Robert Kellogg
University of Virginia

THE PRE-HISTORY OF EDDIC POETRY

The body of poetry that is referred to by the Icelandic term eddukvæði preserves significant traces of traditions that developed in Northern Europe long before the surviving manuscript texts themselves came into being. At least that is the assumption of most contemporary studies of eddukvæði and the justification for the high value we place on this poetry. Literary and archeological evidence supports the belief that both the mythic and the heroic stories in Edda were common Germanic property before the settlement of Iceland and before the technologies of writing made literary versions of these poems possible. This is the assumption from which I will proceed as a first step in considering the traces of oral composition still to be found in the texts of Eddic poetry.

When we attempt to imagine an oral culture of the sort that lies somewhere prior to such texts as Beowulf, Deor, Widsiþ, Hildebrandslied, Nibelungenlied, and the poems of Edda, there is much in our usual way of thinking about literature and literary works that must be laid aside, including the word literature itself, at least insofar as the term suggests that literature is made of written letters. (The word literature, however, in the sense "verbal art" whether composed in writing or orally, is

almost indispensible in English, and continues to be used in the phrase oral literature.) It is not possible, however, to conceive of a text or a poetic work in the ordinary sense when describing oral literature. Most important of all, we must do without a conception of the author or poet. The best single guide in making these adjustments is probably Albert B. Lord's famous book The Singer of Tales, useful less for what it tells us about the crucial and still largely mysterious process by which the Eddic poetry may have evolved into literary texts than for its description of oral traditions pure and simple.

In oral cultures, stories are told and poems are sung by a performer, by Lord's "singer of tales." This performer is not an author. To his art he brings much less of his own invention and individuality than do authors and poets in a literary culture. Because the oral singer is not an author, he is under no obligation when he tells a story to invent a narrator separate from himself. He tells his story with the minimum of mediation or irony, accepting and transmitting its events and values directly, with no other authority than that of his and his audience's common tradition. Nor is he merely the reciter of a text that he holds in memory. Instead, the singer acquires a competence to compose his song as he delivers it, using the conventions of meter, diction, plot and theme that he has learned through an inherited tradition that he shares with his audience. His audience might even include other capable singers. This seems to have been the situation as late as Bede's story of the seventh-century English poet Cædmon, who, because he did not know how to sing, avoided parties where the monks were expected to take turns reciting poetry to the accompaniment of the harp, and also perhaps the circumstance that

Alcuin alludes to when he chides eighth-century English monks for their practice of listening to old heroic songs by asking sarcastically, "What has Ingeld to do with Christ?" But in general I wish to consider a period earlier than Bede, when writing and literary culture were not possible alternatives to oral performance in the Northern world.

The poetic meter in which an oral performer works is, like everything else in his art, determined and formed by tradition. It constitutes a special body of linguistic rules, beyond those required for everyday discourse, which produces well formed measures of verse, even in extemporaneous performance. The demands of meter work in tandem not only with features of grammar but with traditional diction as well. The formulaic expressions so prominently associated with orally composed poetry are shaped by, and employed to conform to, the poetical "grammar" of oral composition, as well as to the larger semantic and cultural features of the tradition.

Traces of this sort of compositional habit still remain in Edda, as in the other traditional Germanic poetry, including ballads. It is particularly noticeable in the handling of names. For example, the name Brynhildr occurs a total of twenty-two times in seven Eddic poems, twenty times in the first half of the line. Only in Oddrúnarkviða, where it is found four times, does it twice appear in the second helming. The obverse of this fact is that Brynhildr's epithet Buðla dóttir can be found in the same line with her name only if it occurs in the second helming, where it appears seven times (in four different poems). It does occur an eighth time in Edda, in the form dóttir Buðla, in the first helming of a line in Grípisspá 27, where Brynhildr was mentioned in the preceding line. The

ability to form a verse with the formula

VP Brynhildr Buðla dóttir

or Brynhildr VP Buðla dóttir

(where VP stands for verb phrase) would be essential for an oral performer. It is a stylistic feature of Eddic poetry that points to pre-literate origins--not of a particular poem, but of the Eddic poetics in general.

Since performances occur under a variety of circumstances, an oral tradition must have generic rules that fit performances to occasions appropriately. Among all of the genres that one might imagine in a pre-literate Germanic oral tradition (work songs, funeral laments, ritual songs, medicinal charms, gnomic sayings) the one about which it is most tempting to speculate among the ancestors of Eddic poetry is the long heroic narrative. Only Beowulf among the surviving texts of early Germanic poems is long enough and dignified enough to raise seriously the question of a pre-literate epic. Encouraged, however, by its existence and even more so by the similarities between the aristocratic heroic culture of the Germanic peoples during the period of migration (fifth to seventh century) and that of the Greeks at a similar stage (twelfth to eighth century B.C.), it is appropriate to consider the circumstances for epic in an oral Germanic culture.

Three features distinguish oral literature: it is rhythmic, it is formulaic, and it is traditional. Rhythm is obvious enough in the case of poetry. Other prose-like rhythms, however, are more subtle and an adequate attempt to describe them would lead me far afield. Suffice it to say that they include even bodily gestures, taken up in some instances by the audience as well as by the performer, who moves or sways or

dances if he does not accompany himself on some kind of musical instrument. Oral composition is formulaic in several ways. The term formula is usually used to designate set phrases, many examples of which are to be found in Eddic poetry. The phrase meðan öld lifir occurs a number of times in Edda, either in that form exactly or as a somewhat more abstract frame, meðan X lifir. The phrase can occur in larger combinations, which are themselves formulaic, as in

þat mun æ uppi, meðan öld lifir,	Völuspá 16
Æ mun uppi, meðan öld lifir,	Hálfsrekkaljóð 18
þvi at uppi mun, meðan öld lifir,	Grípisspá 23
þvi mun uppi, meðan öld lifir,	Grípisspá 41
æ meðan öld lifir.	Fjölsvinnsmál 12

Although everyday language is also full of such phrases, they occur in oral poetry with such great regularity that, in a large corpus such as the Homeric epics, every utterance can be attributed to a formula or a slightly more abstract formulaic system. Literary poets, except to produce some special effect, try never to write the same line twice.

But the formula, or formulaic system (meðan X lifir), is only one element of a more generally formulaic procedure in oral composition. Whole episodes appear with only minor variation in different performances: the arming of the hero, the congratulatory victory banquet, the elegaic lament for departed comrades, setting out on a journey by land or sea, the greeting of the watchman or coastguard, entering the king's court, the description of some notable weapon. The list is both commonplace and inexhaustable. In performances these topoi can be briefly stated or expanded to great length, depending upon the circumstances. The mythoi, or traditional plots, of oral narrative

are also in some sense formulaic, but these are as well considered formulas of the human imagination as attributes of any given tradition: the founding of a nation, the coming of a new god, the destruction of a monster, the journey to the underworld, the quest for a magic object. There is nothing, large or small, that is not an element of the tradition or that does not, with all the others, define the tradition.

Tradition gives oral literature its authority within an oral society. The performance of an epic episode, for example, is judged not by the probability of its events actually having occurred, or against the standard of contemporary manners, or according to whether or not it shows the gods in a favorable light, or by any other extrinsic criterion. Rather it is judged by its fidelity to the tradition, to what wise men have always held to be true and to the way the best poets have always told it. The best the individual performer can do is to learn his tradition thoroughly. Its more abstract formulaic patterns will allow him to incorporate new names and new topoi as he learns them.

Limitations on the endurance of both a performer and his audience suggest that a truly long oral narrative, at least by the standards of the book, would not be possible, not in a single performance. Rather than conceiving of oral epic as a single performance, it is more reasonable to consider it a narrative mode, a kind of story and a way of telling it, with a particular relationship to its culture, one suited to the entertainment and instruction of aristocratic leaders and their courts. Such is the audience implied by Beowulf and by the Homeric epics. The oral performer lives in a vast world of story--his tradition. Even the notion of a beginning and an end

of story does not come naturally to a singer whose esthetic imagination has not been formed by the linear and sequential arrangement of books. His whole tradition, or at least as much of it as falls within his competence, is simultaneously available to him. The epic singer knows the stories of many gods and heroes, the names of their swords and horses and kinsmen. More importantly he has the competence to learn other names and fit them into the "grammar" of his tradition, all of which constitute one vast epic. But the epic poem as a long, artistically unified, coherent, and sequentially presented series of episodes exists in an oral culture only as an ideal, a competence, a generic mastery, and not as an actualized performance. A particular performance is merely one part of some vastly larger whole. Paradoxically, therefore, epic is a narrative form that depends for its creation upon an oral tradition that is supported by an aristocratic and heroic culture, and yet the epic poem is we habitually conceive it cannot be experienced as a single unified and coherent whole until its generative culture has given way to a later stage of cultural development.

The single long epic poem is a phenomenon of verbal art which depends upon a rare collaboration between the competences of oral and literate man. It grows out of a specific combination of cultural features, depending for its production on an oral society that is wealthy, stable and sophisticated enough to develop rich traditions of historical and mythological learning, an ethical conception of heroic and aristocratic excellence, and an educational system that is centered upon these traditions. For epic to be transformed from a disembodied cultural competence to an actualized entity, the technologies of writing

must be introduced into an oral culture in such a gradual way that the older, aristocratic epic synthesis does not collapse, leaving unaccomplished the huge work of converting an oral tradition into a new and permanent medium. Writing makes possible many new forms of intellectual and literary activity, such as history and philosophy, that are powerful enough to displace epic as a central cultural activity. As they have come down to us, the Homeric epics, in their majestic length and encyclopedic learning, are bookish works, each section named after a letter of the Greek alphabet. And yet, as Albert Lord has amply demonstrated, they share most features of their composition with the orally-composed heroic songs of modern Jugoslavia.

An epic tradition synthesizes narrative and intellectual impulses that in literate cultures tend to go their separate ways. Sacred myth, history, romance, heroic legend, and the ethical teachings of an aristocratic society are amalgamated in the Homeric epic, which for centuries was the central study in archaic Greek education (first as orally composed songs and then as written texts). Plato's attack on epic was an explicit effort to replace an epic tradition with dialectic, both in the curriculum and as a tool of philosophical analysis. If epic had not hitherto been the central cultural activity, Plato need not have mounted such a vigorous attack against it.

The survival of a reasonably vigorous oral tradition in England for some years after the migration of the Angles from what is today Southern Denmark is more than just a probability. Beowulf preserves a tradition that could only have been transmitted orally. Additionally, we have such external evidence as the remarks of Bede and Alcuin mentioned earlier and Alfred's

story of the learned Bishop Aldhelm's prodigious ability as an oral singer. Moreover both the encyclopedic references to Germanic peoples and heroes in Beowulf and Alcuin's remark about Ingeld suggest a tradition of Germanic epic song. Literacy, as Alcuin's remark also makes clear, did not come as gently to the Germanic peoples as it did to the sixth-century Greeks. It came with the full force of Latin books, the Latin language, and Roman religion. So while it is beyond all doubt certain that the Germanic peoples--including Scandinavians--had rich oral traditions, with a high probability that they included epic, they did not have the long period the Greeks enjoyed in which gradually to collect, refine, and transmit a disembodied tradition into a more permanent literary form. Of learned institutions (and they came late on the scene) only the Benedictines seem to have had the devotion to antiquity that such a great effort requires.

The mere technology of writing cannot eradicate entirely the composition of vernacular poetry in something like the old way. In an oral culture, speech that is rhythmic, formulaic, and traditional is priviledged speech. Its form separates it from the ephemeral speech of everyday life, which is not memorable and is not remembered. Writing, of course, has the potential to change all of that. It can substitute marks in space for sounds in the air and can provide a substitute for memory. Writing per se, however, lacks authority. No form of writing is automatically priviledged in the way that traditional oral performances are. To maintain its priviledge, its distinction from ordinary emphemeral speech, therefore, poetry most continue, even in written texts, to be rhythmic, formulaic, and traditional in the same way that poetry always had been. It is that from which its

value and authority derive. In effect, therefore, even literate poets will continue to compose in the old way until they lose the competence or until their audiences have been educated to tolerate new forms. For this reason, it cannot be firmly maintained that Eddic poetry--even though it bears many formal resemblances to orally composed poetry--represents the transcription of actual oral performances.

With a view, somewhat as I have sketched it here, of a Germanic epic tradition that could not survive the loss of its aristocratic audience to new social forms, or of its performers to new forms of intellectual and literary activity made possible by writing, it follows that prominent features of the poetics (the traditional and formulaic elements) of Eddic poetry can most plausibly be explained historically as the literary remnants of a collapsed epic tradition. Many of the traces are readily apparent. While the energy and intellectual ambition of an epic impulse were being transfused in Iceland, under entirely new social and intellectual conditions, into a remarkable new literary form, the saga, the ancient epic itself could at best be recovered in shards and remnants, somewhat as Hesiod preserves isolated elements of the Homeric synthesis. In subject matter, as well as in form, Eddic poetry is what one might most plausibly expect to find several centuries following the break-up of epic: (1) short, somewhat encyclopedic accounts of the most essential characteristics of the gods, (2) mythological and ethical wisdom attributed to or derived from the gods, and (3) a cycle of episodes from the stories of traditional Germanic heroes.

Unfortunately, many aspects of the pre-history of the Eddic poems remain closed, even to speculation. What is the process

by which the short Eddic genres evolved, for example the encyclopedic listing and organizing formulas of Völuspá, Grimnismál, Hávamál, Lokasenna, Vafþrúðnismál, Alvissmál, and Fiölsvinnsmál, built on such phrases as Hvat er þat, Segðu mér, and various forms of vita? Were the poems composed by writers who had learned the tradition orally? For how long, before the thirteenth century, were they in a manuscript tradition? Could they have achieved a fixed textual form while still in oral tradition, without the aid of writing? This last possibility seems unlikely to me, but it is a common assumption, especially of scholars who write of Eddic poems having been "corrupted in oral transmission." What original could they have been corrupted from? At the earliest stages of transition from oral tradition to making manuscript texts, writing is a less reliable instrument than oral performance, with its obligation to please an immediately present audience whose knowledge of the tradition rivals that of the performer.

That Eddic poetry is itself a tradition from which an epic might someday have evolved is culturally and socially impossible. On the contrary, our understanding of the relationship of the creation of a mythic, historical, and heroic synthesis in epic to oral tradition, through the example of archaic Greece and through modern research on more recent oral traditions, points to Eddic poetry as a remarkable kind of poetry that was intended to perform the invaluable task of preserving the heart if not the form of a once-prosperous epic tradition.

BIBLIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

The most detailed and scholarly discussion I have seen recently on the oral background of Edda is Joseph Harris, "Eddic Poetry as Oral Poetry: The Evidence of Parallel Passages in the Helgi Poems for Questions of Composition and Performance" in Edda: A Collection of Essays, edd. R. J. Glendinning and Harladur Bessason, pp. 210-242 (Manitoba: University of Manitoba Press, 1983). My discussion of the question here can be considered a footnote to Harris's treatment, which includes useful bibliographical references. Lars Lönnroth, too, has a series of articles on the topic, especially "Iorð fannz æva né upphiminn: A Formula Analysis," in Speculum Norroenum: Norse Studies in Memory of Gabiel Turville-Petre, edd. Ursala Dronke et al., pp. 310-27 (Odense: Odense University Press, 1981).

Lord's book (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1960) is based on the earlier work of Milman Parry and Lord's collaboration with him. Parry's writing, the model for most subsequent investigations of oral composition in ancient texts, is conveniently collected in Adam Parry, ed., The Making of Homeric Verse: The Collected Papers of Milman Parry (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971).

Bede's story of Cædmon, Alcuin's letter to the Bishop of Lindisfarne, and the Continental antecedents of Beowulf are discussed in articles by Alain Renoir, "Oral-Formulaic Rhetoric and the Interpretation of Written Texts," and Robert P. Creed, "The Remaking of Beowulf," in an interesting collection of essays edited by John Miles Foley, Oral Tradition in Literature (Columbia, Missouri: University of Missouri Press, 1986). In addition to the foregoing and to editing the new journal Oral Literature, Foley has contributed much to this field: Oral Formulaic Theory and Research: An Introduction and Annotated Bibliography (New York: Garland, 1985) and Oral-Formulaic Theory (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1987), among many other valuable essays.

In addition to Parry's work, especially on the transition from oral to literary in archaic Greece, three works of Erik A. Havelock are important: Preface to Plato (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, reprinted 1982); The Literate Revolution in Greece and its Cultural Consequences (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982); and "The Cosmic Myths of Homer and Hesiod," Oral Tradition 2.1 (1987) 31-53.