)
And the sun set, and all the ways grew dark

Danak ἑρθε, ταῦνα νοόςα ὁδε (11, 42, 138)
The day passed, the somber night came on

Pg. 383
The themes, as embodiments of the heroic story, are as necessary an aid to the oral poet as formulae; he is sped on his narrative voyage too by set scenes that he can call upon to move his characters forward ("On Typical Scenes in Homer"). A recent study of the 'Odyssey' corroborates Parry's discussion of theme by indicating that the poem divides into six themes or organizational structures that could have been sung at the rate of two a day over a three-day performance:

"1. Telemachus against the suitors and abroad.
2. Odysseus with Calypso and in Phaeacia.
3. Odysseus' wanderings.
5. Odysseus as a beggar in his palace.
6. Odysseus restored to supremacy, and reunited with Penelope and Laertes."

This specific thematic narrative organization in turn embodies non-specific themes such as homecoming, wandering, guest-friendship, testing, disguise, non-recognition of the hero and omens.

"About Winged Words" shows that the oral poet must compose and deliver almost simultaneously, using economy in his words and scope in his narrative and themes:

"The singer of oral narrative rarely plans his sentence ahead, but adds verse to verse and verse part to verse part until he feels that his sentence is full and finished. The poet, with writing materials, can think leisurely ahead, but the singer, in the speed of his song, must compose straight out of fixed verses and verse parts.

28. A. Thornton 'People and Themes in Homer's "Odyssey"
    p. 124
"until he comes to the point where one of his characters is to speak. ... This the common oral style has given him, as it has given him his diction as a whole, and it has given him not one or two formulas which he must in some way work in, but a whole living system of them which allows him each time to express just the right idea in a phrase of just the right words and length and rhythm."

Parry considers that an experience of European oral poetries will help us to appreciate the oral and heroic poetry of Homer in its strictly traditional and forceful epic qualities.

In order to define the characteristics of oral style, Parry began a study of Yugoslavian singers which he called 'Cór Huso: A Study of Southslavic Song.' The excerpts of it included in Adam Parry's edition of his father's papers seem to grasp much more closely than do the essays on Homer the revelation of an age through its oral poetry. Milman Parry's familiarity with a number of Serbo-Croatian poets helped him to see oral-poetry at work, as a type of process form, coterminous not only with the evolving consciousness of the composer (as in the 'Cantos' of Ezra Pound) but also with the actual formation of the poetry. He says confidently,

"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".

The mechanics of oral delivery are much more clearly understood: the caesura is the point of addition, where the poet moves to another formula or a statement in apposition which

29. Milman Parry 'About Winged Words' p.415
30. Milman Parry 'Cór Huso: A Study of Southslavic Song'p.441
the bucolic diaeresis has allowed him to identify in his word hoard. Where a poet makes his own version of a poem, and lines are changed from a previous rendition, the changes come from the poet's own store of traditional phrases and themes, and are not personal additions. The thing is that

"The poetry does stand beyond the single singer. He possesses it only at the instant of his song, when it is his to make or mar". 31

The poet is subject to the story he tells, and is controlled by the traditional themes and formulae that potentially embody the story. Thus the unity of the poem is due to the unity of the story as a freely-existing entity, rather than to the limitations imposed on the poet by the length of time during which he is able to sing without a break. In seeing these Serbo-Croatian poems taking shape, Parry also increasingly realized the importance of the thematic material - this is the skeleton that the poet clothes in the flesh of his stock of formulae. But an important discovery arising from Parry's close study of the delivery of oral poetry in Yugoslavia reinforces what he had the perception to realize in 1928 when he presented his doctoral thesis, that to a mind conditioned to conceiving of poetry as literary there are several blockages to an appreciation of oral poetry. Some of the questions that Parry asked these Yugoslav singers were simply beyond their

31. ibid. p.450.
range of knowledge, outside their frame of reference. Later, Albert Bates Lord points out 32 that when an oral poet stresses that the ideal of the art of oral poetry is to produce an exact telling of a traditional story, it is clear that he has no means to compare the first song (from which, presumably, the singer learnt his song) with the second song (that the now fully-fledged singer delivers). In an oral tradition, the concept of precision and exactness can mean nothing like our own conception, since we have manuscripts and texts to which we can refer. Parry, throughout his work, first hypothesizes and then proves the necessity for integrity and respect when dealing with this different art form. He opened up new vistas in Homeric and epic studies, moving mainly towards a conception of the importance of themes in oral formulaic verse.

Lord and the Singer of Tales

Albert Bates Lord in The Singer of Tales (1960) oscillates between Homer of ancient Greece as singer and Avdo Međedović of twentieth century Yugoslavia as singer. Lord tries to show the nature of the formation of Homer's art with reference to Međedović, and to draw several important conclusions about the oral nature or background of much epic poetry. The first part of the book was presented as a doctoral dissertation in the Department of Comparative Literature at Harvard in 1949, but the entire
work was sustained throughout by collecting and recording trips to Albania, Yugoslavia and Bulgaria in 1937, 1950, 1958 and 1959; the scholastic inspiration is largely attributed to Milman Parry. By looking at Homer from a non-literary point of view which Lord was able to learn from his intimacy with Balkan oral poets, the peculiarities of Homeric language and structure can be seen in a new light. The inconsistencies, the mixture of dialects, the archaisms, repetitions, and epic "tags", are irreproachable in a non-literary tradition since different conditions of composition exist. From this stance of acceptance of and respect for oral literature, similar to the integrity that Parry displays at the beginning of 'The Traditional Epithet in Homer', Lord moves to a factual description of the craft of the singer of tales. The process towards perfection passes through the stages of listening, learning, and singing, until the singer is fully equipped and ready to perform and enlarge his repertory. The nature of his art lies in his flexibility within a fixed tradition - there is no text to refer to, but a tradition which is reaffirmed each time a song is sung, and of which the limits are drawn each time a poet uses the traditional elements. It cannot be stressed enough that this lack of a text as the standard and only form of the poem means that the singer's tale does not depend on words, which correspond one by one with the words in a
fixed poem, but on groups of words which embody meanings from which the story can be built:

"Man without writing thinks in terms of sound groups and not in words, and the two do not necessarily coincide. When asked what a word is, he will reply that he does not know, or he will give a sound group which may vary in length from what we call a word to an entire line of poetry, or even an entire song".  

From his hypotheses about Homer, Parry came to the same conclusion that Lord arrives at here from factual studies of modern singers, that

"... the picture that emerges is not really one of conflict between preserver of tradition and creative artist; it is rather one of the preservation of tradition by the constant re-creation of it. The ideal is a true story well and truly retold".  

From Parry's statistical analyses of formulae, students have mistakenly construed, Lord says, that the use of formulae is mechanical -

"Are we not conceiving of the formula as a tool rather than as a living phenomenon of metrical language?"  

The art of oral poetry, which can be detected in the use of formulae since the formula is the most obvious symptom of oral poetry, lies not in mechanical arrangements of formulae, but in the assimilation of various rhythmical patterns of accented and unaccented syllables. Lord implies that the more experienced the bard, the less mechanical will be his use of formulae:

33, ibid. p.25  
34, ibid. p.29  
35, ibid. p.30
"Surely the formula has not the same value to the mature singer that it has to the young apprentice; it has different values to the highly skilled and to the unskilled, less imaginative bard. We may otherwise think of the formula as being ever the same no matter from whose lips it proceeds". 

The most highly skilled verse is from experienced singers whose manipulation of rhythm is unconscious, not painstakingly fulfilling formal metrical requirements; on a similar level is the assimilation of formulae which are not memorized consciously -

"The learning of an oral poetic language follows the same principles as the learning of language itself, not by the conscious schematization of elementary grammars but by the natural oral method".

Lord seems to sense the most intangible subtleties of the oral method because he was able to witness it at first hand - the objections that critics of Parry raised about the definite structure and use of formulae may be partly met but perhaps not disproved by Lord's suggestion that the bard does not learn, say, a set number of formulae word for word, but that there occurs

"... the setting up of various patterns that make adjustment of phrase and creation of phrases by analogy possible. This will be the whole basis of his art. Were he merely to learn the phrases and lines from his predecessors, acquiring thus a stock of them, which he would then shuffle about and mechanically put together in juxtaposition as inviolable, fixed units, he could, I am convinced, never become a singer". 

The poem to be performed resides in the poet's head, there because of his familiarity with a tradition -

36. ibid. p.31
37. ibid. p.36
38. ibid. p.37
"All singers use traditional material in a traditional way, but no two singers use exactly the same material in exactly the same way". 39

Lord follows Parry into a study of theme as the embodiment of the story; associated with the themes and scenes are sets of characters, and all these elements allow descriptions of heroes, horses, arms, castles, and battles. Thus the song moves forward, and may be given depth and human warmth by the ornamentation and accumulated richness of scenes and themes. The flexibility of composition is illustrated by Lord in his description of Parry's experiment with Mumin Vlahovljak, a mediocre singer, and Avdo Međedović, the most talented Yugoslav singer that Parry and Lord discovered. The same song was sung by both men, by Mumin first and then by Avdo who did not know the song before he heard Mumin sing it; Avdo's version was far greater, it

"imparted a depth of feeling that had been missing in Mumin's version". 40

Thus the formulae and themes and scenes do not exclude the possibility of the creation of poems of varying qualities -

"...to the singer the song, which cannot be changed... is the essence of the story itself. His idea of stability, to which he is deeply devoted, does not include the wording, which to him has never been fixed, nor the unessential parts of the story". 41;

"Any particular song is different in the mouth of each of its singers". 42

39. ibid. p.63
40. ibid. p.78
41. ibid. p.99
42. ibid. p.100
The very point of oral poetry is its flexibility:

"Our real difficulty arises from the fact that, unlike the oral poet, we are not accustomed to thinking in terms of fluidity. We find it difficult to grasp something that is multiform. It seems to us necessary to construct an ideal text or to seek an original, and remain dissatisfied with an ever-changing phenomenon. I believe that once we know the facts of oral composition we must cease trying to find an original of any traditional song. From one point of view each performance is an original. From another point of view it is impossible to retrace the work of generations of singers to that moment when some singer first sang a particular song".

Lord's confidence in his familiarity with oral poetry enables him to examine the effects of writing on an oral tradition. The main thing is that

"...the art of narrative song was perfected...long before the advent of writing". 44

It does not seem to matter that writing was available to oral singers in Yugoslavia; writing did not destroy their art. Since the essence of oral poetry lies in its orality, it is not likely that it will be destroyed immediately by the art of writing. The conceptions of the one are opposed to those of the other. This leads Lord to consider the ideas of many Homeric scholars who, if they have been liberal enough to subscribe to the concept of an oral background to the 'Iliad' and the 'Odyssey', have become reactionary in their definition of Homer's art and medium: most have favoured the existence of a transitional poet who is both oral and literate. As

43. ibid. p.100
44. ibid. p.124
Lord points out,

"...an oral and a written poet ... by their very nature are mutually exclusive". 45

No transition is possible, only a complete change from composition to reproduction, from oral composition to simple performance of a fixed text, from aoidos or real bard to "mere rhapsode". The set 'correct' text sounds the death knell of the oral tradition. Thus it is that Lord leads from Yugoslavia to ancient Greece, where Homer, if we believe that he was an oral poet, must have composed completely without the aid of writing. Lord discovers in Homer the same qualities that mark the oral songs of Yugoslavia, the formulae and themes which are deeply embedded in the text, necessary to its formation -

"There is now no doubt that the composer of the Homeric poems was an oral poet. The proof is to be found in the poems themselves". 46

He summarizes and revises Parry's studies of Homer's formulae, enjambment and metre, introducing the point that the Greek hexameter allows for great variety because the line can be broken at more than one place by a caesura. The economy that Parry noted as a feature of Homer, though not of his imitators, is seen by Lord both in Homer and the Yugoslavian oral songs; thus a similarity can be drawn between these two oral traditions but not between Homer and Apollonius, or between Homer and Virgil, for example, who exist relatively close in time. This alignment

45. ibid. p.129
46. ibid. p.141
emphasizes the difference between oral and written literature, that they should not be confused, that the qualities of one should not be forced on to the other. Lord's concern for the effects of writing upon the oral tradition draws him into a difficult problem which Parry did not deal with: how, if the Homeric poems are oral, did they come into the form in which we know them? Lord thinks that dictation is the most likely method of transcription -

"In the hands of a good singer and competent scribe this method produces a longer and technically better text than actual performance. It seems to me that this is where we should most logically place the Homeric poems. They are oral dictated texts". 47

The final chapter of 'The Singer of Tales' deals with medieval epic: the work of Lord (1949), Magoun (1953), and Creed has proved to Lord's satisfaction

"that 'Beowulf' was composed orally". 48

In 'Beowulf' there are formulae and there are themes ("repeated assemblies with speeches, repetition of journeying from one place to another, and on the larger canvas the repeated multiform scenes of the slaying of monsters") 49 and what Magoun and others have called themes but which Lord prefers to call motifs. In discovering formulae in fair number in the 'Chanson de Roland' and 'Digenis Akritas', Lord thinks these two works may also be of oral background, but finally it is not the oral composition that is important but the elements of the traditional. As Lord

47. ibid. p.149
48. ibid. p.198
49. ibid. p.198
"Oral tells us 'how', but traditional tells us 'what', and even more, 'of what kind' and 'of what force'. When we know how a song is built, we know that its building blocks must be of great age".

Lord's Essays and Other Homeric Scholarship

In his essay 'Homer and Other Epic Poetry' Lord extends the application of his Yugoslavian experience beyond Homer and medieval epics to the four thousand years of epic poetry, of narrative song. The formulaic technique which is apparently inherent in these works enables less common ideas to be composed by rhythmic analogies and patterns, and the thematic technique aids the narrative flow and allows the speed necessary for this type of composition. Thus from Parry's close examination of Homer's text, and his study with Lord of Serbo-Croatian songs and singers, we arrive at the position where we must decide whether to accept that these ancient epics which we have recorded in manuscript or text are of an oral nature, or are of a literary written background, or are transitional works between oral and written literature.

Adam Parry, in 'Have we Homer's Iliad?', reiterates his father's theories and those of Albert Bates Lord, saying that the unity of the 'Iliad' lies in the constant critical presentation of heroic values, and that the formulary technique is exploited by the bard's dramatic and imaginative capacities so that the singer is essentially

50. ibid. p.220
'creative' rather than 'reproductive'. He sees that the main development of Milman Parry's thesis, stemming from Milman Parry's knowledge of Serbian heroic poetry, was from a conception of the antithesis between individual performances to the conception of the antithesis between oral and literary poetry. Like Adam Parry, Cedric Whitman, in *Homer and the Heroic Tradition*, uses the pioneering work of Milman Parry and Lord in an evaluation of Homer without having had close contact with an oral poetry. Although Parry and Lord are not primary sources, they have thrown more light on the primary sources by the originality of their theories (though Parry is the first to acknowledge his influences) than any other Homeric scholars. Like Parry and Lord, James Notopoulos has studied a modern oral poetry in order to throw light on the oral genre as a whole: his field of study has been modern Greek oral poetry, especially Cretan, but he has also looked at early Greek poems that have led him to posit a traditional background for them as well as for the Homeric poems. His main contention is that Homeric poetry is "inorganic" and "paratactic" as is all oral verse, and that therefore it must be judged as of oral origins. This type of understanding of the literary ethos is not shared by Whitman who often disregards the importance of tradition in oral poetry. He is one of those critics who postulate that Homer must be a transitional figure, and
he commits the contemporary fallacy of presuming that an oral poet must hate the instability and flexibility of his art -

"One might even say that, with writing, a new idea of permanence is born; oral communication is shown for what it is - inaccurate and shifting. Writing has a godlike stability, and to anyone with an eye for the future, its significance is scarcely to be mistaken". 51

In the light of the Serbo-Croatian studies of Parry and Lord, Whitman is misunderstanding the nature of oral poetry: it is not a low art form which has had to make do with the second best until writing has come along as a saviour. It will surely die if recitation takes priority over oral composition, if young bards cease to see oral poetry as a separate entity in a culture rapidly becoming more and more literately orientated, but this does not mean that oral poetry has survived as a poor second to written verse. C.M. Bowra also makes Whitman's mistake of imposing on oral narrative our literary conceptions, based as they are in a written heritage. Because of the presence in the poems of formulae, traditional themes, comparisons, repetitions, and the heroic ethos, Bowra realizes that the poems are the product of a heroic age with a long tradition behind it (Heroic Poetry), but still considers that Homer probably learned the new art of writing and was thus able to compose his complex and long poems. A closer examination

51. Cedric Whitman Homer and the Heroic Tradition p.80
of the poems (such as Bowra's essay on 'Metre'), not only within their generalized heroic ethos but also within their specific style and diction, significantly produces more relevant comments on oral composition than do any of the generalized cultural studies (such as Heroic Poetry, Chadwick's The Growth of Literature, Tillyard's The English Epic and Its Background).

The next important close analysis of Homer in the light of Parry's scholarship is produced by G.S. Kirk. The major impression to be derived from Kirk's work is of sceptical and cautious scholarship which will undoubtedly check any generalizations made by his predecessors. In the essay 'Formular Language and Oral Quality', his aim is to cut back the assumptions about oral poetry to the barest facts: he shows how Notoupolos argues in a circle, saying that because all oral poetry is formular, all formular poetry must be oral. Such a criticism of one who subscribes to one's own school of thought shows integrity; having acquired our sympathy thus, Kirk passes on to try to discover where exactly the essence of oral poetry lies. To do this he discusses literary imitations of Homer, such as the 'Batrachomyomachia' — on Notoupolos' thesis, this should be oral poetry, but we know it is not. Formular quantity is thus an imperfect test of orality: the real test is much less simple and is therefore less susceptible to easy 'proof'. Kirk's test relies on quality rather than
on quantity - the quality of a traditional system of
verbal and rhythmical patterns lies not in its creativity
but in its necessity, whereas a self-conscious creation
is deliberately imitative and unnecessary. Because he
believes in the oral nature of the Homeric poems and
criticizes the oral theory, Kirk may seem to be defeating
his own purpose, but in actual fact he is clearing away
some of the secondary growth and getting back to the ideas
of Parry and of Lord. What he objects to is the crystallization
of these ideas ('Homer and Modern Oral Poetry: Some
Confusions'). Kirk returns to a study of the Yugoslav
singers, and reveals how certain critics have mistaken
the conclusions that may justifiably be drawn from Parry's
and Lord's accounts -

"All this proof may make us more cautious about
the kind of conclusion we draw from Sterling Dow's
generalization that 'Verbatim oral transmission of
a poem composed orally and not written down is unknown'". 52

He also shows how our modern conceptions may distort the
singers' meanings, for example

"... they do seek to reproduce the songs they have learnt
as exactly as possible, though by our literate standards
this is not very exactly". 53

Kirk does not believe that Homer and the Yugoslav singers
are similar enough to have inferences made directly from
the poetry of the one to the poetry of the other. Whereas
Parry explicated the oral poetry in Yugoslavia in order to

52. G.S. Kirk 'Homer and Modern Oral Poetry: Some Confusions'
in Classical Quarterly N.S.10 (1960) pp.271-81, p.275
53. ibid. p. 275
refresh Homeric studies and to give some idea of the nature of oral poetry,

"Bowra, Lord, and Dow have made the mistake of making inferences directly from the details of modern Yugoslav poetry, or other less carefully studied oral poetry, to the poetry of Homer". Kirk, instead of blithely listing the similarities between the two poetries, perceives the differences, mainly that the Homeric poems are by far superior in imagination and dramatic effect than the Yugoslav poems:

"There are three factors in particular which must have favoured a greater standard of verbal accuracy in the transmission of the ancient Greek oral poems. The first is the scope, complexity, and economy of the formular system — the qualities which Parry himself first conclusively demonstrated ... The second factor is the much greater metrical rigidity of the Homeric hexameter. The South-Slavic heroic poetry is composed in loose decasyllabic lines which are sung to an intricate repeated melody from the violin-type instrument called the gusle. The musical accompaniment provides rhythmical stability... By contrast the Homeric line has a fixed metrical pattern based on quantity. ... These kinds of rigidity, formular and metric, are likely to increase the degree of verbal accuracy of the reproduction of Greek oral poetry as opposed to Yugoslav. ... The third factor is that the Homeric poems came at the end of the true oral tradition, so that their oral transmission depended for much of its course not on singers but on reciters or rhapsodes. Whereas Lord would like to believe that the poems were dictated, Kirk favours the view that they existed for several decades through reproduction by rhapsodes: there is a continuous line between 'creative' and 'reproductive' in an oral tradition — this is perhaps Kirk's most unsubstantiated theory. What Kirk is saying is that the

54. ibid. p.276
55. ibid. p.277
Yugoslav and Greek poems are all oral, but that because they are oral they are not necessarily identical. Within the genre, orality varies in its developments.

Kirk's picture of the Homeric poems is a cross section revealing elements that layer the poems into varying ages. The essay 'Objective Dating Criteria in Homer' struggles with the problem of dating; this problem is bound to arise when a tradition is recognized as having existed to influence a work which clearly bears the marks of that tradition, and when elements that appear to be incongruous within the work are late rather than early. The essay deals with archaisms and accretions, and reaffirms Kirk's basic contention that the Homeric poems are the result of a Greek poetical tradition (although he is not at all sure that there is evidence for this) and were stabilized by rhapsodes for perhaps one hundred years after composition. The presence of the tradition in the poems can be seen in the language, some objects and customs mentioned in the poems, and in the nature of the verse; the presence of

"additions and distortions [which] must have been made for the most part by men who were closer to being rhapsodes than to being aoidoi".  

Kirk's tentative conclusions are seldom dogmatic and retain the greatest respect for drawing the least fanciful hypothesis from the most finely sifted objective evidence -

Kirk does not allow his imagination to soar. In 'Homer and the Epic' he applies his knowledge to the texts of the 'Iliad' and the 'Odyssey' - he is able to see the artistry of Homer's oral style, especially in comparison with the Novi Pazar singers, and shows the unity of the poems once the apparent anomalies are solved by application of oral rather than literary standards to the works. Kirk, it seems to me, continues Parry's method of close study and thus arrives at more convincing conclusions than others like Bowra who thrive on things as general as ethos. It is true, however, that the problem of transmission is not solved any more satisfactorily by Kirk than by Lord or other scholars: the sudden transformation after Homer of all aoidoi into rhapsodes is not much better than a theory of oral dictated texts.

These Homeric scholars from Milman Parry to G.S. Kirk have established an understanding of the basic tools of oral poetry. The possible revolutionary significance of the application of an oral theory to the origins of much epic narrative poetry is illustrated in the following quotation from H.T. Wade-Gery:

"The most important assault made on Homer's creativeness in recent years is the work of Milman Parry, who may be called the Darwin of Homeric studies. As Darwin seemed to many to have removed the finger of God from the creation of the world and of man, so Milman Parry seemed to some to have removed the creative poet from the 'Iliad' and the 'Odyssey'." 57

57. H.T. Wade-Gery The Poet of the 'Iliad' pp.38-39
But Kirk, who follows Parry's way of integrity in his careful studies, does not sweepingly apply the concept of orality to epic poetry, nor does he exclude the presence of both a creative and a non-creative poet from Homer (where others might accept only a non-creative poet by misapplying a too-generalized concept of orality); most of all he avoids such sweeping statements as Wade-Gery's which, though it portrays the nature of Parry's impact, mistakes its specific applications. Kirk says that 

"If structural analysis is combined with a proper use of the objective dating criteria it can lead to some valid conclusions about composition". 

Likewise Parry has sought illumination of the text of Homer in order to conceive of the nature of the poems in their own right as poems. Evidence within the poems, discovered by Kirk through what he calls "structural analysis" and by Parry in his structural study of formulae and themes in Homer, suggests to both that the poems were orally composed no matter how they eventually came to be written down. Parry maintains his degree of objectivity by his insistence on losing his own preconceptions about literature and on returning as much as he can to the age which he is studying -

"There is a natural sense of an author's style which only he and his contemporaries can share". 

58. G.S. Kirk 'Objective Dating Criteria in Homer', loc.sit. p.189
59. Milman Parry 'The Traditional Epithet in Homer' p.3
Kirk's objectivity is sustained by his critical and sceptical wariness of drawing one dogmatic conclusion where several are equally feasible, and also by his linguistic and textual studies of the Homeric songs and by his archaeological examinations of elements within the songs. When such an incisive mind has approached the hypotheses on oral literature and has agreed with them critically, I am led to feel that the oral approach may be a profitable one in the areas where we do not know for sure whether the work was composed by a literate man (as, for example, we know the 'Aeneid' was composed, although the background to the composition of 'Beowulf' is much less certain); and when close textual studies have shown up the peculiar nature of several old songs and have proved the existence within these songs of strange repetitive formulae, archaic and anachronistic words and objects, I am led to think that the oral approach may provide the best explanation of the peculiar nature of these poems.
CHAPTER TWO

Parry and 'Beowulf': the Hypothetical Structuring of an Anglo-Saxon Oral Tradition

Are Parry's Theories Applicable to Old English?

Parry's theories were first applied to Old English poetry in the context of Old English studies by Francis P. Magoun, who published an essay in 1953 entitled 'The Oral-Formulaic Character of Anglo-Saxon Narrative Poetry'. (Albert Lord, in 1949, showed Magoun his formulaic analysis of 'Beowulf'). Since then many other scholars of Old English have written for or against the idea of a Germanic oral tradition manifest in Anglo-Saxon verse. They have either brought to bear on Anglo-Saxon poetry what they considered to be Parry's rules, or have misread his 'rules' and thus allowed an ever-widening concept of formulae, systems and themes to exist within the Old English context. A revision of what Parry's studies actually say and of the validity of their application to Old English verse is necessary to correct these misleading uses of Homeric scholarship. It is clear, however, that fruitful use can be made of his work, especially in ascertaining the nature of a tradition that maintains an oral literature. Where convenient, the Homeric poems have been equated with 'Beowulf' or Caedmon's 'Hymn' or the 'Seafarer' or 'Elene'.

and so on; in order to establish the oral nature of these Old English poems, scholars have used a generalized concept of Parry's idea of the tools of oral verse and have indicated signs in the Anglo-Saxon verse of these tools. Some scholars (for example, Donald K. Fry) are disturbed because an exact understanding of Parry's definitions has not been employed, while others (for example, Ann Chalmers Watts) are concerned because they do not consider that an exact equation can be made between the 'Iliad' and the 'Odyssey' and, say, 'Beowulf'. Most of those who defend the oral theory continue to presume that loose interpretations of Parry's work can elucidate the composition of Old English poetry: amongst them are Magoun, Creed, Curschmann, Waldron, and Campbell.

It is essential to see clearly that 'Beowulf' has its place at some definite point in time in the history of traditional Germanic literature. Tom Burns Haber has suggested that because 'Beowulf' is the longest Anglo-Saxon poem extant, it was unique in its day and is therefore likely to be the product of classical influence. But 'Beowulf' is only 247 lines longer than 'Genesis', and its length and epic quality do not lead me to think that it is the result of a classical influence or of some other strange catalyst. 'Beowulf' is not a mutation, but belongs wholly to the Germanic tradition as it existed in England in the seventh century. If a feasible hypothetical
concept of this tradition is put forward, and if 'Beowulf' is given its place here, the problem of mistakenly relating 'Beowulf' to the Homeric poems in ways in which they should not be related will be solved. Parry's work, because it is the most detailed done in the field of oral studies, has become a collection of laws to those exploring the oral tradition in areas other than ancient Greek poetry. I think, however, that Parry's work was descriptive rather than prescriptive. The area of confusion is, as always, that hiatus between text and audience, where problems of intention are wrestled with. What Parry has done is to show that, using a concept of genre, he can explain the nature of the verse, help elucidate its heroic and repetitive tone, and throw light on its composition. His view has been backward towards the text, not forward towards the establishment of rules. Looking at certain striking features of the poems, he has constructed a theory that answers for all of these features. He is therefore making the following logical points:

(1) I have a text in front of me which is crystallized and which I have no intention of changing;
(2) this text has certain features which give it a definite character and tone;
(3) to these features collectively I will apply every general theory I know in order to find one theory that fits; thus I may learn about the theory and the features;
(4) if I apply an oral theory to the poems, I think I can see how all of these features are answered for, and I can also learn how the oral method of composition worked because I can see why these features are present;
so far I have learned that the features have a tone and a function - the tone and function corroborate each other since the function is to do with the process of composition and the tone is to do with the nature of the composition;

thus the work and its creation are extremely close, the heroic tone of the work existing in the functional heroic language from which it is created;

it seems, therefore, that I can best describe the Homeric poems from the standpoint of an oral theory.

The confusion between description and prescription has existed before in criticism, since for so many Aristotle's Poetics has been a set of rules against which works could be judged and shown to be deficient. Parry has not said, in his definition of a formula, that unless the formula is "an expression regularly used, under the same metrical conditions, to express an essential idea" it is not a formula. What this and other of his definitions and statements are saying is that, in the Homeric context, certain general processes and characteristics can be isolated and their nature generalized into a definition. These definitions are an aid to recognizing these processes and characteristics (for example, the presence of formulae, formulaic systems and themes, heroic epithets, generic, fixed or particularized epithets, and so on), but primarily they are the accumulated proof of Parry's thesis. Having found that the oral system can best explain the special quality of Homeric verse, he subsequently offered verification of this. Proof is given in his examples from the

text and in the conclusions he draws from the examples: what he is doing is describing the text. He was hopeful that more studies would be carried out in his field, especially after he saw that oral poetry was still alive in Yugoslavia; thus he showed himself to be undogmatic, happy for others to go beyond his particular theories. However, he did not expect that the ideas he wrote down would be uncritically applied to as many areas of literature as they have been applied to; and again, he did not expect that they would be used as a diving board into a morass of confused oral-formulaic studies. If a scholar attracted by Parry's theories utilizes them inflexibly in a field other than Homeric or Yugoslav verse, he is liable to commit several errors: Parry's descriptions and suppositions are all based on a thorough knowledge of the Greek hexameter, its rhythmic and metrical potentials, and also of Greek language and vocabulary. Old English has a different vocabulary, a different rhythm and a different metre; even more important, it lies in a tradition totally different from that of the 'Iliad' and the 'Odyssey'. On the other hand, if a scholar similarly attracted to the oral theory half-heartedly uses Parry's ideas, leaving out those which seem to disprove the orality of whatever field is being studied and expanding those which are useful aids to his theory, Parry's work will once more have been forced to act as prescription instead of description; in addition,
the scholar's field of work will be incompletely explored in terms of its own tradition and incompletely explored in terms of the generalized concept of oral composition. Parry's work is extremely thorough and its implications are far-reaching: his method of close textual analysis seems of supreme importance as the factor most contributing to this thoroughness. From the text, certain ideas have suggested themselves to him which form a whole theory, the oral theory of composition. Through noting the repetition of features and characteristics of the verse, he has been able to draw up a hypothesis which explains why these repetitions are present. His theory is therefore centred on the work, and carefully maintains the work in its own tradition. This is what Old English scholars must do: examine the text and allow the work to exist within the Germanic tradition (there must have been such a tradition for these works to have come into existence). So often it seems that 'Beowulf' must exist in a line of direct descent from the 'Iliad' because of the careless application of Parry's ideas. The first revision of Old English studies therefore must exclude from them any partial application of Parry's work: it is extremely important that 'Beowulf' is discussed as an epic poem of Germanic origins. If selections from Parry's work are the scholarly background of any essays, the danger exists that 'Beowulf' will be seen only as an oral poem of the Homeric type, oral because of its formulae which are, in Parry's terms, a sign of the
oral nature of a work. Such conclusions are too simplistic and result from a misapplication of Parry's Homeric studies.

The discussion of the oral nature of Old English poetry, whether for or against the theory (for example, Francis Magoun 4 and Larry Benson 5 respectively), has centred almost wholly on the idea of repeated phrases. This is because other characteristics of oral verse described by Parry have been inconveniently inapplicable to Old English poetry. The trend has been to ignore the elements that are not proof of orality and to use only those fragments which are proof—mostly, these fragments are repeated phrases. A series of equations has ensued, leading to a definite but insufficiently demonstrated conclusion: repeated phrases = formulae = oral-formulaic literature. Some scholars have written on the problem of economy in Old English: economy is apparently absent from Anglo-Saxon poetry and this absence seems to suggest that the poems are not oral (since economy is one of Parry's main criteria for orality). Donald K. Fry 6 takes the other alternative and concludes that the requirement of economy is not applicable to Old English literature. This is a dishonest way of dealing with Parry's theories: I think that all of the main elements of his studies must be accounted for if any one of them is used, whether the

5. Larry D. Benson 'The Literary Character of Anglo-Saxon Formulaic Poetry' PMLA 81 (1966) 334-41
6. Donald K. Fry 'Variation & Economy in Beowulf' Modern Philology 65 (1968) 353-56
application proves or disproves one's thesis. Once 'Beowulf' is put back in its proper place in Germanic literature, it is safe to explore it as a potentially orally-composed work; its specifically Anglo-Saxon character and language must be looked at in detail, and all of Parry's theories tentatively brought to bear on it. If they do not apply, there are two alternative conclusions:

(1) the work is not oral;
(2) since the work comes from a different ethnic and literary tradition, it cannot measure up to every description of Homeric and Yugoslav verse and therefore it is possibly still oral.

To me, it seems that the more intelligent choice is the second alternative, otherwise one is working with a syllogism which has as its first statement a hypothesis that is used in the final statement as a fact; that is, the poem is oral, these elements show it is oral, if any or all of these elements is not present the poem is not oral. This circular argument is not sufficient proof to coerce me into discarding the oral theory too hastily. I prefer to take 'Beowulf' in its Germanic tradition, to study its text in order to see whether an oral concept of composition throws more light on the poem than a literary concept or vice versa. The way must be open, also, for the establishment of new criteria from which the orality or non-orality of the poem can be judged.
The Nature of General Oral Literature: the Tradition

Parry's work on the general nature of oral literature, used correctly, can suggest the nature of an oral tradition, the marks of an oral literature, and, with Lord, the mechanics of oral composition. The most shattering idea to emerge from Parry's research is that oral literature cannot be described in the same way as written literature can be. What he did was to set up a descriptive vocabulary for oral literature, a genre never explored so thoroughly or with so much respect before. If a work is first seen as written, and then seen as orally composed, the effects on one's understanding of it must be great and extreme. The many presuppositions a modern reader has when he picks up a book are questioned and frequently knocked down. The main difference that must be comprehended is the preponderance of traditional material in an oral poem which is not present in a written poem simply because it is not necessary and does not belong there. Unwritten literature has existed throughout all time in all races. Depending upon the extent of its growth and popularity, and its use, it will universally embody certain characteristics which may be the same in several far distant areas because of the similar point in development reached and because of the similar function. This literature or song is sacred or profane, probably concerned with ritual and then developing into elaborate tales of heroic deeds. Because this literature was not written, mnemonic devices
were unconsciously developed: since writing was not known it was not necessary to discover purposefully a way to remember the works. Memory, or more correctly, mnemonic devices, would have been accepted as the medium of songs since no other medium was known. It is therefore necessary to look for mnemonic devices in poems that have eventually found their way into manuscript form and that could be of oral origin. Parry's recognition of repeated phrases which, under certain conditions he called formulae, is one such discovery of a mnemonic device. If potentially oral works other than the Homeric poems are examined, it is likely that the discovery of similar mnemonic repetitions will be made, and that this discovery will constitute useful proof in establishing the degree of orality of such works. Once a particular rhythm or metre is detectable in the poem, the position of these repeated phrases can be noted: some will occupy one part of the line more easily than they will another part. Amongst the phrases will be some more often used than others, presumably because they are constantly available to fill a line or part of a line. These are likely to be more general than particular in meaning since they are so frequently used: this is Parry's concept of economy, which functions as a mnemonic device by reducing the singer's vocabulary and supplying him with useful phrases that can often be used decoratively and functionally; that is, they do not lessen the impact of
the line even though they are generalized, and they allow the line to move to its end without upsetting the rhythm or metre. If poetry is to be mnemonic it may seem to be in danger of having an impoverished vocabulary: it is clear, however, that the wealth of traditional material available to the poet gives him plenty of scope for the movement of his story and for the events from which he can build it. If a line needs to be completed by a phrase of a certain length, it is likely that there will be more than one phrase in the traditional stock that will fit without making nonsense of the meaning. Thus both artistry and mnemonic devices are available to the poet in his tradition.

Seen from the oral poet's viewpoint, his poetry displays a fully developed functional and artistic medium. Parry noted this functionalism in the use of Homeric traditional epithets and formulae, in the economy of Homeric verse and its scope. All oral poetry is unwritten, and therefore it is likely that these characteristics of oral poetry which are specifically linked to the fact that it is unwritten should persist throughout different oral traditions. Another important fact about oral literature is the unique nature of its composition, its response to its audience and the effect on it of the audience's presence. Lord⁷ has equated oral composition with the ordinary use of language, by which we have words and

⁷. Albert Bates Lord The Singer of Tales pp.35-36
combinations of words in our heads which are quickened and called forth to express our meaning. Michael Nagler\(^8\) gives a psychological and semantic interpretation of oral composition which relies on the concept of Gestalt: the Gestalt exists on some preverbal level in the poet's mind, in a fluid state, until realized in patterns at the moments of utterance. Such a theory goes beyond memory into the darkness of the mind, where a system of deep structures exists from which an almost unlimited supply of surface structures can be realized. The generative view stresses the unconscious development of the mnemonic devices of oral poetry; the development is so unconscious that it is not in fact related to memory but to some more primitive and unknown faculty where the poem exists as Gestalt and from which it comes in the uniqueness of its every performance:

"all is traditional on the generative level, all unique on the level of performance".  

Frances A. Yates,\(^9\) by tracing treatises on memory, has described a more consciously evolved mnemonic system than Nagler's deep structure one. She says

"It is not difficult to get hold of the general principles of the mnemonic. The first step was to imprint on the memory a series of loci or places".  

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9. ibid. p.311
10. Frances A. Yates 'The Art of Memory'
11. ibid. p.3
The mnemonic systems which she finds in the work of classical, medieval, and Renaissance scholars are schematically based upon the location of focus points, on spatial visualization (with the introduction of the printed book), and on the imagination. These types of memorization are psychologically and artistically substantiated, but may be of less relevance to oral composition than Nagler's linguistic mnemonics.

Oral literature is therefore seen as something as mysteriously formed as language and yet as simply formed. Because so many of the terms used to account for oral composition are amorphous, many scholars have felt that oral composition itself is an amorphous and unrealistic concept. If we are to believe Nagler, and I think we must simply because of the abundance of oral poetry as testimony to its ease of creation, composition without writing inside a well-established tradition is as simple as learning to speak while a child within a well-established oral-communicative family. The oral poet is trained in much the same way as a child is. It does not matter that men quibble over the terminology and subclauses of studies on oral poetry: it has existed and still does. Parry and Lord's studies in Yugoslavia proved absolutely that there is such a thing as oral poetry; they also showed how it can work by listening to several singers and interviewing and recording them. These singers were largely unaware
of the devices by which they composed, but these devices are clearly evident in their songs. Since we know oral poetry is real, can be created by mnemonic unconscious devices rather than memorized, and can go on for thousands of lines (Lord recorded such a song by Avdo Međedović), objections such as A.D. Brodeur¹² has raised must be rejected. An oral poet is steeped in his tradition, well-equipped with stock epithets and phrases, endowed with a strong rhythmical sense, and is capable of using his oral tools in a creative and traditionally meaningful and stirring way. Traditional language and mood can be detected in the tone of the poem, be it elegiac or heroic or whatever; traditional vocabulary can be detected in the mood of the poem and in verbal and structural repetitions; folklore and mythic background is discernible in the story, its themes, characters, and events; the nature of composition can be deduced from the quantity of traditional elements and the extent of their usefulness. All of these elements lie within the song, put there by the poet; the other important condition of oral verse is the audience. For a listening audience, the poet will create an evocative and traditional story, made up of themes which lead into one another as they go—thus the poem will not seem prefabricated, of complicated structure, but will follow the paths of natural progression from

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¹² A.G. Brodeur *The Art of Beowulf* pp. 4-5, 70, 220-221
birth to death, through genealogies, from place to place, from event to event. This is the general nature of oral poetry, the area that Parry opened up when he stressed the importance of tradition and of seeing a work within its own context. Here is where his work and that of other classical scholars is so important: they have shown in Homer an oral poet working in a tradition, capable of great, extensive, and colourful epic poetry, not stilted by his medium but working efficiently and superlatively in it. Thus the possibilities for other oral poéties are great: Brodeur's objections that 'Beowulf' is too complicated and too long to have been of oral origin cannot be accepted if the persuasive studies of Homer prove that the 'Iliad' and the 'Odyssey', both very much longer than 'Beowulf', are oral and are still finely worked poems.

Application of Parry's Main Theories to 'Beowulf'

(a) Introduction

The most famous of Parry's discoveries is of formulae, but the point he stresses most throughout his work is the necessity of recognizing the tradition lying behind poems and of maintaining them within this tradition. Few, if any, Old English scholars have dealt with the problem of tradition to the extent that it deserves: when orality is being discussed the general trend has been to carry Homeric theories directly across to 'Beowulf'.

a few formulaic similarities between 'Beowulf' and other Germanic poems, for example 'Helianc'.\textsuperscript{14} Parry has established the importance of this need to place a poem in its own tradition and leave it there, while Lord has emphasized the importance of the tradition to the singer as he draws on his stock of language, and Kirk has tried to show through archaeological and textual studies the possible position of the Homeric poems in an oral tradition. 'Beowulf' is an Anglo-Saxon poem whose origins are undoubtedly continental; the seeds of it were carried by the migrating tribes in myth, folklore, and the poetic language of their cultural tradition or, more specifically, by scops who travelled across the sea with the tribes. As R.W. Chambers\textsuperscript{15} says, the poem ignores England, and this fact alone is enough evidence to indicate the continental origins of 'Beowulf'. The events and characters all belong in a Scandinavian setting, but the mood is the generalized mood of desolate darkness of mind. The language and events both express this heroic ethos, and the unity of feeling and expression suggests a well-established tradition from which the poem was drawn. A firmly entrenched tradition perpetuated by an oral literature will contain in its word-hoard a wealth of generic and specific phrases which in themselves embody traditional heroic values, moods and events;

\textsuperscript{14} Robert L. Kellogg 'The South Germanic Oral Tradition' in 
\textsuperscript{15} R.W. Chambers \textit{Beowulf} p.98
also it will contain themes and stories and heroes which all belong within the heroic tradition and will thus reaffirm it each time they are drawn up. This vague-seeming idea of the traditional stock of words, phrases, characters and events is wholly practical, as seen in the close studies of a living oral tradition in Yugoslavia by Parry and Lord. The corpus of traditional elements of which Lord was so fully aware must exist in any culture where stories are preserved by fresh retellings constructed out of mnemonic and deep-structure patterns in the singer's mind. Within 'Beowulf' itself are clues to the tradition from which it springs; there are descriptions of the scop at work with his harp in the hall

(for example, lēoð was āsungen,
glēowennes gyd. Gamen eft āstāh,
1159-1160 'Beowulf'),

and composing a song while on horseback

(for example, Hwīlum cyninges þegn,
guma gilphlāden, gidda gemyndig,
se ḍe ealfēla ealgesegena
worn gemunde, word ǭber fand
sōðe gebunden;  sæcg eft ongan
sīō Bēowulfes snyttrum styrian,
ond on sped wrecan spel gērade,
wordum wrixlan;

867-874 'Beowulf');

there are many tales from Danish, Geatish and Swedish history that have been substantiated by ancient documents and modern studies; there are strange inconclusive elements that can be explained only by folklore and mythological origins, and so on. I will discuss these elements more fully in a following
chapter. Thus it becomes clear that there is plenty of material from which a cultural and literary continental tradition behind 'Beowulf' can be constructed, mainly because the work on Homer has shown the way towards the possibility of similar hypothetical constructions of traditions.

(b) Formulae

Parry's identification of formulae in the 'Iliad' and 'Odyssey' is important as a means of locating mnemonic devices in a poem that is potentially oral. Any such repetitive devices are indicative of something of significance, and need not be thought of as accidental. Supposing that the repetitions are there for a reason, it is next necessary to try to define the reasons. It is likely that in an orally composed poem such repetitions will be necessary to its composition, and in a written poem only decorative and imitative of oral poetry. Because there are fewer such repeated phrases in 'Beowulf' than in the Homeric poems, it has been said that 'Beowulf' was not orally composed but belongs in a tradition that was once oral, borrowing certain oral elements for decorative effects. The idea that the smaller quantity of formulae in 'Beowulf' proves it is not oral presupposes that Homer is the standard oral poet, against whom other oral poets must measure in many details in order to deserve the rank of oral poet. There are mnemonic devices in 'Beowulf' what-
ever the comparative quantity: and they are often generic rather than particular (for example, goldwine gumena 1171a, 1476a, post was göd cyning - 863b, and ða was frōd cyning 1306b with the variation was ðā frōd cyning 2209b) or have become particularized within a traditional form (for example, Healfdenes sunu 1009b, sunu Healfdenes 1652b, bearn Healfdenes 1020b). In written poetry imitating oral formulae, the "formulae" are usually unnecessary, particularized, and decorative, for example those found in the works of Virgil and Apollonius Rhodius -

cui pecudum fibrae, caeli cui sidera parent
et linguae volucrum et praesagi fulminis ignes,

Whom the victims' entrails obey and the stars of heaven, the tongues of birds and prophetic lightening fires

Aeneid' X 176-177

Βέλος δ' ἐνεδαλετο καθη
νύρθεν ὑπὸ κραδῆν, φλογὶ εἰκελοῦ· ἄντικ δ' αἰεὶ
Βάλλεν ὑπ' Ἀσοῦλὴν ἀμαρύγματα,

and the bolt burnt deep
down in the maiden's heart, like a flame;
and ever she kept darting bright glances straight up at Aeson's son.

'Argonautica' III 286-289
(c) Economy

The economy that Parry stresses should not suggest that the formulae available for any one person, event, or object are limited in scope or quality: a list of epithets for Greek swords and spears\textsuperscript{16} shows the multiplicity of epithets and cases available to fill feet and half feet of varying combinations, with more than one formula of a specific length and case often available so that choice and variation is possible. The criticism of the lack of economy in 'Beowulf' is partly refuted by a study of the epithets for swords and spears therein: the range of alternatives within one case and type of verse is similar to the range of Greek epithets though no one epithet is used as frequently as those in the Homeric poems. The reason for this is that there is not only the requirement of metre in Old English but also the crucial requirement of alliteration: this will mean that a great number of formulae will be available but will each be used to a lesser extent than those of non-alliterative traditions since there is the double requirement of alliteration and metre to satisfy. It will also mean that formulae may be less identifiable in an alliterative poetry since if they are not repeated they are scarcely possible to locate; but there are sure to be many traditional phrases used only once present in the poetry. It is important to note that metre is secondary and alliteration is primary in deter-

mining the nature of the lines. The abundance of synonyms in Old English has also been noted as an example of lack of economy: this abundance also surely suggests that a richly poetic language has developed a wide vocabulary which allows a multiplicity of choices. Since these synonyms belong to the poet's normal as well as to his poetic vocabulary, they will be certain to aid composition rather than to hinder it. An important manifestation of economy in the Anglo-Saxon context is the frequent and skilful use of compounds or concise half lines which rapidly sum up and epitomise an idea which, in modern English, would take more words to express; for example line 2396 "cealdum cearsiōum" is translated "evil expeditions fraught with care", and line 2576b "gryrefōhe slōh" which is translated "slew [the creature] terrible in its variegated colour".

(d) Metre

If metre is the sole technical requirement in determining formulae in Greek heroic poetry, and metre and alliteration are the requirements in Old English and alliteration primary, the formulae in Old English are likely to be twice as many in the work, although many will not be recognized because they are not repeated. The objection based on the number of formulae to the possibility of 'Beowulf' having been orally composed can be razed if 'Beowulf' is seen in the context of its own alliterative tradition, and not
in the non-alliterative Greek tradition about which Parry wrote. The presence of formulae or stock phrases in Old English laws also suggests their highly traditional nature, embodied in the well-developed oral tradition of verbal preservation of Germanic law. Parry saw metre as the controlling device of formulae. Thus, formulae, phrases that were repeated under exactly the same metrical conditions, were restricted to metrical quantitative precision. The attempts to count formulae in 'Beowulf' have varied in their results because of the extent to which different scholars applied this metrical consideration of Parry's to Old English repeated phrases. Since Old English metre is not as strictly quantitative as Greek, Parry's description of the position and nature of formulae cannot be wholly applied to Old English poetry. Certain studies have indicated that both poetries are suited to musical accompaniment, the Greek especially because of its particles (which suggest a tonal language), and the Anglo-Saxon because, like the Greek, its lines carry a caesura and often would be aided by a percussive beat where a primary stress in the line is missing. Within an area of oral studies, the discovery of possible musicality is important: musical accompaniment suggests that the poems may in actual fact be songs and that the metre is strongly rhythmic allowing an unconscious spontaneous rhythmic verse

17. F.E. Harmer Anglo-Saxon Writ pp. 85-92
composition. The metre of 'Beowulf' is certainly strongly rhythmic, and because it allows always a far freer number of unaccented syllables than ancient Greek poetry does, it is once more reasonable to assume that form and content of traditional phrases will be more variable than in Homeric verse. Parry's stress on constant metrical conditions in his definition of formulae is therefore not applicable to Old English verse. If the metre was as strictly quantitative as it is in the 'Iliad' and 'Odyssey' it would be more reasonable to suppose that his definition should become a rule for all studies of formulae. However, he is not setting up an outline of the only conditions under which formulae can exist but is saying where they exist in Homeric poetry. In Old English, metre will be of the same importance as it is in Homer, but its character is different and therefore the way it affects the verse construction will be different. And so it is. Metre rhythmically but not quantitatively controls the selection and use of formulae in Old English, just as alliteration does. Sievers five types, although they retrospectively impose classifications on the sound of 'Beowulf' (and the sound is wholly relevant) which the poet would have felt only as rhythms, do at least show the variation of the verses in this poetry. But the types are rigid impositions and since the poet would be more aware of rhythm than of any number of metrical types, I would dispute the
enforcement of this classification. An oral poet intuitively uses these rules whereas only a writing poet would formulate them. And it is within these oral verses that the traditional phrases take their place, more variable in length than the Greek formulae and therefore taking on many forms which are not identical but are variations of a basic thought.

(e) The Audience

Parry's next important point in discussing the orality of the Homeric poems is the rôle of the audience in its relationship with the singer. Parry used the audience to explain the lapses into terseness or vagueness in Homer's storytelling, suggesting that a listening audience would expect but not register formulae. Thus epithets would be in accord with the heroic ethos but not necessarily of particular relevance to the exact moment in which they occur in the story. The absence of epithets is therefore of more significance than their presence: the epithets help fill the line, but are not useless to the story since they promulgate its heroic atmosphere. The audience of any oral poetry is obviously of great importance since it is not only the recipient of the poetry but also another control on it. It expects a traditional song and will receive one; to the audience each performance is unique and a unity, and the audience has none of our modern ideas on accuracy and foreign and traditional elements. Because of the
method of composition and delivery, each poem (that is, each performance) must exist wholly as itself, a unique creation in an ancient tradition. The heroic nature of these poems is conveyed through the familiar stories and characters and language; familiarity breeds audience interaction and contentedness. If an audience's ear is soothed and pleased by the recognition of formulae and repeated themes, in an alliterative poetry it will also be pleased by the sense of familiarity that alliteration creates through its air of partial repetition. In Old English, therefore, the audience will react to all the elements of the poetry appreciatively because these elements are traditional, as will the audience of any traditional poetry. The bonds between poet and audience that Parry mentions are the same wherever similar conditions apply, but the unique qualities of every poetry must be discovered in order to understand each audience's individual response. For any audience, the unity of the poem will come from the unity of the story, from the strongly traditional nature of the underlying Gestalt.

(f) Themes and Systems

The growth from formulae and formulaic systems into themes and stories is indicative of the oral poet's linear and accumulative method of composition. When a certain point in a story is reached, a relevant accumulation of phrases will be available for use: this accumulation is
the formulaic system. An example of a system is the convention of having a character speak within the story framework: many phrases exist that the poet can use to introduce this event. In 'Beowulf', because of the greater flexibility of rhythm and metre than in Homeric poetry, such systems function very well, controlled also by alliteration. In fact, 'Beowulf' shows more signs of formulaic systems than of formulae; the systems are more easily identifiable than individual formulae because they always express the same thought without necessarily using the same words. It is well known that men cannot tell of much besides birth, love, and death, but these contain a multiplicity of events and ideas, some strictly personal and some the feelings of an age, of a tradition. The dividing line between objective (traditional) and subjective (personal) feeling is, in any case, indiscernible. It is true that 'Grendles heafod', the idea of Grendel's head, could not be expressed in any other way and therefore cannot be a formula; but it is false that the events in 'Beowulf' which could not be substituted for in any way are not themes. The reason for this is that the idea of Grendel's head is specific and therefore not traditional, but the themes of 'Beowulf' are traditional. If a story has folk or mythological origins, or is simply of oral background, events in the story will be old and traditional and thus definitely part of the storyteller's learnt equipment and
not simply elements from his imagination. In a heroic society, or a society where heroic values persist, it is not likely that well-worn stories will have lost their themes. The ritualistic and formal nature of the events that have been called themes seem to suggest that they are traditional elements that have always had their place in advancing the story, helping to supply heroic details in order to enhance and expand the story, giving the poet sufficient material to ensure ease of composition. Agathe Thornton 18 demonstrated the occurrence of six possible themes in the 'Odyssey', showing how the poem could be performed comfortably over three days. In 'Beowulf' there are three similar major divisions of the poem, the Grendel fight, the fight with Grendel's mother, and the fight with the dragon; of significance to a theory of performance is the fact that there is recapitulation at the start of each of these sections. Within the sections themselves are to be found the type of theme that Parry and Lord discovered in both Homeric and Yugoslav poetry: these include the arrival of an unknown quest later to be hailed and honoured, armouring of the hero, feasting and banqueting, gift-giving, speeches of praise, genealogies, heroes who go abroad and encounter adventures, signs and portents (including, in Old English, the beasts and birds of battle), the bringer of news, and so on. All of the themes are of a specifically

18. A. Thornton People and Themes in Homer's Odyssey p.124
heroic and traditional nature, giving satisfaction to the audience able to recognize them and strengthening the tone of the poem. Although 'Beowulf' and the Homeric poems come from entirely separate traditions, they share the similarity of being both heroic. The presence of like themes in Yugoslav heroic poetry as well suggests that the development of heroic society often leads to emphasis on the same values and events. Since a formula is so small, a mnemonic unit, it is extremely likely that larger mnemonic units would develop in any oral poetry; if that poetry is specifically heroic it is possible that these larger units may be similarly heroic, and this seems to be the case.

Unique in the Old English tradition are the appositional sections which, through their repetition of the same idea, seem almost to create themes of their own. These are themes evocative of heroic mood or tone rather than of heroic action or event. The verbal relationships in Beowulf differ greatly from those in Homeric poetry, for example this use of apposition and also of the kenning. Often in Old English, epithets occur without the name to which they apply: this has developed into a highly evolved poetic device called the kenning. The kenning is both generic in its traditional expression and particular in the poetic way in which it is used in the line. By not giving the name of the object to which it applies, the kenning presupposes that the audience is well aware of its
background or is simply sensitive to its poetic suggestions. Such elements unique to Old English poetry by comparison with the Greek show that a transference across from Homer to 'Beowulf' is not sufficient to elucidate 'Beowulf' as a Germanic poem. The appositional phrases and kennis suggest the specifically continental tradition to which the poem belongs, and also indicate these extra tools of which the oral poet could avail himself. Thus, critics of the oral theory must look beyond Parry to the specific nature of the literature with which they are dealing.
CHAPTER THREE

'Beowulf: the Nature of the Poem'

Introduction

In a culture reliant upon oral transmission of folk tales and songs, prescriptive retrospective criticism is not only irrelevant but also totally inapplicable. The problem of criticizing 'Beowulf' as a poem or song is frequently subordinated to the examination of Anglo-Saxon England and its continental ties. To understand whether Parry's theories on oral literature can be applied to 'Beowulf', one must know 'Beowulf' fully, certainly, but too often the textual implications are ignored. Studies that have focused on the poem often classify it as an heroic epic, compare it with other heroic epics, and thus describe and establish the criteria under which heroic epics operate. The discovery of genre is important to modern literary studies, but as David E. Bynum has pointed out in his essay 'The Generic Nature of Oral Epic Poetry' 1, the application of generic terms to an oral folk literature is mistaken since genre can be determined only in retrospect and no restrospective processes of logic are possible in a culture where words exist only for the seconds during which they are spoken. The ephemeral nature of the word, its climatic...

1. David E. Bynum 'The Generic Nature of Oral Epic Poetry'
Genre 11, 3 (September 1969) pp.236-258
utterance and sudden death, suggests that in a culture dependent upon the word rather than upon the text a fixing process may well have developed in order to give the folk utterances, laws, proverbs, and poems some traditional, that is, conservative, value. Here it is clear that mnemonic devices must come into play: if the poem is oral, the orality is the primary consideration, not genre. The genre we ascribe to a dead and forgotten poetry is a cultural classification assessed in an historicist hypothesis; the method of preservation and patterning of words into a reflection of the folk consciousness is not a matter of genre but of communication. The way the words are communicated in a significant way is likely to involve mnemonics since the word patterns are important in collecting and unifying a folk tradition, mood, and life. Within a poem that has risen from an oral culture there will exist signs of ordering which gives the words significance, signs of arrangement, and of mnemonic devices. This is the technical side of oral studies; culturally, the content is important, the lost origins, the half-forgotten suggestions of myth and ritual, god and hero.

'Beowulf' meets Parry's theories on general oral literature. Taken from the viewpoint of an Anglo-Saxon scop and audience, however, many of Parry's specific theories would become absurd if applied. Parry discovered orality as a cultural and literary means of communication,
not as a genre: it is too wide for that, and is to do with a culture and its expression, not simply with the content and type of the expression. Within the expanses of oral poetry and oral cultures are different languages exhibiting stylistic and syntactic facets, all with different potentialities for mnemonics. Old English is one such language, ancient Greek another; Old English poetry, if at all oral, will therefore be different from ancient Greek oral poetry. Homeric metre is fixed within the hexametrical line, divided by a caesura or bucolic diaeresis; it is primarily a quantitative line. The metre of 'Beowulf' is usually seen as non-quantitative, existing under a series of conditions wholly different from those operating in Homeric verse.

Old English scholars pursuing oral studies have, in general, applied Parry's 'rules' on Homeric lines to Old English lines, and have thus reduced Parry's theory to absurdity. An example of useful cross-fertilization between Old English and classical scholarship is the use that could be made of C.M. Bowra's² awareness of the nature of heroic poetry which uses the line as its unit of composition and which, because of its caesura, suggests a musical (probably harp) accompaniment. Such an observation can be profitably applied to 'Beowulf' since here is also a caesura-divided line and

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a linear rather than stanzaic unit of composition; it would not, however, be valuable to apply notions of the rigid dactylic hexametrical line to 'Beowulf' since the metre of 'Beowulf' is rhythmic and alliterative rather than quantitatively defined.

**Formulae**

Many have counted the formulae in the first twenty-five lines of 'Beowulf' supposedly using Parry's 'rules', but all have arrived at different conclusions: this application is unsatisfactory. Since the metre of 'Beowulf' is different from that of the Homeric poems, it is necessary to redefine the conditions under which formulae may be found in 'Beowulf'. It is clear, on reading the poem, that many phrases are repeated (Creed\(^3\) estimates one fifth are exactly repeated and half partially in 'Beowulf', Magoun\(^4\) estimates that seventy per cent are repeated throughout Old English literature, and so on): these repetitions must be accounted for. If an oral interpretation is hypothesized, these repetitions must be regarded as part of the poet's traditional psychological equipment, part of the mnemonic store of phrases from which he could create, and thus, purely because of their repetition, their function in carrying the verse forward and adding to its mood, their necessity and appropriateness in the verse, they may be called formulae. Of course, other

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formulae, as traditional phrases existing within subject-systems for use at certain points in the line, theme, or story, must be present within the poem as well, not detectable simply because they are not repeated. There are not as many "formulae" in Anglo-Saxon poetry as there are in Homeric poetry: William Whallon⁵, amongst others, has come to this conclusion, presumably using Parry's definition of formulae; others (for example, Larry Benson⁶) complain that non-oral poets use formulae in any case. Such are the objections raised in the attempt to prove that 'Beowulf' is not an oral poem: if there are not enough formulae (and apparently Homer is the standard to go by) the poem is not oral. On the other hand, the advocates of the orality of 'Beowulf' say that since there are formulae it must be oral. These arguments show the inconclusive nature of the evidence for the orality or non-orality of 'Beowulf'.

Additional proof for the presence of formulae or formulaic devices in 'Beowulf' is suggestive of a greater degree of stylized language than is normally expected by those who read the unsubstantiated claims of Magoun and others. The rigidity of the oral Homeric theory is destructive to 'Beowulf' which, seen in Anglo-Saxon surroundings and explored textually, yields up promises

of harvests to hunters of formulae. I have attempted to seek this proof in the poem itself, but also through speculation about the structure which a stylized mnemonic device could take in Old English poetry. The following points can be made on the text of 'Beowulf' and on the general trends that mnemonic devices may take in a poetic language as yet only partially explored.

1. The Old English half-line is clearly the control on the verse, what C.M. Bowra has called the "verse matrix". Because it always has the same form or pattern, it lends itself by nature to be filled by a complete set of words. Although enjambment exists in 'Beowulf' the half-lines are generally in control of the meaning, enclose it in atoms which merge into systems, themes, and so on. The rigidity of the half-line as rhythmic principle, verse matrix, and embodiment of meaning is suggestive of a mnemonic verbal rigidity or patterning, co-existing with formulae which take their places by falling into the half-line lengths that make up the poetry.

2. The half-line is the measure in Old English, not the whole line as in Homer. Homeric formulae, by Parry's definition, are usually longer than the formulae that can be discovered in 'Beowulf' by Parry's definition. Formulae in 'Beowulf' are therefore more concise, easier to use since they are all of one length and do not have to serve several linear functions. The apparent lack of elaboration and

7. C.M. Bowra Heroic Poetry p.243
sophistication in the Old English stock phrase has led to doubt as to whether it is a formula. Homeric lines are filled from various points with formulae and therefore the Homeric formula appears to be more highly developed; however, if the Old English line has no necessity for variation in the length of the formulae because of the definite half-line pattern, the difference is not one of barbarism and sophistication, but of metrics and verse development. This difference should not, therefore, be used as proof for the non-existence or paucity of formulae in Old English.

3. Given that formulae are mnemonic forms, and given that we do not know all of the mental processes of language, it is possible that 'formula' in the general sense can be expanded in meaning so as to include general linguistic forms of Gestalt psychology - the element of the unknown does not exclude the presence of disguised mnemonic formulae (it does not, of course, prove their existence either). What I am suggesting is that formulae as we know them in Homer may, in 'Beowulf', be complemented by other mnemonic devices of the formulaic family, as yet unexplored.

4. Randolph Quirk has described the psychological and linguistic habitual collocations which operate in everyday language and which, in oral poetry, must operate as formulae since they belong to an oral method of communic-
The normal collocations we make between words act, in a method of communication that is directed towards cultural celebration and portrayal of a story in patterned words, as the formalized patterning of mnemonics. If a folk culture has crystallized some of its ethos in traditional language, conversational collocations will simply be more formalized into poetic collocations, that is, formulae. In 'Beowulf' these may exist where the past is hearkened to, the heroes praised.

5. The lines of 'Beowulf' read cumulatively; that is, the sense rests in the dominant system rather than in the actual words - such a phenomenon may be a result of traditional formulae which embody an idea rather than an object. In an oral poetry the listener will always pick up a sense unit rather than a word meaning, and the sense unit will often be formulaic because of the poet's traditional and responsive craft.

6. A facet of the cumulative effect of systems in 'Beowulf' is the presence of appositional passages which, by their variation, expand the number of synonymous phrases and thus
reduce the possibility of detecting formulae. If one of the statements in apposition is actually a formula, it is likely that it will never be identified as such since the nature of apposition reduces the possibility of any one phrase being repeated a sufficient number of times for it to be recognized as a formula.

7. Apposition, besides expanding the sense for the audience, a function similar in effect to the familiarizing repetition of phrases, contributes to tone. The tone of Grendel's approach to Heorot is emphasized in a repetitive device that, because of its repetition, is suggestive of mnemonics and therefore of formulae - 702b, 710b, 720a. The continuation and strengthening of a tone may therefore be formulaic, although whole phrases are not actually repeated.

8. Alliteration is the important control within the half-line. Often, stressed words recur and therefore create repetitive patterns around the stressed repeated words, although the phrasal elements change. The poet, in oral creation, is connecting words metrically and alliteratively; for the story and the audience he is trying to attain a sonority of tone, a repetition and strengthening of the stressed elements. The accumulation of sensibility around a stressed word seems formulary in that it relates directly to the audience, familiarizing it with the story; it is also formulary because of the repetition of the stressed
word around which other elements combine. The mnemonic use of such a device is clear in the word repetition and in the tonal strengthening.

9. The use of formulae as sense units therefore appears to be variable and flexible. Of line 2368a (earm Ænhaga) Greenfield\(^9\) explains how, when the singer wished to use an A-verse formula in the second half-line, he could substitute such words as guma, hæle, for wreccá and thus avoid alliteration in the off-verse. In the on-verse he could alter the alliteration to fit the more specific nature of certain exiles. Formulae, in being so variable, are not easily detectable; their flexibility also indicates their use to the oral poet.

10. The kenning in Old English is of a formulaic nature and has been equated by William Whallon\(^{10}\) with Homeric epithets in order to strengthen the case for an Anglo-Saxon oral poetry. However, the kenning replaces the person or object in Old English verse, while in the 'Iliad' and 'Odyssey' epithets stand with the person or thing (antonomasia versus epitheton). Kennings are thus a unique type of formula, a stylistic convention that facilitates description and poetry in oral storytelling. The epithet,

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also present in Old English, is used generically as it is by Homer, to a lesser extent because Old English has the alternative technique of the kenning.

11. Phrases common to more than one Old English text are indications of formulae, of a common ancient oral tradition-for example, 'Beowulf' 1419, and 'Exodus' 58. It is also possible that these are cases of polygenesis. To suspend disbelief for a moment and to accept an ancient non-literate tradition, one can see that it is almost certain that mnemonic devices would have played a great part in its oral poetry - these repeated phrases may be evidence both of an ancient tradition and of some of its formulae.

12. In the Old English texts themselves mistakes suggest an ancient tradition which, being largely lost, leaves blanks and inconsistencies in poems which use elements of its traditional language. Another type of mistake found in 'Beowulf' is suggestive of oral composition: Grendel's dam should be feminine but in three places she seems to be masculine - the poet is operating formulaic phrases that do not quite fit his subject. Inconsistencies are also apparent which hint that a tradition is being drawn upon: "the stone-paved streets" (320) may be a formula from the time of the Roman occupation of Britain, the description of Beowulf's cremation (3137-3155) may be a memory of earlier pagan rituals preserved in formulae but not fully understood by the 'Beowulf' scop.
Cumulatively, these points hint at an oral tradition in the continental mists that roll behind 'Beowulf'; to me, they appear to be a more satisfactory indication of the potential formulary nature of the poem than the analytical statistical 'evidence' drawn up by Lord, Magoun and others in their studies of the poem. Without turning yet to the technical facets of 'Beowulf' which should strengthen the argument for its orality, the purely theoretical considerations of possible mnemonics or formulaic devices present in 'Beowulf' (though not in Homer) suggest more areas of fruitful research than do the purely statistical analyses. Of course, since 'Beowulf' is different from the 'Iliad' and the 'Odyssey', it is not necessary to believe that formulae are the only criteria for establishing the orality of the poem.

Metre and Alliteration

The metre of 'Beowulf', A.J. Bliss 11 tells us, is a stressed metre of varying syllables: the normal half-line or verse contains two stressed elements, the others contain one stressed syllable preceded by particles. Alliteration is present throughout the literature of all the Germanic peoples, and this fact suggests that alliterative metre is of a traditional type. The controlling devices in the Old English line are accents and alliteration, with a varying number of syllables. Randolph Quirk 12 demonstrates that

11. A.J. Bliss The Metre of Beowulf
12. Randolph Quirk 'Poetic Language and Old English Metre' in Early English and Norse Studies Presented to Hugh Smith in honour of his Sixtieth Birthday, edd. Arthur Brown and Peter Foote
the connection between words is frequently determined by metrical or rhythmic demands, so that within any metrical system the words will always have to answer to the metre when they take their place in the lines. Although Parry's adherence to the rigidity of the hexameter cannot be applied to 'Beowulf', an understanding of the relationship between metre and words will not disqualify his concept of a formula as working within a rigidly metrical system from Old English studies. What must be remembered is that different metrical conditions exist, but it is important that there still are conditions. Dispute has arisen over the 'formulae' discovered in 'Beowulf' through the application of observations about Homeric poetry, but I think that what must be grasped is the nature of the alliteration and rhythm of 'Beowulf'.

In the 'Iliad' and the 'Odyssey' there are numerous phrases which fill exacting metrical conditions: from the caesura to the end, from the bucolic diaeresis to the end, varying in the number of feet and half feet needed. Within these strict limits the poet could work very efficiently because he knew exactly what was required of him and exactly how much he had to say to end the line correctly. These conditions control both the poet and the story and in fact help the creation of the poem: if I attempt to compose a limerick I know what rhythm is required as I go along, and if I have phrases which combine to make up that rhythm or do so wholly in themselves I will easily produce the limerick
in the correct rhythm.

The tradition of Old English poetry is different from that of ancient Greek verse: the controlling devices are alliteration and stress, not quantity and hexameter. The alliteration not only speeds the connection within the half-line, but also connects the two half-lines; the alliteration, I think, is almost a mnemonic device, operating in a similar way to the formula. As Quirk says, it gives substance to the linguistic connection between the collocated words, and establishes the expectation and congruity that will satisfy the audience. The two-stress rhythm and alliteration offer variation to break up the half-line division and also give a linguistic and metrical sense of familiarity that would please an audience listening to traditional songs about traditional matters. Whereas the strict dactylic phrases of Homer are Parry's guideline to the presence of formulae, alliteration is the sign of traditional language in 'Beowulf'. A poem belonging to an alliterative tradition clearly need not be orally composed, but the alliteration enhances the sense of the poem's having been composed in a forward movement through a story by an oral singer; there is a sense of his not stopping to look far ahead to plan devious structures (such as the written Icelandic sagas are full of) but of his moving competently through his half-lines as the story unfolds in them. Since, as Winfred Lehmann has pointed out, all old

13. Winfred P. Lehmann The Development of Germanic Verse Form
Germanic poems are alliterative, this distinctive and traditional element would seem to emphasize the traditional and ancient nature of the language.

I wish to dissent from Siever's classification of the metre of 'Beowulf' because it retrospectively groups the lines into types and sub-types, and must therefore, since it looks back at the verse rather than on it, see it in a mistaken context. The poem, belonging to an oral tradition, must take no account of technical impositions by critics used to the examination of literate written works. This does not mean that Siever's five types do not fit the verses of the poem; but no amount of stretching and fitting has any relevance to a poem composed in sublime ignorance of any such classification. We have seen 'Beowulf' as a written work for years; now we must see it as an oral work, in order to establish a balance in which a more fair and objective evaluation of the nature of its composition can be made. If a poem is orally composed, its metre is one that exists for the ear, not for the analytical critic with lists of feet and rules. The ear hears rhythm, not types of metre; therefore I think that in an oral study of 'Beowulf' a consideration of rhythm is much more important than adherence to metrical types. A rhythmic natural verse form is linked to a past tradition while an imposed metre is linked to retrospective critical assessment. Both Bliss and Lehmann have observed that the distribution of the same
alliterative metre amongst all the Germanic tribes proves that this metre must have had its origin long before the dispersal of the tribes; different manifestations of metre in different Germanic languages imply the subsequent growth of independent traditions, all of which are likely to retain vestigial features of the ancient common tradition. Such ideas produce important conclusions, because they seek illumination of the poem within the chronological and cultural context of the poem. Siever's ideas are not as close to the poem and do not yield any interesting conclusions that throw light on the actual poem. A less prescriptive view of the verse rhythm than Siever's can approach several hypotheses about 'Beowulf' as composed by an oral poet interacting with his audience. To insist on Siever's five types is often to exclude a full view of the poetic lines with their alliteration and other characteristics.

As John Pope\(^4\) has said, either Germanic poetry is a "very queer and unintelligible thing, or some vital clue has been lost .... this book is founded upon the latter assumption". He found that when he kept time to the verse of 'Beowulf' he produced two quadruple measures in each half-line; using Siever's five types, he was always able to keep time in reading A, D and E, but had difficulty with B and C. This sort of difficulty is typical of the problems

\(^{14}\) John Collins Pope *The Rhythm of Beowulf* pp. 3-4
which arise when a description is made prescriptive and inflexible. Pope found that by heading the B verse with a rest, he was able to include all the syllables in the verse. This involves a more natural sound, a quickening and an enlivening of the verse, and a suggestion of musical accompaniment; for example

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\text{Hē ðæs} | \text{frōfre} \quad \text{gebād}
\]

is less satisfactory than

\[
\text{Hē ðæs} | \text{frōfre} \quad \text{gebād}
\]

Robert Creed\textsuperscript{16} has expanded Pope's theories to include a criterion of length in the verses, so that stress is not only rhythmic control; this means that more syllables can be allowed into the measure. These studies of the verse as rhythm increasingly show the flexibility of the half-line within its alliterative and stress limitations; gradually scholarly considerations are pared away until we see the stark Germanic rhythm that John Nist\textsuperscript{17} has called dipodic. Noting this rhythm and, allowing it to speak for itself, Paull Baum\textsuperscript{18} has observed that the character of the dipody is one of extreme variation, a poetic oral

\textsuperscript{15} ibid. pp.78-79
\textsuperscript{16} Robert P. Creed 'A New Approach to the Rhythm of 'Beowulf' PMLA LXXXI (1966) pp.23-33
\textsuperscript{17} John Nist 'Metrical Uses of the Harp in Beowulf' in Old English Poetry ed. Robert P. Creed
\textsuperscript{18} Paull R. Baum 'The Meter of Beowulf' ME XLVI (November 1948) pp.73-91
method of extraordinary facility and freedom.

The conjunction of the rhythmic metre with sense is indicative of the formulaic nature of the word patterns. Just as Quirk shows how the effect of the natural collocation of words and the existence of alliteration in Old English verse work together so that alliteration becomes the regular mode of endorsing the linguistic connection between collocated words, Robert Stevick shows how the conjunction of alliteration and stress endorses both the rhythm and sense in Old English verse. He writes:

"Meter seems to consist of regularized incidence and grouping of principal linguistic stresses, in turn presupposing coincidence of (phonological) phrase-and-clause boundaries with half-line boundaries, in addition to which alliteration furnishes the phonological linking of the 'line' unit."\textsuperscript{19}

In Old English verse, it seems that metre cannot be isolated as much as it can in Homeric verse; it works too closely with other characteristics of the verse for it to be used as the major criterion for distinguishing formulae. The metre is dipodic, following closely the rhythms of natural speech since it is so flexible, and strong enough to maintain a poetic rhythm satisfying to a listening audience. Factors of the rhythm, such as the possible anacrusis, unfilled stress area, and syllabic variation, are suggestive of a musical accompaniment which in turn

\textsuperscript{19} Robert D. Stevick \textit{Suprasegmentals, Meter, and the Manuscript of Beowulf} p.82
is suggestive of an oral poetry. John Nist thinks that the most obvious position for harp substitution is between two contiguous primary stressed syllables - thus the harp chord substitutes for the missing secondary stress, and may also occur between a primary and tertiary stress. In an oral tradition, the harp is functional, not decorative: it reinforces the alliteration, the names of the characters, the emotional effects, and strengthens weak measures. Old English metre is therefore not a control that limits formulae to those phrases which recur in exactly the same metrical position. In its interaction with and closeness to alliteration, stress, word collocation, and meaning, Old English metre is part of the traditional mnemonic framework of Germanic oral poetry.

The Filling of the Half-line

The appositional variation that the Old English poet uses, and kennings, are facilitated by the easy flow of alliteration leading from one half-line in apposition to another, and by the convenient filling of half-lines. As variations and kennings are conditioned by the metre, they too may be of a formulaic or mnemonic nature. The metre is bound to stress and alliteration, and therefore to word flow. An example of the forward flow of apposition, variation, and alliteration is the following -
Thus variation within 'Beowulf', which may suggest a lack of economy and therefore (by Homeric standards) a non-oral background, may actually be a device extremely useful to the oral poet in his composition of heroic verse. Appositional statements often add no meaning but strengthen the mood, be it heroic or gloomy or whatever; and the kennings speak for a traditional vocabulary in their frequent terseness.

Lehmann sees this terseness as inherent in the alliterative line, in the strongly rhythmic paratactic lines. Lehmann has made the following statements: alliteration and the spoken rhythm are present in all Old Germanic literatures, and 'Beowulf' more than any other retains such features; from here, I suppose that 'Beowulf' is probably more firmly entrenched in the oral traditional mode than other Germanic works. The precision of language and kennings hints at a background where the meaning was well known and embodied forcefully in clearcut phrases of poetic intensity. As the following examples show, these phrases are also convenient half-lines which could be fitted into heroic poems; it is possible that they are therefore of a formulaic nature:
Haber sets 'Beowulf' apart from other Old English literature because of its frequent diversions, and because of the less realistic and more formal speeches attributed to Beowulf: the reason Haber gives for the uniqueness of 'Beowulf' is that it is highly influenced by the 'Aeneid'. I think the reason is that 'Beowulf' belongs in a tradition largely lost to us, of which 'Beowulf' is the only long extant epic example. The peculiarities of the poem are many, for example, the much less frequent use of the definite article in phrases containing a weak adjective and noun, which is sometimes adduced as a criterion for early dating of the poem (the Lichtenheld test); this factor also adds to the paratactic language and rhythm.
The strength of this rhythm, which can be illustrated in a translation of 'Beowulf' into modern English, must have aided the poet greatly in his recited composition, composed as it is spoken, in the filling of his half-lines:

Fast fared the time; boat under bankside. on stem stepping, Sea with sand then — to boat-storage glittering war gear; warriors on willing trip.

floater was in ocean Bowmen lightly Streams were mingling, swiftly carried brightest treasures, gallants out-shoved then, wood-braced vessel.

210-16 'Beowulf' 21

Then speedily came the behest Heorot within with hands to adorn; a host of them was there, of men and women, who that wine-room, that guest-hall decked. Golden shone rugs on the walls, wondrous sights many for each of men who at them looks.

991-996 'Beowulf' 22

It is also clear that accompaniment by a harp, percussive if not linear and melodic, would have been in keeping with this rhythm with its marked caesura and often missing primary accent (for example, the first line would improve considerably with a strong chord played as the first beat). Recent suppositions that the Sutton Hoo harp may in fact be a lyre do not alter this assumption since both instruments were:

20. R.W. Chambers 'Beowulf', p.106
21. E.B. Irving Introduction to 'Beowulf', p.30
ments are percussive rather than sustained. The dipodic rhythm is sufficiently strong to control both metre (which is of no importance to the ear in comparison with rhythm) and alliteration (which gives variation and structure to the verses). This general survey of 'Beowulf' may be summarized as follows: the metre of 'Beowulf' and more specifically its rhythm and alliteration, suggest the traditional background of the poem, and the strength of these controlling devices is clearly sufficient to allow straightforward oral composition to take place by an adept singer aware of the requirements of rhythm (but not of metre); the use of frequent appositions is indicative of the same forward-moving composition, and of the convenience of filling half-lines with ready-made phrases; the caesuras invite the occasional use of appositional phrases and enforce the development of poetic verse by half-line accumulation.
CHAPTER  FOUR

'Beowulf', its poet and Old English poetry

Introduction

As far as we know, the Homeric poems derive from an age in which no religious conversion took place. The 'Iliad' and the 'Odyssey' tell of events that occurred in the Heroic Age of the late Achaean period, as far back as 1190 B.C., but the poems were composed some time between 900 and 700 B.C., probably nearer 900. There is an intervening Dark Age between the Heroic Age and that of Homer, but elements from the Golden Age of Mycenae, the late Bronze Age, and the Achaean period are all present in the 'Iliad' and the 'Odyssey' to varying degrees, the character and dating of these ages substantiated by archaeological discoveries. The tradition of oral singing which G.S. Kirk traces is unbroken by this Dark Age; he says

"Oral poetry is not like architecture or gem-cutting or high-class vase-making, it does not need prosperity and good material surroundings. Sometimes it flourishes best when the opposite is the case". 2

Thus the oral tradition retained conventional and historical elements for several centuries after their actual disappearance so that Homer was able to perform songs about deeds long since past. The heroic content of 'Beowulf' is probably of similar significance: the tales and heroes and deeds do

1. G.S. Kirk Homer and the Epic
2. ibid. p.69
not disappear with time but are given significance by means of the linguistic conventions by which those events are recorded.

The 'Beowulf' poet is unlike Homer because his tradition has suffered a blow from outside, from an alien religion which converted local chiefs and thus became part of the status quo. The old gods who wield fate are confused with the new God of love and retribution, and the old heroic values are qualified by Christian virtue. However, it would be unwise to imagine that the 'Beowulf' poet felt the strains of epigonism and suffered from a cataclysmic upset to his tradition. It is more likely that the tradition in which he operated adapted itself to the new religion as did all of the other facets of Germanic society, and that it had reoriented itself well before the time in which 'Beowulf' was composed. The earlier the dating of 'Beowulf' the closer it must be to the Teutonic oral tradition. Both the Germanic heroic ethos and the literary Christian ethos must be isolated and examined, and it is possible that a comparison of 'Beowulf' with other Old English poetry will throw light on its proximity to the oral tradition and on the nature of its Christianity.

G.S. Kirk\(^3\) has demonstrated the illogicality of much oral criticism, for example the essays of Notoupolos which

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state that, because all oral poetry is formular, all formular poetry must be oral. It is clear, however, that many works in which formulae occur (identified as repetitive phrases of a particular function in a particular metre) are actually written works. If an ancient poem is of unknown composition, a test of orality should be applied to it since a new understanding of the work will often result. But there is a difficulty, and this is that the formular quality is subtle and intangible. The distinction should not be made between comparative numbers of formulae but, as Kirk points out, between "a natural composition" in an oral formulaic tradition and "a deliberate self-conscious composition in a formular style". 4 Me and others who have attempted to look at this problem have come up against the difficulty of establishing criteria by which true formular and imitative formular works can be distinguished. Kirk is unable to solve the problem, but stresses the need for qualitative rather than quantitative appreciation of the works in question. A rapid reading of a collection of Old English verse suggests a tighter and more strenuous heroic tone in certain poems than in others: for example, 'Exodus', 'Elene', 'Andreas' and 'Christ' contain very long episodes of verse which are entirely non-traditional in content and quality because of the heavily Christian orientation and themes. A qualitative appreciation of these poems

4. ibid. p.174
suggests that such a foreign thorough-going addition to the continental alliterative tradition has destroyed the older heroic and terse poetry that we find in 'Beowulf', 'Widsith', 'Deor', 'Waldere', and 'Finnesburh'. The addition of Christian stories in itself does not diminish the quality of extant Old English verse, but in a consideration of oral poetry it seems that those poems of a more traditional content are more likely to qualify for early dating and are therefore likely to be closer to an oral method of composition than later more heavily Christianized works.

At some stage in the Germanic poetic tradition, songs were definitely orally composed and delivered, probably in the same mnemonically-based way as Parry and Lord's Yugoslav singers rather than in a purely memorized fashion. The concept of word for word memorization does not cohere with the poetic conception of a non-literate culture: in such a culture no texts would be available as measuring sticks and standards of uniformity. Since Tacitus has described the process of third century Germanic poetic composition, we can safely assume that an oral-formulaic literature continued at least until the date of the introduction of writing. It is possible, however, that because oral poetry held a monopoly on performance before the introduction of literacy, it could survive for some considerable time in competition with the new written literature. After this, as oral and written literature are sufficiently distinct genres, they can maintain their respective styles in isolation from each other until writing takes precedence.

5. Tacitus On Britain and Germany pp.102-103
over oral communication. Both Christianity and writing came to Great Britain at the same time, and were disseminated by the missionaries during a period of roughly forty years\(^6\); it is therefore reasonable to assume that these influences were linked in their areas of effect. Monasteries were set up as centres of learning and theology, and Latin works were the products of well-educated men. The country seems mainly to have accepted the new religion with passivity, but the early native works show the assimilation of religious elements that are not specifically Christian and which are in accord with older Germanic ideas such as wyrd and the Eternal Father or Chief Deity. Is it conceivable that a poem composed by a thoroughly Christianized poet in an age with several centuries of Christianity behind it (such as Dorothy Whitelock\(^7\) suggests) should not mention Christ when it mentions His Father? A negative answer to this question is my main reason for dating 'Beowulf' early, nearer to its continental origins of which Tacitus speaks.

**Dating**

The date of the composition of 'Beowulf' has not been established. Historical, grammatical, and textual evidence has been put forward by many scholars in attempts to establish the approximate date of the poem. I do not feel capable of producing convincing and final proof of early dating, but

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7. Dorothy Whitelock *The Audience of Beowulf*
several elements in the poem itself that have not been placed in juxtaposition before lend strength to an hypothesis of early dating.

'Beowulf' is an English poem about continental heroes. The man who composed it was an Anglo-Saxon working in a Germanic tradition. If the poem was composed nearer 700 than 900 A.D. it is likely that its retention of customs and conventions from the age of its heroes will be fairly accurate and contain few historical errors. The excavation of the Sutton Hoo site, where the ship burial is dated in the second half of the seventh century, has shown that the riches of Heorot and the Geats are not exaggerated, that ship burials still took place after the Christian conversion and that the 'Beowulf' poet may have witnessed one, also that the people sometimes adhered to paganism and Christianity simultaneously. The discovery of the Yeavering Site also testifies to the unexpected splendour of the Anglo-Saxons, especially with regard to the size of the tribal hall.

Ritchie Girvan wrote *Beowulf and the Seventh Century* before the Sutton Hoo excavation, and his text is only strengthened by the added knowledge of Sutton Hoo, which solves one of the biggest problems with which he was confronted, that of the supposed inaccuracy of the descriptions of burial in the poem. The discovery within the ship of a fish symbol and of twin spoons marked Saulus and Paulus suggests the

commemoration of a Christian king; it is also possible that the fish is a pagan symbol, perhaps of fertility. The whetstone, with its strange pear-shaped faces reminiscent of those on continental finds of the same or earlier dating, is possibly a pagan ceremonial standard, perhaps associated with the cult of Weland the Smith. If the burial with its signs of impure Christianity indeed occurred in the late seventh century, it is reasonable to suppose that any poems composed in the same age could similarly exhibit both Christian and pagan features. Many kings were converted to Christianity and baptized, and then drawn back into the ranks of paganism, as with Cadwallon who allied himself with the heathen Penda, and Redwald who after his conversion in Kent set up altars to both Christ and the devil; note also the rapidity of Coifi's conversion and the apostasy that followed Edwin's reign. It has been suggested that the silver spoons from Sutton Hoo are a baptismal gift, since they record the extreme and sudden conversion of Paul. The one for whom the ship was buried may well have been the East Anglian king, Aethelhere, who became an ally of Penda who had killed his Christian brother; the religious affiliations of Aethelhere are uncertain, but his alliance and the fact that his wife sought refuge from him in a nunnery suggest that he was still heathen. His body was lost in the floods at the Battle of Winwaed, and his cenotaph hints at the duality between his religious condition and that of

9. Isabel Henderson The Picts plates 30 and 35
his people.\textsuperscript{10} Such archaeological evidence as Sutton Hoo is indicative of the accuracy of the 'Beowulf' poet in dealing with heroic and traditional matters. The funeral of Scyld (lines 26-52) is an event that belongs to myth, but is similar to the 'funeral' evidence of Sutton Hoo except for the method of disposal of the ship. The East Anglian burial took place after the boat had been dragged a considerable distance to the site, ceremoniously lowered, and adorned with jewels and precious things. The burial of Scyld releases him, as he lies in the bosom of his ship, into the waves. The difference may be due to local variation or to myth: since Scyld appeared mysteriously and magically from across the sea as a child, his people may well send him back over the sea when he is dead so that he may be reclaimed by the land which gave him birth. The Finnesburh pyre and the cremation of Beowulf illustrate another pagan funeral custom, but archaeological evidence does not substantiate the descriptions in 'Beowulf' of these events. In the poem, armour and precious things are burnt with the bodies, whereas excavations suggest that the possessions were buried and the bodies burnt. It is possible that this particular funeral custom had ceased in England long before 'Beowulf' was composed, and that the poet is confused between cremation and burial. But

\textsuperscript{10} R.L.S. Bruce-Mitford \textit{The Sutton Hoo Ship Burial}
in Chapter 27 of his 'Germania', Tacitus describes the burial and burning of body, armour, and horses on one fire, and thus suggests that the 'Beowulf' poet may be more accurate than previously thought, especially about customs that have receded into the past and that have left little physical evidence of their existence. The descriptions of the ship and earth graves in 'Beowulf' are energetic and physical, giving details of construction, siting, and ceremony. They suggest a familiarity with the events told or a close proximity to the formulae which first described these events. Óðinn is said to have commanded that the heroic dead be surrounded by "bauta stones" and be given appropriate weapons: the 'Beowulf' poet reaffirms this ancient and pagan custom in his verse.

The epithets and formulaic structures of the poem are extremely important because they maintain the entire heroic tone of the poem. If they are present in imitation of the old style this should be evident in the quality of the verse. The heroic background is pervasive and informs the moral feeling throughout. The epithets do not appear to be merely decorative but give the poem its particular atmosphere of heroism and defeat, sombre fate and brave virtue. It seems to me that the traditional language which so efficiently

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11. D. Elizabeth Martin-Clarke 'Significant Objects at Sutton Hoo' in The Early Cultures of North-west Europe: Twenty-two Essays written in honour of H.W. Chadwick, edd. Sir Cyril Fox and Bruce Dickins
embodies the tone is not ornamental but necessary and utilitarian\textsuperscript{12}, as well as poetic. To date 'Beowulf' circa 700 is to place it two hundred years nearer to the continental oral tradition than do Dorothy Whitelock\textsuperscript{13} and Schuchting\textsuperscript{14}. Early dating enables one to see 'Beowulf' as a poem of the same oral type as the 'Iliad' and the 'Odyssey'. Because the heroic tone induced by the heroic language creates a unified expression, and because oral poetry about heroic societies creates this same unity, I think that 'Beowulf' is early rather than late, near enough to the old oral sources to use the tradition skilfully by necessity rather than decoratively for nostalgic effect. Eric Havelock, in his \textit{Prologue to Greek Literacy}, suggests how a culture and its language attest unity:

"...any given culture group will codify the procedures of marriage, child-rearing, and property holding within a given family structure. The words for cognates and relatives within this patterned structure come into existence in obedience to the kind of pattern of relations that is set and assumed. They will themselves carry associations which automatically denote appropriate status and prescribe mutual behaviour.... This kind of vocabulary implies a set of proprieties ...., and as it implies them, it also recommends, as it were, the maintenance of such relationships and of the behaviour that goes with them, which, as they become incorporated into the language structure, are also incorporated into the tradition of the culture".\textsuperscript{15}

\textsuperscript{12} In oral studies, "necessary" and "utilitarian" are not synonymous: "necessary" refers to the particular theme, system, and word hoard of the moment, and "utilitarian" refers to the usefulness of any particular word, construction, formula, system, or theme.

\textsuperscript{13} Dorothy Whitelock \textit{The Audience of Beowulf}

\textsuperscript{14} R.W. Chambers \textit{'Beowulf': an Introduction to the Study of the Poem with a Discussion of the Stories of Offa and Finn}, p.322

\textsuperscript{15} Eric A. Havelock \textit{'Prologue to Greek Literacy'} pp.25-26
It is this proximity of language and content that also characterizes the Homeric poems. 'Beowulf' relies for its effect on immediacy, as must all oral heroic poetry: the shortness of life in an age of war is met by the immediacy of the impact of the verse. Walter Ong stresses the importance of formulae and mnemonics in oral cultures:

"Dependence on formulas gives not only a special kind of surface but also a special kind of content to messages sent in oral cultures... The medium is not the message, for one medium will incarnate many messages. But medium and message interact".17

It is Ong's contention that the formulary character of Homeric poetry is of a piece with the culture as a whole:

"Primary orality is radically formulary". 18

The language of 'Beowulf', concerned as it is with deeds of strength and martial virtue, is not shot through with Christian messages and does not therefore seem to reflect a stringently Christian culture. The preservation of life is man's primary instinct, and in a co-operative society he will thus rely upon a system of sustenance and survival.

Elements of Christianity which attend to these needs are present in 'Beowulf', but few other Christian sacraments. The structure of this imposed religion is such that it is relatively easy to view it as a divine hierarchy of lord and retainers, but not once is Christ referred to in 'Beowulf' by name or indirectly. God is there for sure, and so is

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17. ibid. p.290
18. ibid. p.291
fate. But *god* is a Germanic word from pagan times, and fate manifested itself then in days of old as *wyrd*. The fate that plays with the heroes of *Beowulf* is strangely in the throes of transition. The poet conceives of it at different times as superior or inferior to the power of God, so that it sometimes overrides Him and He sometimes overrides it, and at other times the two forces work in co-operation. This transitional conception of a force which occurs both in pagan Germanic religion and also in Christianity suggests that the poem was written nearer 700 than 900 since it is more likely that the poet could be torn between the two at the earlier date than at the later. Beowulf's trust in God can undoubtedly be Christian faith through the poet's anachronistic setting of the poem, but it may also be the acceptance of *wyrd* by a pagan king as described by a poet within a Christian ethos. William Whallon has called the Christianity of *Beowulf* transitional since the poet displays Biblical knowledge of little besides the first nine chapters of *Genesis*. The study by Keiser of the Christian content of the poem reveals that the majority of words introduced into the Old English vocabulary to describe Christian concepts are absent from *Beowulf*. The Christianity of the poem does not seem to me to be pervasive, nor does the poem suggest an audience so well-

20. Albert Keiser *The Influence of Christianity on the Vocabulary of Old English Poetry*
informed about the Christian stories that they need only brief reminders in order to associate the heroic events with Biblical ones. Biblical exegesis was established by Bede in English monastic learning, and this fact has been taken by some as proof of the preponderance of allegory in Anglo-Saxon writings. Morton W. Bloomfield has shown that, on the contrary, allegory is not the custom of medieval works, nor does it cohere in any way with the tradition of Germanic poetry. If 'Beowulf' is accepted as an allegory of Christian salvation, complete with its harrowing of hell, its Judas, and its sacrificial king, the entire poem will be distorted beyond recognition. It is more likely that the culture informing 'Beowulf' is a pagan mystic one rather than a Christian one. The poem is an elegy on the transitoriness of life and worldly things, on the tragedy of being a man, rather than a didactic tale of salvation and redemption. The final mood is one of gloom and despair and all occurs in the world of men. There are pagan elements in the language, for example the use of frea (seventeen times) and bealdor (twice) for "lord", both names deriving from those of the pagan Germanic gods, Freyr and Baldr. Hell is not necessarily a Judaic-Christian concept since the queen of the underworld, the daughter of the evil loki, in Norse mythology is called Hel. Similarly, the mention of the flood could belong to 'Genesis' but could

also belong to the five hundred other cultures whose mythologies include a flood as a sign of the wrath of the gods towards men. Tolkien makes the point that feond at this stage in Old English still means "enemy", and has nothing to do with our Christian concept of demons. And Cain and Abel, both of them Biblical characters, are also recurring types in humanity. Many critics have likened the life of Beowulf to that of Christ, but there could just as easily be a parallel between Beowulf and Baldr, Beowulf and Woden, or between Beowulf and Odin since these three gods died sacrificial deaths and were hanged only to rise again. Nor are the seemingly Judaic-Christian elements of the poem necessarily out of place since Taylor quotes from the Icelandic "Völuspá" to show the possible similarity between pagan and Christian cosmology:

"...jörð fannd skáva, né upp himinn, 
gap var ginnunga, en gras hvergi, 
Ádr Burs synir bjöðum of yppðú, 
þeir er miðgarð mæran skópu, 
sól skein sunnan á salar steina, 
þá var grund gróin grænum lauki"
stanzas 3-4

"þá gengu regin Öll á rókstola, 
þverir skyldi dverga drottir skepja 
ór Brimis blöði ok ór Bláins leggjum"
stanza 9

22. Brian Branston *The Lost Gods of England*
23. J.R.R. Tolkien *Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics*
"...earth was nowhere to be found, nor heaven. There was a primal gap and grass nowhere, before the sons of Hur raised up lands. They shaped the great world. The sun shined from the south on the stones of the earth, then green leeks grew upon the ground... Then all the gods went to sound,... [to decide] who should of the dwarfs create man from Brím's blood and Blain's limbs."

Snorri Sturluson in 'Skáldskaparmál' cap.8 comments on the value of pagan myths for Christian poets and sums up the problem which is similar to the one confronting the 'Beowulf' poet:

"And I say now to young poets who wish to study poetic diction and acquire a variety of language with old metaphors or who wish to discern that which is hidden in poetry, let them understand this book for their knowledge and pleasure. But not to forget or distrust these stories, or to take from poetry old kennings which the great poets of old let themselves enjoy. But neither should Christian men believe in heathen gods or the truth of these stories."

The evidence of Christian allegory in 'Beowulf' is therefore inconclusive, and mythic undertones are as likely as Christian allegory in the poem.

'Beowulf' itself speaks to me of an heroic age not long since gone, of a religion not totally accepted but partially invested with the values of the old society on which it was imposed. For these reasons, and because of the evidence of Sutton Hoo, I date it between 680 and 740. The poem exists in an heroic rather than a theological mode. Because the values of the society of the poem were connected with excellence in warfare, protection of the people, and the effectiveness of a man's deeds, the rituals of myth and magic will be of a more pragmatic nature than in a more leisured

25. ibid. p.125
26. ibid. p.128
and learned society. The Christian elements in 'Beowulf' are those which mention God-the-Father's interventions on behalf of heroes and his control of the world: these are the pragmatic utilitarian values of heroic society transferred to the society's deity. Similarly, with the story of the Creation and Cain, the analogue is that with heroic society and its self-protection through exile of anarchists. There are enough pagan elements in 'Beowulf' to indicate that the poet was sufficiently close to the polytheistic and ritualistic tradition of the past and its contemporary manifestations (for example, the ship burial) to record them with understanding and accuracy. In Old English poems of a later dating than 'Beowulf', the heroic expression is less stringently impressive and seems to be reminiscent of rather than representative of present feelings and customs. The same applies to the religious tone: those Old English poems which I consider to be between one and two centuries later than 'Beowulf' are far more oriented towards Christianity than 'Beowulf' is and far less to paganism than is 'Beowulf'. As Routh says 27, Christianity brought certainty and fore-knowledge, but emphasized man's own worthlessness. The heroic code relies on the splendour of the individual and is therefore at loggerheads with Christianity. The heroic tone of Old English religious poetry is consequently diluted, and Routh makes the statement that 'Andreas' moves

27. H.V. Routh God, Man and Epic Poetry: a Study in Comparative Literature, Vol.2 pp.73-78
away from the epic spirit towards romance.\footnote{ibid. pp.88-89} By comparison with the artificially contrived and imitative works, we may find crystallized in 'Beowulf' the solid dependability of heroic paganism and traces of ancient spoken ritual in the formulae.

'Beowulf' and Old English Poetry

Widsith the singer speaks directly of his wordhoard ("wordhord onleac" line 1b), and in 'Beowulf' there are similar descriptions of the scour at work (867-74,2105-14). The 'Gododdin' begins

"This is the 'Gododdin': Aneirin sang it";\footnote{ed. Kenneth Jackson The Gododdin: the Oldest Scottish Poem} and the 'Ynglinga' Saga, preserved orally for centuries before being written down, mentions two singers, Thjodolf and Eyvind Skaldaspiller. None of the heavily religious Old English poems contain such references, possibly because the poet in these cases was not a singer but a poet composing pen in hand. 'Beowulf' contains a far greater number of themes than 'Andreas' or 'Elene'; 'Elene' belongs in the Cynewulf canon, which I regard as being almost certainly in the written tradition, and 'Andreas' has echoes of 'Beowulf' and perhaps contains Christian themes which are not recognizable as themes because they are not traditional. It seems far more likely that 'Beowulf' (rather than 'Andreas' and 'Elene') was orally composed since it has a less Christian and more traditional tone. If formular-sounding phrases
are recognized in Christian Old English poetry, there is always the possibility that they are imitations, for these Christian poems are dated later than 'Beowulf' in a period when writing was well-established. Poems other than 'Deor', 'Widsith', 'Finnesburh', 'Waldere' and 'Beowulf' that are of similar heroic theme may well be of like composition and dating, or they may be songs created from heroic material by a literate poet attracted to the qualities of old songs. The criteria for dating and deciding on the nature of composition are, clearly, as yet unsatisfactorily hypothetical.

When, in some Old English poems the allegory is clear and this didactic genre specific, the likelihood of other poems being in fact allegory while in appearance they are literal is minimal. In 'The Whale' the allegorical suggestions of the verse are explicit and pointed directly to man's own identity in the story. When the poem becomes literal and recedes from allegory it is similar in tone to those passages of 'Beowulf' introduced by such phrases as "Nō best jōe byðn" (1002b), "Forðan" (1059a), "Swā sceal man dōn" (1534b) which spell out a moral for the listeners, a maxim usually drawn from the preceding events, often embodying an heroic virtue or a fatalistic assignation of man's destiny to the decree of the heavens. But the rest of 'Beowulf' is not like the allegory of such poems as 'The Whale' and 'The Phoenix' because the text of 'Beowulf' does not depend upon moral
interjections and illustrate only these, and nor does the entire poem illustrate the Christian message. It seems that 'Beowulf', in neither cumulatively nor sectionally allegorizing its stories, is simply utilizing an ancient device where a message is attached to a theme which dramatizes rather than allegorizes the message. 'The Whale' and 'Phoenix' are clearly allegorical because of the unity between the content and the moral, whereas 'Beowulf' is a large and complex poem unified only by its heroic themes, characters, and language. Its religion and ethics are utilitarian and sustain the world of the poem; they do not rely for their effect upon the audience's identification with these elements since the poetic heterocosm stands up by itself and needs no outside reference to give it meaning.

Robert Burlin's argument for the typology of 'The Phoenix' where redeemed and Redeemer become one because they are part of the same illustrated historical process does not apply to 'Beowulf' where there is no consistently described Christian history wherein such a connection between type and antitype could be sustained. To remove 'Beowulf' from the realms of allegory is to remove it from dangerous impositions of Christian interpretation. Since the poem is not clearly allegorical, there is little justification for seeing it as such.

30. Robert Burlin The Old English Advent : A Typological Commentary pp. 32-34
'Christ and Satan' and 'Genesis B' both portray Satan as one who has fallen from his liege lord's favour, as an exile from the tribe. Heroic values inform both of these long poems and help intensify the fate of Satan as seen through Anglo-Saxon eyes. 'The Dream of the Rood' has similar overtones of the tribal contract system, so that it seems a common Old English device to illustrate Christianity and its deistic hierarchy by speaking of it in the traditional terms of heroic society. 'Christ and Satan', 'Genesis B', and 'The Dream of the Rood' are clearly of Judaic and Christian content, and there is no need for allegory within them. Their interest and energy derive from the humanizing of the divine, while majesty is maintained in the language. If 'Beowulf' was composed at the same time for the same audience, it might be expected to display an understanding of the lord-retainer relationship in its descriptions of God and His deeds. Such a later dating would ensure the entrenchment of 'Beowulf' in Christian teaching, and the absence of a thoroughly Christian colouring could be attributed to the Christian allegorizing of heroic events. But 'Beowulf' does not consistently mention God and His will, nor does the hero in his relationship to God become retainer. Satan may be the exiled retainer of God, the liege lord; but Beowulf, whose allegorical role in the Christian ethos can only be that of Christ, cannot by any means be retainer to God since Christ and the Father are equal and balanced in the poles of
the Trinity. I think that the application of Christian meaning to 'Beowulf' within the Old English poetic tradition makes nonsense of it as a poem and as an historical document belonging to an age emerging from religious change.

In comparison with 'Christ 1* (‘Advent’), which dates from 970-990\(^{31}\), 'Beowulf' is an extremely terse poem. 'Christ 1' is largely unformulaic, probably because of its later dating, its subject matter, and its probable monastic origin, for example 1-17, 50-70, 249-74, 275-300. 'Beowulf', by contrast, is formulaic and concise; the difference between the two is even more marked than that between the 'Iliad' and the 'Aeneid'. The major change which occurred between Homer and Virgil was the establishment of writing and literacy and the consequent uselessness of formulaic verse except as a decorative style. The change occurring between the composition of 'Beowulf' and 'Christ 1' is more specifically traced since they both derive from a common culture into which writing and Christianity were simultaneously introduced, gradually replacing paganism and purely oral communication. Writing and Christianity could only alter the continental oral tradition, and had no means of sustaining it. The effects of these changes are clear in the comparison between 'Beowulf' and 'Christ 1'. But a difficulty arises with 'The Battle of Maldon' which was

\(^{31}\) ed. Robin Flower The Exeter Book of Old English Poetry p.83
definitely written only a few years before 1000 A.D. and which, as R.K. Gordon says\textsuperscript{32} displays "the old strength and nobility". This poem is again in the traditional heroic style and confines itself to matters of warfare and valour; for these reasons it regains the terseness of heroic verse and utilizes the familiar-sounding phrases which embody so well the events of battle. The prayer of Byrhtnoth is more explicit than the Christian references in 'Beowulf' about the destiny of the soul and uses at least one invented half-line which, because of its concision and the typical bonding of epithet and noun, takes on a formulaic character: "pēoden engla" (178b). It seems to me that the poet of 'Maldon' has adapted many of the stylizations of earlier oral poetry of which 'Beowulf' may be an example, and the similarity of the subject matter of the old and the new has enabled him to bind them into his poem successfully. The custom of memorizing poems composed pen in hand or orally took over from simultaneous oral composition and performance after the advent of writing. The poets became more like the Homeric rhapsodes than like the Yugoslav guslavs. The 'Maldon' poet was probably such a rhapsode, a memorizer of verse, such as the literate Cynewulf seems to have been. Magoun\textsuperscript{33} points out that Cynewulf may well have dictated poetry to himself and written it down this way. The differ-

\textsuperscript{32} ed. R.K. Gordon Anglo-Saxon Poetry p.ix

\textsuperscript{33} F.P. Magoun 'Bede's Story of Caedmon: the Case History of an Anglo-Saxon Oral Singer' Speculum 30 (1955) pp.49-63
ence between the heroic verse of the 'Maldon' poet and that of the 'Beowulf' poet is subtle and intangible, perhaps non-existent, though various editors and critics have tried to evaluate this difference. Sweet\textsuperscript{34} says

"The poem betrays familiarity with older verse, though it does not show the high technical finish of this".

The heroic code is obviously not dead, but lacks the old glamour and seems to enumerate its characteristics for the sake of history rather than to include them because they contain all there is to know about life and death. 'Beowulf' dramatizes these virtues and vices whereas 'Maldon' lists them in a desperate bid to recapture the past, to give Byrhtnoth a last heroic elegy before an age passes. 'Maldon' is concerned with oratory, with

"the vocabulary of oath, speech and reputation",\textsuperscript{35} and thus it epitomizes the poetry of an age of panegyrics when verse is memorized and recited. Community performance still seems to be important just as the bond of \textit{comitatus} still functions, but neither retain their original cohesion with the heroism of living. "Maldon" celebrates a known virtue whereas 'Beowulf' tells old tales based on causal myth and the structure of social contract. The difference between these two heroic poems lies not only in the language, where the later poem shows signs of new thought and of

\textsuperscript{34} Sweet's 'Anglo-Saxon Reader in Prose and Verse' revised by Dorothy Whitelock p.116
\textsuperscript{35} W.F. Bolton 'An Old English Anthology' p.47
imitative formulae, but also in mood. In 'Beowulf' the
informing tone is continuous because it is necessary and
no alternative is known; in 'The Battle of Maldon' the
tone strains for effect as it captures a dying time and a
dying habit. Walter Ong describes the difference between
written and oral poetry as follows, and his statement
perhaps explains the separate tones of 'Beowulf' and 'The
Battle of Maldon':

"Writing brings those who acquire this skill to structure
their entire world view around a feel for the written
word and the positive (but not often conscious) exclusion
of the oral as such. ... Literacy thus set (sic) up
subconscious defenses of great strength and depth".

A comparison of 'Beowulf' with other Old English poems
hints at its special characteristics. It is unique because
it embodies the heroic, terse, and traditional qualities
of 'Finessburh', 'Deor', 'Waldere', and 'Widsith', and is
very much longer than any of these. It depends upon the
codes and adventures of heroic society because it knows no
other, and it describes this ethos rather than celebrates it.
'Beowulf' stays to praise the man while 'Maldon' stays to
praise the heroic contract. Northrop Frye makes a similar
distinction between oral and written poetry: oral poetry
fulfills the general expectation of the audience where written
poetry becomes didactic. In this sense, 'Beowulf' tells of
standards already shared, whereas 'Maldon' explicates values

36. Walter Ong, Rhetoric, Romance, & Technology: Studies
in the Interaction of Expression and Culture, p. 293
37. Northrop Frye, 'Mythos and Logos' Yearbook of Compara-
tive and General Literature' no. 18 (1969) pp. 5-18
it considers worthwhile. Frye sees this as a movement from
the oracular and proverbial to the dialectical, where a
mythical habit of mind is replaced by a more logical one.
The contention is that in the beginning the singer dealt
in mythos rather than logos:

"Oral culture is, necessarily, a highly ritualized
one, and oral poetry has strong affinities with
magic.... Magic means secret wisdom, the keys of
all knowledge". 38

'Beowulf' and the Scop

In tribal society the singer was apparently a man of
court, befriended by the lord in a relationship of recip-
rocal benefits. This is the case with Widsith and Deor,
and with the singers whom the 'Beowulf' poet describes,
just as Homer tells of the blind Aëtidos, Demodocus. The
primitive function of the scop in Germanic society may have
been, as in other oral cultures, shamanistic, for he of all
men in the tribe evoked the situation of the world by the
elocution of words. Such a naming of objects separated man
from the eloquence of things and allowed in him the evolut-
ion of religious thought and artistic development. Once we
begin to name, we begin to explain. Kennings may have orig-
inated because primitive man was loath to name all things
for fear of arousing them or reducing their wonder. A
kenning is a poetic circumlocution, and thus does not encyst
the object within man's apperception of it. It retains its
quiddity and is only impressionistically described for us.

38. ibid. p.7
Oral poetry probably began in the mists of magic and myth and was adapted to the needs of changing man, until the logos became supreme, the arche of the world. Oratory was regarded as medicinal by the ancient Greeks, 39 and the frequency of spells, evocative riddles, and chants throughout the oral literatures of man illustrates this development. The poetry of gods and men explains the chaos and order of the universe, and succeeds in removing responsibility away from man to fate so that chaos no longer holds sway but is overcome by the gods. If a race believes in a deity, paradoxically chaos is no longer random but ordered, though it retains its primary quality of disorder. Routh 40 describes how once nature became external, and animism was a habit of mind, the terrifying forces made man turn from animism to gigantism. Threat from the world called for the rise of monster-slaying gods, and then of human heroes of supreme power. These heroes take up the task of protecting weaker men and of establishing customs for the perpetuation of the way of life. The development of oral verse is also the development of man and his society, a reflection of his mind throughout the ages. The singer is thus the arbiter between gods and men, between the world and the mind's conception of the world. He is also an entertainer and mortal, and he may like Deor come to lament the passing of favour.

39. Pedro Lain Entralgo The Therapy of the Word in Classical Antiquity
The Anglo-Saxon scop was an entertainer and a con-
server of tradition. No longer pagan, he had to adapt
to a new religion in order to remain a conserver. For cent-
uries writing was not common outside the English monasteries,
and the scops had no cause to change their method of
composition for some time after 597. It is not likely that
the scop was still covered with the aura of magic, but in
his role of preserver of the heroic status quo he may well
have reached the heights of fame in the Anglo-Saxon court.
So it is that in 'Beowulf' Hrothgar's scop is described as
"guma gilphlāden" (868a). The scop in 'Beowulf' is skilled
with words and has a memory for the old sagas; his tech-
nique is described but interpretations of these passages
vary from scholar to scholar, depending upon whether or
not the nature of oral composition is understood and
credited:

"ond on sped wrecan spel gerade,
wordum wrixtan " 873-874b

The 'Beowulf' poet is clearly talking about spontaneous
oral composition and performance, since this is a descrip-
tion of songs of praise spoken from horseback. The passage
at lines 2105-2113 is explicit about the word hoard and the
mnemonic technique of performance; it also mentions the
harp accompaniment and the mood of the songs. 'Widsith'
takes the description of the poet for granted just as
'Beowulf' does: the nature of the scop's composition seems
well known and no novelty or thing of the past. No other
Old English poem describes the scop at work and there is none of the same stress on the importance of his role. Since he belongs to earlier oral poetry rather than later rhapsodic memorized and written poetry, his appearance in 'Beowulf', 'Widsith', and 'Deor' suggests that these three poems are close enough in time to the tradition of which they speak to know the details of this tradition. I think it likely that they are not only close to this tradition but also partake of it. The presence of the scop in 'Beowulf' does not necessarily testify to the oral composition of the poem itself, but it is a clue to the kind of poetry which was being performed at the time. It is an indication of the nature of the composition of 'Beowulf' and possible proof of the orality of the poem since the scop is a product of the Germanic oral tradition.

This tradition is described by Tacitus, and Priscus tells of a similar continental technique displayed in a declamation given before the Hun, Attila, in 448:

"When evening came on torches were lighted and two barbarians stepped forth in front of Attila and recited poems which they had composed, recounting his victories and his valiant deeds in war". Bede's description of Caedmon is a clear indication of the nature of Old English poetry: the memory is stressed, the orality of the song, and the flexibility of the skill wherein

41. H. Munro Chadwick The Heroic Age p.84
42. ed. Thomas Miller The Old English Version of Bede's Ecclesiastical History of the English People, Part 1 iv 25
words of a like manner can be added on to what is already known mnemonically -

"Then he arose from his sleep, and he had firmly in his memory all, that he sang while asleep. And to these words he soon added many others in the same style of song worthy of God".

In Caedmon's songs, religion is the inspiration, but the technique is traditional. I believe that the nature of poetic composition in Europe was similar to that of the Homeric poems, and there is now so much written about the oral poetries of various peoples that there is no doubt that composition by extemporization is and was a common and fluently artistic practice. The simultaneous composition and delivery of oral poetry did not detract from the quality because of the traditional and mnemonic tools of the singer. The 'Beowulf' poet composed in the traditional heroic style and his poem is less decisively Christian than other long Old English poems; therefore it is probably of an early date - between 680 and 740. This date closes the gap between 'Beowulf' and the continental oral tradition and it is therefore as likely as not that the poem was orally composed, possibly preserved by rhapsodes rather than by creative scops throughout several centuries until written down. Lehmann conceives of the 'Beowulf' poet as a singer who is asked by a monk for his song so that it can be copied down and preserved. Lord discusses the merits and demerits of dictation and it is probably the most accurate way of  

43. Ibid. p.345
44. Albert Bates Lord 'Homer and Other Epic Poetry' in *A Companion to Homer*, ed. A.J.B. Wace and Frank H. Stubbings
45. Winfred P. Lehmann *The Development of Germanic Verse Form*
46. Albert Bates Lord *The Singer of Tales*
recording oral poetry, since the changes in lengthening which occur are less distorting than the changes made by rhapsodic memorization. An alternative method of transmission is oral creation expanded by numerous additions through several written copies and versions over a long period of time. Since monasteries seem to have collected material (for example, the Exeter Book) and to have maintained much of the Germanic culture, it is likely that 'Beowulf' was in fact preserved by dictation and transcription. The poet, unused to pauses, could thus increasingly develop themes and plot because of the time available for him to think ahead. It is also true that this extra time may have disoriented the poet and caused him at times to contradict history and to confuse the threads from which he normally wove his highly coloured and textured poetic fabric.
CHAPTER FIVE

The Effects of Oral Criticism on Textual Problems

Introduction

The majority of essays about 'Beowulf' point to several textual problems in the poem, isolated by the understanding of a written verse and a reading public. If, however, 'Beowulf' was composed by a singer of tales and delivered vocally in several versions to audiences, the lines must take on a new character and fulfil different expectations. In this Chapter, I shall look at several passages of the poem which have given scholars difficulty. I hope that the application of oral, or at least aural, values will throw light on these passages and so reduce their problematic nature.

The Relevance or Irrelevance of Scyld (4-52)

The Scyld episode introduces the history of the Danes from far back. As their founder, Scyld endows the race with godlike splendour since the mystery of his arrival is a supernatural mystery. The glory is acclaimed first, and then the poet moves chronologically through Scyld's background and genealogy and brings the poem to the mood in which it will end: the distress of the people at the funeral of their lord. Oral creation does not mean lack of form, although it may mean lack of ornamental and woven complexity. The form of
oral verse is organic in the sense that it is the vehicle of the story and allows the colouring of the story - nothing else. The ascription of the qualities of contrast, movement towards climax, and establishment of setting to the Scyld episode are not irrelevant to oral criticism of 'Beowulf' since they are not qualities which have their existence only in retrospective literary criticism. They would be identifiable on performance. The audience listening to the scop hears of a glorious race, and is then told about the founder of that race whose deistic character enhances not only his own splendour but also that of the heroes who come after him. The biographical line of the story moves to the natural climax of fame and death, and so carries the tale on to present time within the fiction. To say that the Scyld episode is irrelevant is to say that the poet must conform to certain print culture ideas about stories, that they must retain interest in and adherence to the main subject matter. A poem such as 'Beowulf', which is a sort of composite of heroes, folk tales, mysteries, legends, and myths, cannot speak of one tale only, and if it did it would no longer be 'Beowulf'.

Grendel and his Descent from Cain (103-114)

The poem is of Germanic descent but of English birth; Grendel is of Biblical descent but of heathen birth. There is a discrepancy in the cultural mixture of Grendel's
genesis, but an oral poet working in the old tradition while living in a transitional age could well have used all available resources when composing and performing. Undoubtedly, the poet is not heathen, but his Christianity has a pagan tang which prevents a thorough acclimatization to the new religion and retains the flavour of pagan heroic values.

I do not believe that the poet attributed Grendel's ancestry to Cain in order to bring the poem into the favour of Christians, but rather because he saw a parallel between the Cain and Abel Story (which defies the Germanic code of kinship) and the Grendel Story (which embodies the stereotypes of the outlaw from society and the anarchist-turned-monster). I think that the heroic poet rather than Christianity is dominant here, and the similarity between Cain and Grendel lies in their mutual defiance of a law which protects society. Oral composition, with its necessary rapidity of thought and linkage, would not hesitate to mix such elements since story and the possibility of conjunction or contrast is more important than theology.

Lines 168-69: Are They Misplaced?

Klaeber comments on these two lines, "One might suspect an inept interpolation here".¹ The lines,

\[
\text{ne he þone gifstōl grētan mōste, māþum for Metode, }\; \text{ne his myne wisse.}\]

are ambiguous in written form, but I think, as Betty S. Cox

¹ Fr. Klaeber Beowulf and The Fight at Finnsburg p.135
does\(^2\), that oral performance, which has methods of communication in addition to the word (facial expression, musical accompaniment, gesture, tone of voice), could easily convey the meaning of such lines. The exact meaning is now lost, since there are about sixteen alternative readings, and simply to say that oral performance tells why the passage is present does not tell what the passage means. But at least we know that the lines are not necessarily an "inept interpolation", and may have some forgotten tone which resided in dramatic performance rather than in the bare and inarticulated word.

Betty S. Cox thinks that 
\begin{equation*}
\text{maþum}
\end{equation*}
and 
\begin{equation*}
\text{gifstöl}
\end{equation*}
are appositional\(^3\), and that 
\begin{equation*}
\text{maþum}
\end{equation*}
has affinity with the Ark of the Covenant. However, pagan Anglo-Saxon religion endowed the king with deistic powers and so also endowed his possessions and regalia with godlike splendour and sanctity\(^4\). This pagan source alone may explain Grendel's inability to approach the throne, be it God's or Hrothgar's, or traditionally the possession of the tribal god-king.

**Paganism (175-188)**

The poet's commendation of obedience to God is specifically Judaic but has no direct Christian content. Hell and heaven are juxtaposed, and the choice between

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2. Betty S. Cox  \textit{Crucès of Beowulf} pp. 35-36
3. \textit{ibid.} p. 70
4. William A. Chaney \textit{The Cult of Kingship in Anglo-Saxon England}
them is an obvious one. Man's natural desire for happiness is enough to cause his advocacy of heaven, and there is no need to regard this passage as a monastic addition to the text. When the poet speaks of pagan practices, he may conceivably be using the same formulae that he, as an orthodox Anglo-Saxon pagan, would have used when speaking of the Huns, or of the Goths. The dichotomy between Christian and pagan has overshadowed the fact that to any religion, another is heathen. But this does not disprove the influence of the new religion on this passage; it only shows that the language and formulae are possibly more traditional than is usually thought. Events in England in the sixth and seventh centuries may have served as background to these lines, since apostasy occurred after conversion in several areas; the topicality of events may have put into the poet's mind the old formulae of worship and religious change. It is not necessary to think, with Klaeber, that "he seems to have been influenced by reminiscences of the idol worship of the Babylonians described in Daniel."5

The Relevance of Gnomic Insertions to the Theory of Oral Composition (287-289, 572-573)

The coastguard's maxim is placed at the beginning of his speech and refers abstractly to the situation on hand. Beowulf places a message in the midst of his storytelling

5. Fr. Klaeber Beowulf and The Fight at Finnsburg p.135
and so refers beyond himself to all men. The poet draws such maxims from his context and embodies them in ancient formulae which have the sound of laws. The Germanic laws were transmitted orally\(^6\), and it is very likely that poets utilized such expressions because of their convenience and poetic tone. Axioms such as these reinforce the poem's heroic tone and spell out the morals which bind the heroes. They give a highly majestic ring to the verse and maintain its aristocratic mood. Instead of moralizing through allegory, oral poetry tends to draw a meaning from the story and to place the two in proximity without syntactical connections. By this method, the verse is improved because depth of meaning and majesty of tone is attained.

An understanding of the abrupt juxtaposition of the story and its moral is necessary to an appreciation of the verse. Oral performance probably declaims such passages so that they become points where the audience is drawn in to the poem through the emptying of the lines of specific character and event and the universalizing of meaning through abstraction. The familiarity of the almost pat lines, with their proverbial sound, would also help to draw in the audience after long narrative passages. I feel that the poet instinctively weaves in such fragments in order to keep commerce between his words and his audience alive.

\(^6\) F.E. Harmer *Anglo-Saxon Writs*, intro.
The Boar Crests: Literal or Magical? (303-306)

The boar was sacred to Freyr, the god of fertility, strength, and harvest. It also embodied the grain spirit in many ancient European cults, and is associated with fertility and plenty when it refers to the tribe, and with splendour and protection when it refers to the king. The older composite figure of king and god probably added to the significance of the boar as emblem, and informed it with magical powers of protection. The boar crests referred to here in 'Beowulf' are of this nature, and guard the lives of the warriors with supernatural power. A literal interpretation of these lines is possible, and the poet might have seen boar helmets being worn. But since the helmets are said to protect, and since the old symbolic nature of the boar is demonstrably one of protection, these lines are apparently of traditional rather than literal origins. Consequently, the mythic sources are present in lines 303-306 to those who see 'Beowulf' as an oral poem. The proximity of the tradition to oral performance is not due so much to the character of the scop (his religious and moral beliefs) as to his use of language in which traditional beliefs are inherent.

Dating Criteria (320, 673a, 2778a)

Within an oral poem, half-lines and lines will appear which are not chronologically coherent with the present time of the fiction. These may be formulae from far back or inventions of the poet who is nostalgic for the past.

G.S. Kirk locates in the Homeric poems certain elements which are out of time with the heroes\(^8\), but which belong to an earlier age and have survived through oral transmission. In 'Beowulf', similar elements have survived, and have been termed anachronistic or irrelevant or poetically decorative and superfluous. These comments may all be true, but in the oral context they lose their malice.

The half-line, "Strōt was stānfān" (320a), may be a formula invented in early times in areas of Roman settlement, or a regional invention which has been carried elsewhere, or a description made from personal witness. It is more likely, if 'Beowulf' is an oral poem, to be one of these rather than an example of "poetic extravagance"\(^9\). The presence of this half-line may indicate a tradition, since if 'Beowulf' was composed in any of the areas normally ascribed to it, there would have been no Roman paving or memory of its presence there for the poet to refer to.

The half-lines "ecg was īren" (2778a) and "īrena cyst" (673) are probably formulae, since iron was used for centuries for Germanic weaponry, and iron in the early growing Anglo-Saxon societies was given more to domestic and agricultural use\(^10\). The descriptions of armour and weapons in 'Beowulf' are accurate, as shown by archaeological discoveries; but

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8. G.S. Kirk *Homer and The Epic* p.75  
9. Fr. Klaeber *Beowulf and The Fight at Finnsburg* p.141  
10. Dorothy Whitelock *Beginnings of English Society* p.116
more important, they are traditional and old since the discoveries are from the Germanic heroic age of the first migrations. Other features of dating are the references to paganism and Christianity, and these have already been dealt with (Chapter four).

The Mythic Word (326, 769, 2577a)

Regnhearde (326) is translated "rain-hard", but may have mythic origins. The poet could use such a word in the same way that he referred to the magical boar-crests, indicating by an incantatory tone its significance or allowing it to colour the line by its very presence.

Regin originally meant "god", and thus the adjective means "divinely hard" or "protected by the strength of a god". A word of which the etymology is similarly obscured is ealuscerwen (769) which may mean "taking away of ale", and thus "terror". In Northern mythology, mead was sometimes seen as the liquor of the gods and its absence took away the poet's inspiration and power of fine utterance 11. Mead was the vomit of the gods, and its disappearance meant the separation of men from the gods. These may be the mythological origins of the word, carried by the oral tradition, and lost once Christianity and literacy replaced the old society.

Of line 2577a ("incge-lafe"), Klaeber writes,

"Quite possibly the scribe did not understand the word" 12.

12. Mr. Klaeber Beowulf and The Fight at Finnsburg p.217
This again is a word with a possible mythological background. Ing was a pagan deity, perhaps residing in the darkness behind the 'Ynglinga Tal'. In Proto-Germanic, the epithet is * /ingwjas/, meaning "Ing-like", "god-like", "marvelous". There is a similarity between incge-lāfe and regnhearde, in that they both perhaps refer to the strength invested to men by the old gods.

**A Burial Custom (445b-447b)**

The covering of the head after death was a burial custom in Scandinavia as well as amongst the Anglo-Saxons. R.R. Onians may have an explanation for this when he says that the head is the seat of life, the principle of life, and is therefore supremely honoured and holy. The person is thus somehow equated with his head: in battle, men protect their heads ("hafelan weredon" 1327a), and Wiqlāf guards the heads of Beowulf and the dragon (2906b – 2910a). The close proximity of content and value in oral poetry, of expression and the status quo, ensures that such traditional belief are preserved for transmission in poetic language.

**Why Beowulf Allows Grendel to Kill (728-754)**

Because Beowulf rests on his bed while Grendel slaughters and eats one of the warriors, scholars have been led into discussions of battle tactics, psychology, and textual

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13. ibid. p.144
14. R.R. Onians *The Origins of European Thought* about the Body, the Mind, the Soul, the World, Time, and Fate pp. 95-108
corruption. I think that if the poem was performed and composed orally, close to folktale sources and using a different time sequence from that of written verse, it is possible to see Grendel's deed as part of the storyline and not as a discredit to Beowulf's claims of strength. The idea that Beowulf watches Grendel in order to learn his method of attack (as Kevin Crossley Holland thinks 15) is very feasible, but it is also likely that a poem continually set in the present because of its ephemeral delivery in sounds rather in concrete printed words would use time linearly rather than cumulatively. A cumulative conception of time uses more adverbial conjunctions, and so always maintains the exact relationship between events. 'Beowulf' exists on one temporal level, and that is the same level as the storyline, always moving on because it is presented by the linear flow of voice.

It is a Germanic convention that two events occurring simultaneously in real time will occur one after the other in fictional time. Simultaneity is virtually absent, so that Beowulf does not necessarily lie dormant while Grendel ravages, but lies watching and moves to attack at the same time as Grendel's rapid savagery is committed. An oral performance would lessen the sequential effect of this passage, since only one poet is singing and only one thing is being told at any one time. The aural convention would

15. Kevin Crossley-Holland & Bruce Mitchell Beowulf p.53
allow the audience to appreciate the possible simultaneity of events.

Another example of simultaneous time occurs at lines 1501-1505, where the attack of Grendel's mother and Beowulf's survival are repeated in apposition with ever-increasing detail so that suspense is heightened and reverberates throughout the passage.

Landscape and Oral Transmission (1357 ff.)

Formulaic transmission is geared for ease of creation. The word hoard of a Germanic scop probably included descriptive half-lines which filled many requirements of mood, setting, and atmosphere. I think that it is upon these half-lines that the 'Beowulf' poet has drawn in his descriptions of the habitation of the monsters. Absurd arguments occur about the credibility of such geography, about whether fens and rocky cliffs can occur in the same area. Less absurd are the attempts to attribute the landscape to early ideas of hell\(^\text{16}\), but I do not think it is necessary to go far outside the Germanic oral and heroic tradition to discover the source of this landscape. Monsters were very real to the Anglo-Saxons, and the darkened rugged countryside must often have supplied imaginative settings for lairs and such like. Grendel and his mother are horrible creatures, and the place in which they live should also be horrible to reinforce the terror they inspire and the brutality of their own lives. The 'Beowulf' poet, it seems, has accumulated a number of landscape features.

\^{16}\text{Fr. Ki\aeber Beowulf and the Fight at Finnsburg p.183}
which together give a picture of terrifying vividness. The effect is something like that of Gothic settings and all of their trappings. First hand knowledge of the place is unnecessary, and attempts to locate the landscape somewhere in England are therefore not of very much importance. It is essentially an imaginative landscape constructed as it is in order to inspire terror in the audience.

_How Grendel's Mother and Beowulf Stand Up (1514-1556)_

There are two connecting links missing in this passage; the poet does not tell us that Grendel's dam gets up, or how Beowulf throws her off and rises to take the giant's sword. This is the type of narrative structure that occurs in oral poetry, where links are sometimes made by sound rather than by sense, and the vocal flow of the spoken poem gives sequence although the actual events narrated may be disjointed. The puzzled acceptance of this description of combat illustrates the expectation for connecting detail, but oral poetry does not necessarily have the same syntactical structures as written poetry. It is a characteristic of Anglo-Saxon verse to juxtapose rather than to connect, and so it is also that Anglo-Saxon verse records events by highlighting rather than by reporter-like detail. This technique is made more consciously artistic in 'Maldon', where battle sequences are described as if a flare were

17. ibid. p.182
thrown upon them and darkness covers the rest of the battlefield. 'Beowulf' still relies upon the elliptical method of description, especially with such subjects as combat which could become tedious if minutely described. Emphasis falls upon decisive action rather than upon manoeuvres leading up to that action. Tactics are important and appreciated, but mechanical moves seem to be held as scarcely worth description.

Hrothgar's Sermon: an Interpolation? (1700-84)

Hrothgar's Sermon is, in fact, another speech, a formal declaration of belief or intention of which so many appear in the poem. Klaeber comments,

"Of course, its excessive length and strong homiletic flavour have laid the third division, and even other parts, open to the charge of having been interpolated by a man versed and interested in theology..., and it is, indeed, possible that the 'Sermon' represents a later addition to the text"18.

Hrothgar, I think, makes it clear that he offers advice because he himself has ruled for fifty years and will soon die. His speech is not longer than that by Beowulf in the Breca episode, and the sentiments expressed are not different from others in the poem. Oral poetry has, as one of its common themes, the delivery of speeches, and these allow the poet some freedom of expression and content, a new area in which he can utilize his word hoard. The speech, because it is also a theme, is an aid to creation since it is almost always relevant and opens up a new word

18. ibid. p.190
It prevents faltering of the story-line and reinforces the content and mood of the poem. I do not believe that Hrothgar's speech is any more unusual than other speeches in 'Beowulf', and its moral tone is consistent with other ascriptions of man's destiny to God in the poem. Hrothgar is an old man who has learnt much; in Beowulf he sees a potentially great leader and he offers him advice to warn him of evil.

The Problem of Beowulf's Inglorious Youth (2183-2189)

Klaeber calls the introduction of this episode into the narrative "not very convincing"¹⁹. A singer moving linearly through his material may neglect details here and add them there, or he may forget elements of his story and formulae he has used. Beowulf's inglorious youth belongs to folktales about the Bear's Son, about Bjarki, and it is probably from these old sources that the poet is drawing his description. The fact that he did refer to this before in the stories of Beowulf's youth is unimportant to him since he has probably forgotten by this stage whether he made this reference or not. The contrast between the sluggish youth and the glorious man is the major poetic quality of these lines, and once more the contrast arises from juxtaposition rather than through linkage. It is likely that a singer composing \textit{ex tempore} would use phrases of immediate impact to his audience, that

¹⁹. ibid. p.207
he would sense the reaction to his poem and manipulate it to his artistic ends. The passage preceding line 2183b maintains a high note of triumph and so the change to a less glorious time impresses more firmly on the mind the extraordinary strength and greatness of Beowulf as a man. The added length of the lines reflects the sluggishness of his youth, and one can imagine the poet's voice rising to a climax as he once more establishes the glory of the man. There is no real problem of inconsistency, only one of the turns which oral poetry is likely to take.

The Curse on the Hoard (3051-3075)

The curse upon the hoard, pronounced by the prince who laid the treasure there, has all the fantasy and magic of pagan folk devilry. Because so many 'Beowulf' critics are anxious to show the pervasiveness of Christianity in the poem, the basically non-Christian deed of cursing the precious things is turned by them into a proclamation against greed. But the poet makes it clear that the burier of the treasure, the man who laid the curse, will profit nothing. No human being may approach the contents of the barrow without unleashing the curse upon him, unless it is God's will that he be there. It seems that the dragon is free from this curse, and traditionally the dragon is guardian of the barrow and of the possessions of dead men. This thoroughly pagan idea is used by the poet as part of the colouring of the poem, and especially because it is a theme
with ancient origins there is no question of its traditionality. This tradition is clearly non-Christian, and the mention of God is therefore another example of the poet's mixture of the old way of life and the new. Certain elements of the Germanic religion were easily modified to Christian beliefs such as that in God the father (the Chief Deity) and in fate (man's lot on earth). These are the sort of ideas that inform the religious conceptions of the poem, and these ideas which so well bridge the gap between paganism and Christianity are those that the poet uses when he tells of old practices in the new light.

The dragon is conventionally the hoard guardian, and he has no conceivable role within a Christian moral tale about greed. This type of interpretation has nothing to do with the kind of poem that 'Beowulf' is: it is far more likely that the dragon is there in his familiar rôle and that the reference to God is there because of the Christian conversion. The poet, because he lives in an age of transition, shows no signs of confusion since to him all the elements of his tradition are part of the present and are therefore not contrary to each other. The dragon, the curse, and the hoard are the familiar trappings of folktale, and the final control that God has over entrance to the barrow is an acceptance of certain Christian values.

These textual problems in 'Beowulf', only a few of the very large number, can be somewhat elucidated by the applic-
ation of ideas about oral composition or of the Germanic tradition to the poem. I think that the conditions of performance, with the contact between singer and audience, are the most important influence upon the form of the poem. Not only does living performance allow certain dramatic methods of communication to portray the verse, but it also specifies certain conventions which, in an unspoken way, help to clarify the verse. I think that an understanding of these possibilities, as well as of the tradition in which the poem occurs would together solve all problems of the text, but I do not know whether we can ever recapture a full knowledge of oral poetry and all the conventions of its performance.
CHAPTER SIX

'Beowulf and Oral Criticism'

The Preservation of the Poem

The manuscript of 'Beowulf' dates from circa 1000 A.D., but the poem is commonly thought to belong to an earlier period. There are several ways in which the poem could have been preserved:

1. The poet wrote 'Beowulf' in a monastery where it was copied and kept, successive copies being made over the following decades and centuries. Scribes in monasteries throughout the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms revised the text to account for historical changes and regional differences in grammar and phonology.

2. 'Beowulf' was first written down as a poem suitable for memorization by rhapsodes, and it was preserved for several centuries by close memorization, the only changes being those of local dialect and colouring. Eventually, the poem was copied down as a poet spoke it; speed of delivery did not affect the dictated poem since memorization held the verse intact in its original form.

3. The 'Beowulf' poet composed the work orally, as one version of many about the Geatish hero. The poem we have is a version rather than a definitive text. After
the tradition of simultaneous oral creation and performance had died out (because of the increase of literacy), rhapsodes memorized 'Beowulf' as it passed through the centuries until it was eventually written down, either by a literate rhapsode or by a monk taking dictation.

4. The 'Beowulf' poet was literate and wrote down his poem, dictating aloud to himself. After this, his text was preserved in monasteries and the final manuscript shows the areas and times through which the poem passed.

5. 'Beowulf' was orally composed, heard appreciatively by a literate (i.e. monastic) audience, and dictated soon after the first performance. The dictated poem, in this case, took the route of all the other hypothetical early manuscripts.

6. 'Beowulf' was orally composed, re-created by scops, and finally written down.

Not one of these possibilities can be proved or disproved conclusively, but since I believe that the 'Beowulf' poet used similar techniques to Homer's, his poem might well have been composed orally and transmitted from rhapsode to rhapsode until eventually one of them wrote it down or dictated it to a scribe. It is feasible that a rhapsode could write, since there is no cultural clash between the stress on orality and literacy in the nature of his performance. Rather than compose ex tempore
from mnemonics, and memorize as one nowadays memorizes Shakespeare, he maintains the concept of a fixed text to which he must be faithful. The basis of his art is therefore firmly entrenched in a print culture, where the absolute work exists inviolate, surrounded as it is by the idea of originality and authorship. The true oral poet who creates rather than memorizes is outside these print culture concepts, and can lay no claims of ownership to any work except that which falls from his mouth at the time of composition. Our ascription of the title 'Beowulf poet' is therefore something of a misnomer, since the traditional elements of the poem defy possession by any one man, and we do not know whose version the manuscript is closest to. Because there are at least two stages in any method of preservation described above, there is a strong possibility that 'Beowulf' as we know it is a collective work, based on the written or oral version which led to preservation, and on the changing 'process-poem' as it was preserved throughout several centuries.

The poem has the sequential structure of a heroic adventurous tale in which a certain number of tasks are performed. The three main sections are not only architectural, giving a firm guideline for memorization, but also episodic. They may indicate the division of the poem into sections which could be performed separately, allowing the oral poet to rest every thousand lines. There is nothing
in the poem which proves that it was composed by a literate writer of heroic verse. I can see no hints of romance, or of rhyme which Lehmann identifies as a sign of the new Germanic verse. The characteristics of the verse are purely traditional, being formulaic in tone, repetition, concision, and rhythm, and heroic in events, action, ethics, epithets and atmosphere. The Christianity is informed by the virtue of the lord-retainer pact, and there are fewer introduced Christian words and original phrases than in some other Old English poems. The structure is no subtle entanglement of verse, as in the later written Old Icelandic sagas, or pattern of plot; the method is not allegoric. A certain amount of work has been done to suggest levels of unity and complexity in the poem, such as that by A.E. Du Bois on the numerical sequences in 'Beowulf'. It is true that such numbers as three, nine, thirteen, and forty may have Biblical significance, but they also alliterate with primary verbs and nouns in the lines in which they appear and therefore seem subordinate to the lines rather than dominant in them. There are other numbers in the poem (four 1.59, thirty 1.123, twelve 1.147, fourteen 1.207, fifty 1.1769) for which no Christian interpretation can be given, and these are left politely unscrutinized.

1. H.V. Routh God, Man, and Epic Poetry: a Study in Comparative Literature, Vol.11 pp.88-89
3. Albert Keiser The Influence of Christianity on the Vocabulary of Old English Poetry
The Oral Society: the Context of the Poem

To say that 'Beowulf' lacks a complex structure is not to find fault with the poem, since this judgement acknowledges the poem's creative method. I believe the 'Beowulf' poet, that man with whom the poem was first identified, composed orally and spontaneously, using mnemonic devices rather than straightforward memorization. After his performance, his poem was somehow crystallized into the solidity of written words, and probably somewhat altered by this change of medium. However, the poem bears enough witness to the nature of its conception for it to be identifiable as of a traditional, heroic kind.

If the primary orality of the poem is accepted, then a different sort of criticism must be applied to it, since it is clear that the values of a print culture are different from those of an oral culture. Marshall McLuhan describes this in *The Gutenberg Galaxy*. One's views of the objective and subjective, of communication (that is, commerce between the objective and subjective), and of time, are all altered.

The case for a new critical system is introduced by Harry Levin in his preface to Lord's *The Singer of Tales*:

"A culture based upon the printed book, which has prevailed from the Renaissance until lately, has bequeathed to us - along with its immeasurable riches - snobberies which ought to be cast aside. We ought to take a fresh look at tradition, considered not as the inert acceptance of a fossilized corpus of themes and conventions, but as an organic habit of re-creating what has been received and is handed on".5

5. Harry Levin, Preface to *The Singer of Tales* Albert B. Lord p.xiii
The snobberies of which Levin speaks are the evaluative
tags with which we belabour oral poetry, treating it as
an inferior level of literacy rather than as a supreme
use of the auditory function. This supremacy is attained
within the realms of the known, and does not explore the
purely imaginative realms of fantasy which run through
much literate composition. The confines are real rather
than mental. McLuhan\(^6\) suggests, by reference to Edward T.
Hall's 'The Silent Language', that we have evolved exten-
sions which are in a sense extra-linguistic and extra-
literal since they reach the outer boundaries of our
consciousness, that is, the limits of the real. It seems
that man has gone beyond the use of literacy, and has thus
in a sense returned to the confined world of the closed
society\(^7\), but in a vastly extended global form. In
primitive oral society, the extension occurred within the
limits of phonetic development, from cave drawing, to
ideograph, to phonetic word. McLuhan expresses this develop-
ment as follows:

(a) cave drawing  "the Altamira Buffalo is a prayer"\(^8\)
"The magic of the cave image lies
in its being, not in its being seen"\(^9\)

(b) ideograph  "with the ideograph we begin to move
from the reverential to the referential"\(^10\)
"As the bounding line ceases to be
stressed, there is a steady lessening
of involvement in process. There is a
steady strengthening of visual values
and detachment".\(^11\)

7. Karl Popper 'The Open Society and its Enemies'
8. Marshall McLuhan and Harley Parker 'Through the Vanishing
Point: Space in Poetry and Painting' p.39
In contrast to phonetic letters, the ideograph is a vortex that responds to lines of force. It is a mask of corporate energy.

The cultural movement in oral society is therefore from mythos to logos, from a bounded evocation of being to a split conception of subject and object, of being and seeing. Plato testifies to the effect such a movement can have on philosophy of communication in an age of change.

"This bifurcation of reality had a disastrous impact upon the conception of human communication, for it caused Plato to disclaim the validity of logos as an instrument of thought. He held that language merely approximated reality and so was bound to mislead us [Plato 'Seventh Letter' 342-344, 'Sophist' 233-35, 'Phædo' 74-84]. Effective discourse about philosophical matters was impossible [Plato 'Seventh Letter' 341 c. 'Cratylus' 432]. The philosopher who employed discursive means to encounter Truth would become disoriented in his own mind [Plato 'Republic' 517, 'Theactetus' 174-76]."

The problem that Plato faced is concerned with the change-over from an oral to a literate culture, from an age of faith in which man is not alienated from the world around him to an age where the specifying and abstracting powers of language segregate man from the world or grant to him only an apperceived and mental reality.

Eric Havelock discusses pre-literate Greece, focusing especially on the scholarly snobberies to which Levin refers in his preface to The Singer of Tales.

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12. ibid. p.39
14. Eric A. Havelock Prologue to Greek Literacy
gives an example of common critical contention in order
to display the bias of some scholarly works:

"Here is a poetic literature as sophisticated as any
the world has seen. It must therefore represent the
refined product of a culture which had begun its
ascent to supremacy a considerable time before these
works appeared, one which indeed must have rested on
a foundation of discourse written in prose, even if
most of it has been lost."

This type of criticism can be found often enough amongst
Old English scholars when they outline the literacy of the
'Beowulf' poet, his deep knowledge of Virgil, his familiar-
ity with Biblical exegesis, his sense of structure and tonal
quality. Others who have heard of Germanic oral poetry
disson 'Beowulf' on literary terms without honest consider-
ation of the nature of the poem. It is clear that the
problem which Navelock describes is a common one, perpet-
uated as it is by those who ignore or are ignorant of
cultural studies such as those by Karl Popper and Marshall
McLuhan, and of the new studies of oral poetry. There are
two territories, oral and written, with a disputed frontier.
Literacy has reigned supreme and occupied the territory
of the other; now the balance between them is being restored
as those poems which are truly of oral nature and origin are
rightfully being reclaimed as such. There are still dict-
atorial scholars who deny the orality of these poems and who
insist on drawing them into literate territory and thus

15. ibid. p.3
16. Karl Popper The Open Society and its Enemies
17. Marshall McLuhan The Gutenberg Galaxy
destroy them. The literate and the oral poem are different species, and they need different critical standards. The one belongs to a non-literate bardic culture, the other to a scribal culture with phonetics and alphabet. Even at the time of Christ, a scribe had not taken on this completely word-orientated character, since the 'alphabet' with which he worked was only approximate and moveable. He still performed a task of interpretation:

"The 'scribe' of the time of Christ was still the required and recognized interpreter of Scripture, in the first place because he was prepared to say what a given transcription 'meant', that is, in practice, what choices to make of key syllables where choice was possible. To read such a script required a series of decisions basically acoustic in their nature."18.

For a long time, control of writing systems was the exclusive right of appointed scribes and scholars, and could not be democratized because of the scope of interpretation.

The movement from hieroglyphics or ideograms to phonetics broke the word down into meaningless sounds, and perhaps in this way fragmented its being and made it a tool and extension rather than an element of self and reality.

Literacy in this way moved man away from himself, and from his traditional past and its close proximity to the world. The crucial difference between the oral and the literate culture and its relationship between man and his world is expressed by Havelock as follows:

"language is an act of management of sound, not an arrangement of letters"19.

18. Eric A. Havelock  Prologue to Greek Literacy p.7
19. ibid. p.20
The change is one from being to abstraction, from meaningfulness to symbolic meaninglessness. So it is also that myth, the ascription of life to all things by man's sensual interaction with the world, is supreme in a non-literate culture. The vocabulary of Homer is descriptive and prescriptive, at one with the culture that produced it, manifesting a type of cultural self-censorship and preservation. A literate culture with its dependence upon logos highlights the dichotomy between the named and the namer, and thus dilutes its self-identity by the thorough naming of all things, known and unknown, randomly and amorally.

All things considered, oral poetry is entirely different from written poetry in its use of language, its vision of man and the world, its upholding of society, and its idea of time. Where literate values have been transferred to oral poetry, a misapplication has resulted. I intend to show how some Old English critics have misapplied their critical theories in their discussion of 'Beowulf', and to hint at better theories for evaluation of such hypothetically oral poems.

The Misapplication of Literate Values to a Non-literate Poetry

W.P. Ker20 manifests the critical characteristics of which Havelock speaks: Ker cannot conceive of 'Beowulf' as originating from an oral tradition. He must have it as the

20. W.P. Ker The Dark Ages
product of a complex poetry and a literate poet:

"There is too much education in 'Beowulf', and it may be that the larger kind of heroic poem was attained in England only through the example of Latin narrative". 21

"'Beowulf' and 'Waldere' are the work of educated men". 22

This is the type of criticism which rests on an unconsidered hypothesis, a snobbish (to use Levin's term) prejudice which can assign no quality to any poem that is not finely wrought and the work of a very clever and educated man. The literate value of complexity, and the educated creativity that produces it, seem inapplicable to oral poetry. Ker's association of ideas between tonal complexity and the poet's learning is understandable in a print culture, and his critical evaluation of 'Beowulf' may therefore appear reasonable. He has no fault other than his automatically print-culture response to a poem that may in fact be oral.

The concepts of learning and education are crystallized when the knowledge which man feels is essential to his life can no longer be contained solely in his head, and must be stored in brain-extensions such as books, maps, charts, and codified laws. The oral poet functioned when he needed nothing but the mnemonic tools of which he availed himself, the traditional word hoard, and a mythic (as distinct from logical) way of seeing himself and his surroundings. Ker conceives of 'Beowulf' as complex and skilled, and immediately assumes the poet's literacy and learning. The

21. ibid. p.251
22. ibid. p.250
affinity between education and complexity is a linkage that exists only because of our print culture way of conceiving of the world. We are, in effect, conditioned to be associative within a specified context, that of literate society, and it is difficult to short circuit this rational process and to arrive at a different association of cause and effect that is relevant only to a non-literate culture. To bypass Ker's criticism of 'Beowulf', we must dissociate the poem's value from the poet's education, since retrospective value and scholarly learning are irrelevant to oral poetry. The effect of such poetry is immediate, and reaction to it is spontaneous: it has a temporal existence but not a spatial one.

Ker's criterion of education as the source of the poet's skill mistakes the nature of the verse and of its creation. Oral poetry is traditional and close to the society it reflects; it is less identifiable than written literature with its poet since he relies as much upon the furnishings of his tradition as upon his own individuality and originality. Literate society and its art are ego-centred and place the man at the head of all things. Non-literate society has as its axis the community, and is therefore liable to produce anonymous works for which no one man claims authorship. Instead of attributing creation solely to the poet, such a society would turn to its past, its benefactors, and its tradition. This tradition is an accumulation of
vital facts, names, phrases, and events which together comprise the total history and raison d'être of the society. One man's vision certainly gives life to the tradition, but it serves to reflect all rather than to present one. So it is that in 'Beowulf', the society and its codes and the heroes who have upheld it are foremost. The poet's vision, if indeed he has one other than the conventions of his verse, is embodied in the sustained declaration of heroic virtues, in the aphoristic designation of man to fate and the ways of life and death, and in the choice of event and mood. Instead of going to sources of influence as Ker does, and locating the prototype of 'Beowulf' in Latin verse, one should return to the continental poetry of which 'Beowulf' is a sure survivor. Seen in its historic and cultural context, the poem speaks of a tradition which links behaviour and social survival in tight bondage, and there is no need to search for learning in the poet and consequent complexity in the poem since both scop and song are inextricably bound in an ancient oral tradition which provides its own values, inspirations, creative directives, and so on.

Stanley B. Greenfield, rather than look outside the Germanic tradition for the cause of the poem's excellence, turns to the poet's originality. He finds that in variation

23. Stanley B. Greenfield A Critical History of Old English Literature pp.75-76
(linguistic and structural), and in the utilization of contrast, the 'Beowulf' poet surpasses other Old English poets. Greenfield thus lays his critical burden at the feet of a poet who was probably unaware of individual artistry in the sense of a man taking leave of his tradition to such a degree that he surpasses it. Such a concept reflects avant-gardism, and it does not seem likely that the 'Beowulf' poet would have reached what he felt were the limits of oral literature and of its tradition since this was the sole flesh and blood of the survival of oral verse. The Yugoslav bards did not praise originality, nor did they have such a term. Rather, they praised a good story well told, a skilful accumulation and linking of formulae, a formulaic enrichment of theme. Many Old English critics point to the abundance of compounds in 'Beowulf' which occur nowhere else, and thus suggest the poet's originality. It is clear, however, that Old English is a compounding language and its very nature is therefore an invitation to such ingenuity. Consequently, compounding in 'Beowulf' is not a sign of the poet's superiority since he is following a habit of his language and not creating an invention of his own. The surviving corpus of Old English literature is so small anyway that the criterion of unique occurrence is not really valid. Originality can hardly be of such critical value in a non-literate context since

the context is dominated by tradition and not by the artist.

The problem of originality leads to another misconception in studies of 'Beowulf'. If the poem is indeed of oral origins, and the singer's education therefore under suspicion, the danger is that critics will see the poem as inferior since it is the product of an illiterate and ignorant bard.

"It would be unwise", writes Edward B. Irving, "to deny originality to the 'Beowulf' poet or to see him as merely a mechanical producer of verse".

Irving contends that "mechanical" production, (i.e. oral mnemonic creation), is undoubtedly crude and unpolished by comparison with written composition. This is the mistake made by so many Homeric scholars, when they assume that Homer must have been literate since his poetry is fine. Because oral poetry is associated with primitive societies, some critics tend to feel that the poetry must be "primitive" also; and if the poem in question is in fact pleasing, the alternative is to deny excellence to orality as Irving does. Parry's discussion of Homeric verse clearly shows that there is room for the invention of splendid poetry using mnemonic devices only; and my discussion of 'Beowulf' shows that the particular Old English line-structure is well suited to flexible formulaic composition. I do not believe that mnemonic creation need result in poetry of a standard inferior to written literature. Mnemonic composition is in no sense "mere", as Irving says, and as long as such pejorative uses

25. Edward B. Irving A Reading of Beowulf p.1
of oral critical terminology are made, oral poetry will go misunderstood.

The Renaissance elevated man to creator and thus allowed him a deistic place in the universe; the oral poet learns his technique as a craft to be well performed and skilfully executed. He is subordinate to his poetry, and in this sense it does not belong to him; a literate poet, on the other hand, is master of his verse. The conception of mnemonic production is loaded with the overtones of mechanism; this should not be the case. Like written language, mnemonic devices are the constituents of a literary heterocosm where a coherence truth is attained; but unlike written language the mnemonics are prescribed by the society in which they exist in a symbiotic relationship and thus form a correspondence truth with reality. The valuable tone in oral poetry is therefore the close proximity of society, singer, and audience; and the skilled and acclaimed technique is that which carries language beyond its abstraction into contact with society and its conception of reality.

The suggestion made by Greenfield, Irving, and Brodeur that 'Beowulf' is a superior poem because the poet surpasses his tradition and relies upon his original skills denies the possibility that an oral poem may be of great value. I offer the alternative view that 'Beowulf' is in fact different and excellent because it is the only really long oral poem which

26. Arthur Gilchrist Brodeur The Art of Beowulf p.2
has survived in the Anglo-Saxon corpus. If the nature of its creation is dissimilar from that of the more obviously literate Christian poems such as 'Andreas', 'Elene', and 'Genesis', it is less fruitful to compare 'Beowulf' with them than to evaluate their differences. Instead of ascribing 'Beowulf' to a learned and literate poet influenced by Latin works and native scholarship, the poem can be ascribed to a scop working in the old tradition. This would account for the poem's uniqueness in the Old English context just as much as a theory of the poet's unsurpassed originality. 'Beowulf' is probably one of the earliest Anglo-Saxon poems extant, and it is thus perhaps the sole surviving English example of the continental epic type which appears later in the long-preserved Icelandic sagas. It comes at the end of a poetry which is dying because of the increase of literacy; it is not the work of a poet heading in a new direction. Its tone is of lament for the past, and its fineness lies in this presentation, so close as it is between poetic utterance (occurring in the time within the poem) and poetic feeling (occurring at the time of presentation). I disagree with Brodeur's conception of 'Beowulf':

"Nowhere else in Old English do we find such splendor of language; its wealth and sureness attest that 'Beowulf' is the work, not of an illiterate 'Singer', but of a great literary artist, dominating, expanding, and transcending the limits of the form in which he elected to compose". 27

27. ibid. p.70
The superiority of 'Beowulf' lies in its trueness to the oral tradition, just as the value of the Homeric poems lies in the nature of the creation. If Homer was indeed a singer, there is no reason whatsoever to doubt the possibility of the 'Beowulf' poet's being a scop.

E.G. Stanley\(^2\) finds artistry in the poet's superior handling of the beasts and birds of battle. Stanley suggests that the use of their presence in 'Beowulf' is proof of the poet's conscious and literately-minded composition. But there is no reason why an oral poet should not be accredited with artistry. He composes from formulae and themes which he links and discards as he wishes, and his choice of them and the consequent determination of mood is surely an act of potential artistry. Often a critic points to skill in 'Beowulf' as proof of the poet's literacy, but he has only to look at Homer in order to realize that orality does not mean inferiority or lack of artistry. Stanley accredits the poet with greatness inside the oral context, and so does him rare justice:

"His skill shows itself in his exploitation of the resources of the Old English poetic, vocabulary, in his manipulation of complicated sentences, and in his use of the alliterative metre to convey his meaning effectively".

But Stanley, too, thinks the poet's method of composition is conscious, and this suggestion of a time lag between

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29. Ibid. p.115
creation and delivery is not in accord with the nature of oral performance. He says,

"The method of composition in 'Beowulf' is usually additive and annexive. That is not to say that the poet simply tacks phrase to phrase without premeditation." 30.

The force behind the poet's pursuit of linearly-arranged sense units (encapsulated in metrical half-lines) is not premeditation but mnemonic delivery of a similar type to our spontaneous use of language for communication. The mnemonic language of the singer is specifically for entertainment as well as for communication, and it demands a sensible form, a coherence, and an ease to make it pleasant to listen to. The processes of mnemonic composition are no more understood than those of language, but both undoubtedly exist. And the audience responds to the delivery because a situation is set up which leads to an expectation of performance; this expectation is fulfilled by the familiar phrases of the verse, the old heroes, values, and events, by the proximity of the song, singer, and audience, and by the artistic presentation as a social and traditional transaction. Stanley expresses this as follows:

"The excellence of the poem is in large measure due to the concord between the poet's mode of thinking and his mode of expression." 31.

He places the value of 'Beowulf' in its choice of elements and language, and thus moves towards a fair criticism of

30. ibid. p.120
31. ibid. p.136
the poem within its own context.

The literary values of our print culture are continually used to assess 'Beowulf', and certain biased judgements are therefore made. The points in the left hand column below are all received opinions which focus on written composition rather than on oral composition-performance, and a revision of the creative medium should enable the oral context to assert its own values. These values appear in the right hand column.

1. The poet is an artist rather than a storyteller 32.
The oral singer is both storyteller and artist since he creates and performs simultaneously, and produces a vocal art work which is intimate and alive, and which replaces the inert and solid art work as we know it.

2. 'Beowulf' is open to exegetical analysis 33.
The concepts of allegory and typology are foreign to traditional poetry which is nearer to mythos (the direct relationship between name and object i.e. linguistic symbolism and entological reality) than to logos (the primacy of discourse, logical thought, substitution of concept for object and morality for natural law).

3. The poet utilizes dramatic irony and is highly skilled in this.
"Dramatic irony" is a critical term which points to the poet's skill with his materials, creating a tangled web of suspense; but oral poetry relies less on the cleverly wrought residue of artistry in the text than upon the direct contact between the poet's voice and the audience.

32. A.E. DuBois 'The Unity of Beowulf' loc. cit. p.405
34. Arthur Gilchrist Brodeur 'The Art of Beowulf' p.230
4. He has an intimate knowledge of Gaatish history, and a less satisfactory knowledge of Danish. An oral poet relies not upon knowledge which he learns as we accumulate book knowledge, but upon sets of formulae, phrases, systems and themes which embody all that he needs to know. Mnemonic alliterative genealogies are an example of this type of historical knowledge. Regional formulae may give a singer a stock of specific phrases found nowhere outside that region unless carried by population movement.

5. He builds a complex structure of balanced contrast in order to create a poetic unity. The creative process of oral verse is linear and cumulative rather than patterned and involved. A literate poet can plan the perimeter of his work and fill it with plot complexities, structural and symbolic echoes, and so on. The oral poet composes in a forward movement so that his verse runs on, and the unity lies in the story, the tone, and the traditional aphoristic contrasts. The contrivance lies in the tradition rather than in the individual scop.

The Values of Oral Poetry

Godfrid Storms suggests that 'Beowulf' has two major informing elements, the objective and the subjective, both of which are evident in the emotional colouring of the poem. The tradition carries an immense load of moods, words, tones, characters, events, stories, plots, and social values. The poet who uses the tradition may choose to relate it in an objective way, incorporating in his poem an untouched block of traditional lore, for example the legal terminology used.

35. Godfrid Storms 'The Figure of Beowulf in Old English Epic' English Studies, XL (1959) pp.3-13
by Hrothgar to welcome Beowulf. This language is ancient, oral, and formulaic, and as such it enhances the verse without being in any way foreign to it because the poet maintains continual proximity to his tradition and its tools:

"Him Holy God
for honor's code sent to keep us
Danes of the West — no doubt of this —
from Grendel's terror". 39

381b-384a

The poet's originality lies in the nature of his performance, its length, richness (as through added stories, parallels, and digressions), interest (suspense through terror rather than through the unknown and unseen), and variation (in settings, language, speeches, and contests). Anne Amory Parry writes,

"...the conditions of oral poetry, in which a bard may sing a song many times, afford a greater opportunity for artistry than is sometimes allowed" 40.

"Modern adherents of the Parry-Lord theory sometimes speak as if an oral bard had no choice of diction, but this is a reductio ad absurdum. Clearly a bard, like a poet, decided what he wished to say, and then selected formulas which expressed his intention as exactly as possible" 41.

The ingenuity of the scop resides in his ability to choose well from the tradition, and to link the known elements into combinations of excitement, gloom, grandeur, terror, fidelity, treachery, and thanksgiving. The interaction is

40. Anne Amory Parry 'Homer as Artist' The Classical Quarterly XXI no.1 (May 1971) pp.1-5 (p.1)
41. ibid. note 4 pp.10-11
always between poet and audience, and both relate to the tradition from which the song derives.

Homeric scholars find poetic virtue in the power of narration, the coherent unity of the old story retold ("The ideal is the true story well and truly retold"\textsuperscript{42}), in the progression of events controlled by the inner logic of oral composition\textsuperscript{43}, in the fluidity, conception and scale of the poem\textsuperscript{44}, in the variation and enlivening of a necessarily recurrent theme\textsuperscript{45}, in the imagery\textsuperscript{46} and marvellous scenes\textsuperscript{47}, in the vividness and precision\textsuperscript{48}. Because oral poetry involves performance, the qualities of interest are of supreme importance since these maintain the attention of the audience. An oral poet's technical ability is as necessary to smoothness of delivery as inspiration is to ease of creation in a written work. The technique gives the means but the poet determines the end product. The singer of 'Beowulf' used traditional mnemonic devices to create his poem, and because of the society in which they evolved they evoke a unified tone of heroism. 'Beowulf' displays formulae, systems, themes, kennings, similes, and an alliterative line which all speak of a well-developed mnemonic style. The sound and the sense are important, as in any poem\textsuperscript{49}, but they are as they are because of a

\textsuperscript{42} Albert B. Lord \textit{The Singer of Tales} p.29
\textsuperscript{43} ibid. pp.191-192
\textsuperscript{44} G.S. Kirk \textit{The Songs of Homer} p.82
\textsuperscript{45} ibid. p.344
\textsuperscript{46} ibid. p.345
\textsuperscript{47} ibid. p.364
\textsuperscript{48} Anne Amory Parry 'Homer as Artist' loc.cit. p.15
\textsuperscript{49} ibid. p.10
particular method of composition rather than because of a particular whimsy of the poet's. Technical mastery allows 'Beowulf' great aural fluidity and, on a smaller scale, beauty and progression (in story and description) of half-line and line. The singer's awareness of the length of the poem implies an awareness of its structure, embodied as it is in the life of one man. The control placed upon the form by this life-span allows the poet room within for enriching digressions, for variation (as in the fight sequences and feasting scenes), for contrasts between glory and desolation, for precision and vividness to extend and complement appositional sections of necessary repetition. This local adoption of one song for re-creation is controlled overall by the poet's adherence to his tradition, and it is this that supplied both tone and technique.

The scop's individual mastery is thus great, but it always flourishes only in the traditional environment. He may be praised, though, for thoughtful shaping of traditional material in a complex way, in other words, for his handling of his potential materials. Lord attributes changes in certain Yugoslav poems to a poet's own sensitivity, and illustrates how Avdo Međedović improved Mumin's 'The Wedding of Smailagić Mehö', by such personal extensions. If we had any standards against which to compare the extant

50. Jess B. Bessinger, Jr. reading Beowulf, Caedmon's Hymn and Other Old English Poems, Caedmon TC 1161
51. Anne Amory Parry 'Homer as Artist' loc. cit. p.5
52. Albert B. Lord The Singer of Tales p.105
'Beowulf' (in the form of other versions of the poem), we might find signs of such personal artistry. I think they are there in any case, but their presence cannot be proved. I think it entirely likely that in oral performance, the singer would sense the reaction of his audience and so expand or abbreviate his lines:

"It would be absurd to argue that the interests of an audience do not affect the efficacy of communication."

And the more brilliantly terse and descriptive passages of 'Beowulf' are perhaps evidence of the singer's response to his audience's pleasure. The empathy between poet and audience in oral performance is therefore of great importance since it may improve the poem by the current of mutual responsiveness, by psychological encouragement, by the releasing of the poet's emotionally controlled word flow.

As well as the inner Gestalt of mnemonic composition there is the outer expectation of the audience to which the poet responds and conforms. In this way his verse pleases, and failure of his own vision or of his willingness to accept convention may result in poor verse and the displeasure of the audience.

I think that 'Beowulf', because of its pervasive adherence to the heroic code and its knotted and colourful descriptions, fulfils the artistic desires of its audience, and its wish to be spell-bound. I believe the poem as we

know it is of oral origins, and that it so pleased its audience that it moved with time into the age of literacy and was so preserved. The continental tradition sustains the tone and the technique, and the poet has not yet relinquished his hold on these old skills. He performs well the task which he sets the singers in his tale, just as Shakespeare creates superlatively the kind of drama of which Hamlet speaks. This is the extent of the 'Beowulf' poet's literary criticism:

"Hwīlum cyninga þegn
  hwealhlice gēgum
  gīdona gemyndig,
  ealdgeðegena
gorn gemunde,  word ōber fand
  word òber fand
sōgē gebunden;  secg eft ongan
  secg eft ongan
sið Beowulfes  snytrum styrian,
  snytrum styrian,
ond on spēd wrecan  spel gerāde,
  spel gerāde,
wordum wrixtan;"
  wordum wrixtan;
867b - 874a

"Bær wēs sang ond swēg  samod atgeredere
  samod atgeredere
fore Healfdegnas  hildewiðan,
  hildewiðan,
gomenwudu grētēd,  gīd_oft wrecen,
  gīd_oft wrecen,
ðonne healgaemen  hroþgāres scop
  hroþgāres scop
æfter medowence  mænan scolde"
  mænan scolde
1063a - 1067b

"gomela Scilding,
  feorran rehte;
 hwilum hildedeor  hearpan wynne,
  hwilum gýd æwroc
gomenwudu grettī,  hwilum syllic spell
  hwilum syllic spell
sōd ond sārlīc,  hwealhlice gēgum
  hwealhlice gēgum
rehte æfter rihte  rumheort cyning;
  rumheort cyning;
hwilum eft ongan  eldo gebunden,
  eldo gebunden,
gomel guōwiga  glioguðe cwīðan,
  glioguðe cwīðan,
hildestrengo;  hreðer inne wēoll,
  hreðer inne wēoll,
ðonne hē wintrum frōd  worn gemunde."
2105b - 2114b
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