

Oral Tradition, 1/3 (1986): 636-94

The Oral-Formulaic Theory in Middle English Studies

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Since it was first brought into modern critical consciousness by Milman Parry over half a century ago, the recognition of a distinctly oral mode of verbal artistry has sponsored a broadening interdisciplinary movement that now encompasses oral “literary” traditions from many parts of the world.¹ In the course of such a development it was no doubt inevitable that the categorical distinction between “oral” and “literate,” axiomatic in the early stages of the evolution of oral theory, should increasingly fall into jeopardy. For on the most obvious level, the existence of some kind of text—whether a medieval codex or a cassette tape—is a precondition for literary study on any but the most limited of scales; one might well argue that poems and narratives so recorded have been made literate at least to the degree that literate consciousness has participated in the process of their preservation and dissemination. Yet when one turns to Middle English literature, one is confronted with a greater complexity of orality-literacy interactions, figured in literary works themselves composed in writing yet indebted to oral traditions that underlie and inform them on many levels. Defining the parameters of the relationship between this burgeoning, vernacular chirographic tradition and its oral progenitor will comprise a central task for many scholars working in this branch of Middle English studies.

My present enterprise, to review Middle English scholarship vitally relevant to the oral-formulaic approach, meets with difficulties that should be elucidated from the outset. The root problem is that the theory in its “classical” form (Lord 1960) has yet to be applied to English literature of the later medieval period, in the sense that no one has claimed for any extant work an unambiguously oral provenience. At the same time many scholars,

borrowing from the theory selectively, have brought certain key concepts to bear on longstanding, canonical issues in Middle English criticism, such as the role of tags, or the significance of the oral performance medium, or the source of manuscript variations. Since all these subjects have their own scholarly history, the limits of my coverage become hard to designate. Further, since it depends on a mainstream of oral-formulaic scholarship that flows outside the boundaries of its period, the relevant Middle English research, taken by itself, conveys an impression of incompleteness: major topics are neglected, while particular problems become the subject of heated debate. Therefore, to avoid the kind of superficial and decontextualized approach that admits only those books and articles directly referring to Milman Parry, Albert Lord, or Francis P. Magoun in the footnotes, I will need to identify a nexus of themes that can serve as spotlights illuminating relevant fields of Middle English scholarship.

My principles in this respect are threefold and stem from the logic of the Parry-Lord theory itself. Reduced to its essentials, this theory argues from structure to genesis: that is, it derives observed stylistic tendencies from an oral-improvisatory mode of composition. Once one admits writing into the compositional process, of course, the “necessary,” causal link is broken, and one is left with two problematically related lines of inquiry. The first centers on structures internal to the texts themselves: how would one compare the use of formulas, themes or type-scenes, story-patterns, and other such devices in their Middle English manifestations with their counterparts in primary oral traditions? The second moves from text to human interactional context: how should a hypothetical oral performance medium shape our perceptions of what these poems are? A vital concern with either of these two problems constitutes the prime qualification for coverage in this essay. Yet I will also draw selectively on scholarship treating historical and cultural topics of high potential relevance, such as the extent and phenomenology of literacy in the later medieval period, or the sources of the Alliterative Revival. For modes of discourse do not stand in isolation from their historical settings; and inquiries into oral traditions or orality-literary interactions will increasingly need to bridge the gap between particular texts and relevant conditions in the cultures that produced them.

Since the material under review is itself erratic in its coverage

of Middle English literature (with, for example, a marked orientation towards romance narrative), this essay cannot profitably be organized by Middle English author, work, genre, or historical period. Nor is the distinction “structure versus genesis” productive, since many studies concern themselves precisely with the relationship between the two. Present needs would be best served, in my opinion, by a historical treatment of the scholarship itself. In the following pages, then, I will review scholarly contributions roughly in chronological fashion, with a few reorderings in the interests of coherence. Section I will survey the research prior to 1957 that significantly anticipated or catalyzed the introduction of the oral theory into Middle English studies. The second part (II) covers the seminal phase 1957-1967, which witnessed the first introduction of and response to Parry-Lord formulations; the time boundaries are marked, on one end, by the publication of Ronald A. Waldron’s “Oral-Formulaic Technique and Middle English Alliterative Poetry” (1957), and on the other, by the last of Albert C. Baugh’s articles concerned extensively with oral composition (1967). This endpoint is admittedly somewhat arbitrary; yet the scholarship of the 1970s and 80s seems to be less a primary response to Parry-Lord tenets and more a complex engagement mediated by a recognition of the past history of the oral-formulaic controversy in Old English studies, by new concepts borrowed from other areas of critical theory, and by a growing familiarity with Middle English oral-formulaic scholarship itself. In Part III, then, I trace this story of increasing sophistication and eclecticism through the present (1984), insofar as possible.² The concluding section (IV) attempts a general assessment and indicates directions that medieval and oral-formulaic scholarship might profitably pursue in coming years.

I. The Beginnings through 1957

Despite its apparent revolutionary character, the oral-formulaic theory, in the form by which it first became known to medievalists, represented as much a culmination of previous scholarship as a departure from it. In fact, the problem of formulaic structure had been the subject of debate from the last quarter of the nineteenth century among apostles of the Higher Criticism, although their conclusions seem to the modern eye vitiated by the limited character of their aims. John Miles Foley

(1980b:52) describes the situation thus:

These early studies make very little or nothing of the possible orality of the poems they examine, occasionally suggesting sung or recited performance but always assuming a prior written record which serves as the basis for the performance. Editors and commentators have much to say about the "formula," very loosely conceived and defined, but for a few distinct and limited purposes only: (1) to solve the complex puzzle of authorship and interpolator(s) and thus (2) to assess the interrelationships among poems in the same literature or language family. To put it another way, the chronological strata which occupied the Analyst and Unitarian classicists have their counterparts in the *Lieder* and *Fortsetzungen* of the leading Germanists of this era. Questions of style, methods of composition, and the like are not addressed, simply because they are not the concerns of the "Higher Criticism."

Since Foley has documented in some detail (1980b:52-59) the evolution of the idea of the oral formula from its first adumbrations in these pioneering efforts of Germanic scholarship, I will confine myself here to a fairly cursory mention of several works of the Higher Criticism that concern Middle English directly. Among the first to try to demonstrate the traditional, popular underpinnings of a Middle English poem was Karl Regel (1872) in his examination of alliterating pairs in Layamon's *Brut*. These traditional phrases Regel divided into categories on basis of such characteristics as concreteness or abstraction of reference. Several years later Julius Zupitza, motivated by the need to justify editorial decisions, set a precedent by incorporating into the textual notes following his edition of *Guy of Warwick* (1875-76) many parallel phrases from elsewhere in the Middle English romance canon. Though Zupitza offered little theoretical insight into the nature of this stock phraseology, in subsequent decades the subject of stylistics, usually for the evidence that it provided (or failed to provide) concerning authorship, became a regular concern of editors. The connection between formulaic tendencies and oral culture was not, of course, appreciated. Yet an interesting anticipation in this respect appears in Wissman's proposal (1876:6) that variations between the texts of *King Horn* may reflect, in addition to scribal

error, the license of performing minstrels in an oral transmission process.³

In the following years the collection of parallel phrases proceeded apace. In 1876 Moritz Trautmann published an influential treatise listing repeated or similar expressions; two years later, in an inquiry into the celebrated “Huchoun” question, Trautmann buttressed various authorial claims with several stylistic “proofs” based on diction, phraseological parallels, and metrical usage. Oscar Zielke’s *Sir Orfeo* (1880) and Eugen Kölbing’s *Amis and Amiloun* (1884) both give attention to stereotypic expression; in an appendix to Kölbing’s 1886 edition of *Sir Beues of Hamtoun*, Carl Schmirgel cites a wide range of Middle English parallels under such categories as “feelings of joy,” “descriptions of grief,” “fixed expressions of an amatory character,” “phrases containing benedictions,” and so forth. Schmirgel’s examples exhibit similarities of various types, from verbatim or near-verbatim repetition to repeating and collocating alliterative pairs to mere similarity of idea. This line of scholarship culminated in Johannes Fuhrmann’s *Die alliterierenden Sprachformeln in Morris’ Early English Alliterative Poems und im Sir Gawayne and the Green Knight* (1886), which organizes its matter by etymology and relations between words and phrases; and in Curt Reicke (1906), another inquiry into the Huchoun authorship problem offering perhaps the most extended treatment of repeating and parallel phraseology until that time.⁴

Several other studies from this period have particular bearing on matters oral and formulaic. In the introduction to her edition of *The Romance of Emaré* (1906:xxii-xxvii), Edith Rickert tallies the poem’s repeating lines, exact and approximate, which comprise by her count 16.5% of the total (cf. Wittig 1977). Further, she details nine examples of what we might now loosely call themes or type-scenes, that is, passages with marked phraseological and structural similarities treating common subjects such as love at first sight, boat travel, a messenger’s reception, a king’s resolve and subsequent penance, and so forth. Shortly before the publication of Rickert’s edition, and anticipating another important line of oral-related Middle English scholarship, Charles M. Hathaway took a step in the movement from empirical observation to explanation and interpretation in his “Chaucer’s Verse-Tags as a Part of his Narrative Machinery” (1903-5). Noting the corresponding formulaic habits of Homer, Chaucer, and other medieval storytellers, he raises

the question of “artistic propriety”: “why did Chaucer use these phrases, if he is the consummate artist in narrative that he is generally held to be?” (477). Reviewing the medieval poet’s growing mastery of the pleonastic style, Hathaway argues that the frequency of tags results from Chaucer’s participation in the popular idiom and “attitude of mind” common to cultured men of that era, and that it was to engage *listeners* rather than readers that he perfected this medium of “living oral speech” (484). Employing approaches less narrowly literary and more historical and sociological, Robert K. Root (1913) and Samuel Moore (1913) touch upon the related problems of literary publication and dissemination in a world that lacked print and a developed book trade.

The next two decades were marked by a general reaction against the methods and assumptions of the Higher Criticism as new, more fully documented treatments increasingly demonstrated that the parallels formerly used to “prove” common authorship often merely attested to a shared, conventional poetic style. In 1910 Henry N. MacCracken vigorously attacked Trautmann for the frail foundations of evidence on which his lofty arguments relied and concluded that most of the previous attributions of poems to the ever-elusive Huchoun had emerged from a “maze of guesswork” (534). The next generation of editors, including Robert J. Menner (1920), Henry L. Savage (1926), and Magoun (1929), steered carefully through the hazardous waters of facile attribution; in an interesting aside Magoun, after citing numerous examples to disprove the uniqueness of parallels between *Alexander A* and *B* located by Trautmann, suggests that “*Al. A*, by virtue of its extensive use of trite phraseology and transitional formulae, was composed with a view to a listening rather than a reading audience” (111). This same essential insight, divested of its pejorative connotations, received considerable amplification at the hands of the same author 24 years later.

Yet by far the most important of these early contributions to the understanding of Middle English formulaic language were John S. P. Tatlock’s two articles on Layamon, both published in 1923. Cataloguing this poet’s stylistic proclivities regarding the use of the alliterative verse form, simile, litotes, kennings, variation, and so forth, “Layamon’s Poetic Style and its Relations” (1923b) is intended largely as a supplement to the far more compendious “Epic Formulas, Especially in Layamon” (1923a). Not least among

his contributions was Tatlock's recognition in this earlier, massively documented article of a "looseness in the use of the term epic formula" (1923a:494, n.1) by his scholarly predecessors; while he proposes no precise definition of his own, he does exclude phrases that occur less than three times, "mere stock-rimes," and "phrases so inevitable that they would not have been felt as formulas by Layamon or his auditors . . ." (495). What follows is an impressive listing of "128 separate formulas, which occur upwards of 1500 times, once in about 10 lines, an average of 12 times to a formula" (511); Tatlock further notes the division of formulas into half-line and full-line types, the gravitation for formulas towards the b-verses, formulaic clustering, "petrification" as well as variation of wording, the avoidance of enjambement, and other characteristics of style to which Parry and others have attached particular importance.

In the second half of the article Tatlock interprets the evidence that he has amassed in a broad historical and comparative context. He contrasts the *Brut* with the English-language poetry that preceded and followed it: for the Anglo-Saxons eschewed formulas altogether, cultivating rather a "variety and ingenuity of phrasing" (515-16), while the later Middle English romances, although they frequently revert to the popular, unsophisticated formulaic style, rely on it less than Layamon does. Comparable formulaic usage is not to be found in English but in the *Chanson de Roland*, or the *Poema del Cid*, or the Homeric *epos*. Since most such works "stand near the head of the written documents of the peoples involved," Tatlock briefly speculates on a connection between formulaicity and oral delivery: "[the formulaic style] goes with singing more than with reciting, and with that more than with reading It is due partly to economy of effort. The poet feels no need of searching for variety of expression, and when he strikes out a fine or serviceable phrase, he is conscious of no carping criticism or nagging self-criticism to prevent him from repeating it" (528). Here and elsewhere, Tatlock's remarks remind one of Parry. And while many of his observations break down in the light of subsequent research, Tatlock clearly deserves credit for bringing the formulaic character of Middle English poetry into a new intensity of scholarly focus.

The next important study in this line, and in some respects culminating a half-century's research, was J. P. Oakden's massive, two-volume *Alliterative Poetry in Middle English* (1930-35), which

remains a standard reference to the present day. Surveying problems of dialect, metrics, the range of literature in its genres and historical phases, vocabulary, alliterative phraseology, and style, this work defies summarizing here by its sheer dimensions (almost 700 pages) and the diversity of its topics; in any event, from our present perspective it is more important for the evidence that it assembles than for its theoretical insights. Yet the quantity and variety of this evidence is indeed remarkable. In the third part of volume 2 (195-363), for example, Oakden compiles a series of purportedly complete listings of alliterative phrases in Old English poetry and prose, in early Middle English poetry (alliterative and non-alliterative), in poems of the Alliterative Revival, and in several non-alliterative works of the fourteenth century; within these categories the phrases are listed under various further subdivisions. Entries are cross-referenced, so that “the reader may see at a glance whether the phrases are traditional or not” (2, 195). Though far less comprehensive, his collections of tags (381-91) are also of interest. While a few of these tag groups are unified by common syntactic or semantic properties, most seem to embody an implicit defining principle similar to that commonly used at present to define Old English formulaic systems: that is, a constant lexical core (e.g., “men of armes,” “of dedes,” etc.) combines with a further lexical element varied to satisfy alliterative requirements.⁵ Like others of his day, Oakden found little redeeming aesthetic value in stock phraseology. Yet whatever his merits as a theorist, his extraordinarily thorough compilations of evidence have had decisive impact on the study of Middle English stylistics and will no doubt continue to prove serviceable until they are at last superseded by computer technology.

Most of the scholarship that we have been reviewing bears primarily on problems of formulaic language; references to orality and oral performance occur usually as passing asides. Yet during the 1920s and 30s, a time span coinciding with the first publication of Parry’s work and the Chadwicks’ *The Growth of Literature* (1932-40), the matter of oral performance (as distinguished from oral composition) began to receive serious attention. Lynn Thorndike’s brief note on “Public Readings of New Works in Mediaeval Universities” (1926) and G. R. Owst’s *Literature and Pulpit in Medieval England* (1933)⁶ focused on traditions of discourse in the medieval world that bore considerable freights of oral residue. Yet the ground-breaking treatment of orality in

Middle English literature was George P. Wilson's "Chaucer and Oral Reading" (1926), whose explicit purpose was to "establish the probability that Chaucer wrote some of his works with the intention of reading them aloud" (283). Wilson proposed three historical or cultural-evolutionary stages "through which verbal composition passes in going from its author to the public" (283-84): transmission through singing or recitation, through reading aloud, and through silent reading. After reviewing the evidence for and circumstances surrounding recitation and especially oral reading in the Greek, Old French, and Middle English literary traditions, Wilson turns to the case of Chaucer specifically, adducing both external and internal arguments for that poet's participation in the second stage of literary transmission. The historical reasons are manifold: oral reading was the custom of the age; in a multilingual nation the spoken vernacular communicated more readily than its written counterpart; books were scarce, and poor handwriting and inconsistent punctuation practices made their decoding unpleasant and cumbersome; and live presentation suited the needs of court entertainment. Turning more briefly to textual evidence, Wilson cites several passages in which Chaucer addresses a present, listening audience or otherwise depicts the practice of oral reading. Though his evidence is far less complete than Ruth Crosby's (1936 and 1938), Wilson sets a precedent in bringing these three major perspectives—the comparative, the historical-biographical, and the internal—to bear specifically on the problem of orality.

The early 1930s ushered in the publication of several other articles touching on the topic of oral tradition directly or providing seminal treatments of topics vitally connected with it. Into the latter category falls James R. Hulbert's "A Hypothesis Concerning the Alliterative Revival" (1931), whose proposal that this literary movement was fostered by a baronial opposition to the crown has evoked a continuing response. In fact, the search for the origins of the Alliterative Revival repeatedly runs up against the possibility of oral traditional continuities from the Anglo-Saxon period. R. W. Chambers (1932:lxvii) articulates the position thus:

There can be few stranger things in the history of literature than this sudden disappearance and reappearance of a school of poetry. It was kept alive by oral tradition through nine generations, appearing in writing very rarely, and then usually in a corrupt form,

till it suddenly came forth, correct, vigorous, and bearing with it a whole tide of national feeling.

A different aspect of the orality-literacy problem was addressed by V. H. Galbraith in "The Literacy of the Medieval English Kings" (1935), who finds that medieval royalty remained largely illiterate through the twelfth century. More directly literary in his orientation is A. McI. Trounce (1932), who, in defining the principal characteristics of the popular, conventional style of the tail-rhyme romances, several times notes the connection with oral delivery or oral tradition, evidenced (for example) in narratorial tendencies to direct expressions to an audience presumed to be present, or in a repetitiveness suited to the needs of oral communication, or in phrases that assume a prior oral source.

Yet of all these early discussions concerning the role of oral performance in the Middle English literary tradition, undoubtedly the most authoritative and influential were Crosby's two articles, the first (1936) concerned with the Middle Ages generally, the second (1938) limited to Chaucer. Opening with a survey of historical antecedents, the more wide-ranging "Oral Delivery in the Middle Ages" cites Greek, Latin, and Anglo-Saxon authors who attest to this practice in their societies. Alluding to scholarship on minstrels and *jongleurs*, Crosby goes on to cite passages from later medieval literature—particularly the romances—that depict one person reading to another or in which the narrator seems to presuppose a present, listening audience. The second half of her argument catalogs the principal characteristics of literature designed for oral delivery. Asserting that the surest textual indicator of such intent is the "use of direct address not to the reader, but to those listeners who are present at the recitation" (100), Crosby quotes numerous examples from several genres of French and English poetry. The other chief characteristic is repetition, which Crosby subdivides into two types. Under the heading "phrases occurring frequently in works intended to be heard but showing no specific intention of uniting the poet or minstrel with his hearers" (102), she surveys introductory and descriptive phrases, expletives, and formulas; the more significant category of "phrases which actually further the purpose of oral delivery by showing the relation of the poet or minstrel to his audience" (106) includes transitions, asseverations, and oaths. Noting further the tendency to employ religious introductions and endings, Crosby concludes that the "oral delivery of popular literature was the rule rather

than the exception in the Middle Ages" (110).

This article's successor and companion piece, "Chaucer and the Custom of Oral Delivery" (1938), follows a similar plan of organization. Documenting at the outset Chaucer's familiarity with contemporary oral performance practices, Crosby surveys the Chaucerian narrator's deployment of verbs of hearing and telling, passages that explicitly indicate an audience that is physically present, and other evidence suggesting that Chaucer envisioned an audience of listeners as well as readers. The second half of this article, like its 1936 counterpart, studies stock phrases (introductory and descriptive, expletives, formulas, and so on) and religious openings and terminations. In short, "his genius notwithstanding, Chaucer was conventional," and many characteristics of his style "can be accounted for only by understanding his relations to the popular traditions engendered by the custom of oral delivery" (431).

Less rigorous and economical in his assemblage of evidence while more speculative in his probings into aesthetic ramifications, Bertrand H. Bronson attacked this same problem of literature intended for oral performance in his lengthy article, "Chaucer's Art in Relation to His Audience" (1940). Noting like Crosby that Chaucer's original addressees were listeners as well as readers, Bronson cautions against the unconscious mental reduction of auditory signals to visual ones that habitual literacy facilitates. The oral medium would indeed have imposed on medieval authors numerous limitations, such as the imperatives to avoid audience boredom and to maintain a high degree of clarity through emphatic transition devices, frequent definitions and clarifications, and so forth. Yet, on the positive side, Chaucer was able to exploit the immediacy of his encounter with his audience to considerable artistic advantage; and here Bronson devotes almost half the essay to detailing how Chaucer's various self-representations and other features of his poetry relating to narrator and narratorial voice would have functioned aesthetically in a live interactional context.⁷ Venturing on quite a different tack, Bronson next postulates a series of four stages by which the "habit of composition for oral reading" would have led to a realization of full dramatic structure in the *Canterbury Tales*. Moving from text to context, the essay closes with a few comments on the "nature and quality" of Chaucer's actual audience.

Although it does not particularly feature Middle English

literature, H. J. Chaytor's *From Script to Print* (1945) calls for attention here for its insightful discussion of communications in the pre-print era. Since relatively few in the Middle Ages could read, and since for those who could this activity often proceeded ponderously and with the accompaniment of muttering, auditory images usually predominated over visual ones in the medieval literary experience (5-21). Chaytor recognizes that many aspects of style—such as the frequent employment of formulas (64)—resulted from the imperative for immediate rhetorical impact that goes hand in hand with the oral performance medium. Chapter 6, “Publication and Circulation” (115-37), reviews various topics relating to the oral dissemination of medieval literature; particularly noteworthy are Chaytor's remarks on the role of memory, oral variation, and oral improvisation, as practiced by the Yugoslav singers. Much in this book falls outside our purview; yet in what concerns us, Chaytor seems in several connections to have anticipated much of the recent interest in the contrasting phenomenologies of reading versus listening.

Before we turn to the explicit history of oral-formulaic theory in Middle English scholarship, two more works deserve mention. Though it is oriented essentially towards the lettered and learned aspects of medieval culture, Ernst R. Curtius' *European Literature in the Latin Middle Ages* (originally published in German in 1948) brought into modern prominence the ancient rhetorical concept of *topoi*,⁸ whose possible relation to oral “themes” was suggested by Robert Scholes and Robert Kellogg (1966:26). More directly relevant is Dorothy Everett's posthumously published collection, *Essays on Middle English Literature* (1955). Several times in the articles “Layamon and the Earliest Alliterative Verse” (23-45) and “The Alliterative Revival” (46-96), Everett evokes “oral transmission,” perhaps from the Old English period, as a possible source for aspects of the conventionalized diction, phraseology, and narrative patterning in this Middle English verse. Everett's recognition of a conventional style and a possible oral provenience reflects what had by this time become fairly common perceptions whose implications were seldom looked into.⁹ Under the stimulus of the oral theory, however, this same insight was soon to present itself again in a more fully articulated form and with a heightened awareness of its own literary and historical importance.

II. 1957-1967

The first applications of oral-formulaic theory to Middle English literature followed in the wake of scholarly developments relating to the Old English period, notably the publication of Magoun's "The Oral-Formulaic Character of Anglo-Saxon Narrative Poetry" (1953).¹⁰ And indeed, the Old English period has consistently been the main battleground for the oral-formulaic controversy; extensions into later English literature have followed secondarily and intermittently, discouraged no doubt by the higher state of literacy in later medieval civilization. Nonetheless, the conventional style of much of the verse narrative, particularly the romances, seemed from the outset to lend itself to certain aspects of oral-formulaic analysis.

The first scholar to take up the gauntlet was Ronald A. Waldron in an article consciously styled after Magoun, "Oral-Formulaic Technique and Middle English Alliterative Poetry" (1957). While postulating a "continuity in the use of alliterative meter between the eleventh and fourteenth century" through the medium of an oral tradition that "only incidentally found its way into writing" (793), Waldron makes it clear that he is searching for only "the *remains* of an oral technique embedded in written literature" (794). Such narratives, Waldron feels, would have been composed by poets "familiar with a body of formulas" ultimately deriving from an oral tradition, and for a readership that "still retained a taste for the conventions of an oral style" (800). This oral residue takes the shape of a "common diction" extending "to the use of formulaic phrases fulfilling metrical, rather than stylistic or aesthetic requirements" (794). Thus Waldron invokes the dichotomy of art versus usefulness that has remained the bugbear of the oral theory for the past three decades. To illustrate his claims, Waldron devotes much of the article to listings of phrases belonging to common formulaic systems. Further, in the fashion of Parry, Lord, and Magoun, he performs a formulaic analysis of lines 1-25 of the *Alliterative Morte Arthure*, indicating with solid lines phrases "repeated elsewhere in exactly the same form, or with insignificant variations" (795) in his sampling of Middle English poetry, and with broken lines member phrases of formulaic systems. Though he does not tabulate his results, it appears that better than three-quarters of the half-lines in the sample passage contain phrases falling into one of these two categories.

Much ink has been spilled over Waldron's use of "formula" and especially "formulaic system," key terms that unfortunately remain undefined in his article. In fact, as later scholarship repeatedly discovers, Middle English alliterative poetry itself seems to be distinguished less by verbatim repetition than by constellations of similarities difficult to categorize. Perhaps in an attempt to meet this complexity adequately and without reduction, Waldron conceives of formulaic systems as underlying patterns with rhythmical, syntactical, and lexical components. Examples of these include: "as soon as the (NOUN) (VERB)," "the first (NOUN) that he (VERB)," and "there is no (NOUN + PREP PHR)"; member phrases of this last system are "For þar is na wa in þe werd," "Per is na wyge in his werk," and "There es no man appon molde" (799). Waldron has several times been taken to task for the excessive generality of these constructs¹¹; yet their evident generative power has won the commendation of later scholars such as R. F. Lawrence (1966) and Stephen Morrison (1983).

Waldron's article has served as one of the two principal points of departure within Middle English scholarship itself. The other was established by Albert Baugh in a series of articles which, because of their interrelatedness and collective importance, I will here treat together, even though their publication dates span a full two decades. Antedating our period by seven years, "The Authorship of the Middle English Romances" (1950) tries to determine whether those who created in this genre were scholars or entertainers. While internal evidence does indeed seem to implicate minstrels in the performance process in some way, we cannot assume that these later medieval descendants of the Anglo-Saxon scop actually composed in their own right. On the other hand, references to written sources or the activities of reading and writing smack of "the odor of the lamp." It is true that this evidence, taken together with the invocations to God in the prologue or epilogue and the narratorial intrusions of an otherwise unworldly character, do not in general prove the authors to have been members of religious orders; yet taking certain of the English Charlemagne romances as examples, Baugh demonstrates that sometimes a stronger case can be made on basis of manuscript evidence and comparisons with the French sources. Drawing all these observations together, Baugh briefly hypothesizes that many of the romance narratives were in fact composed by non-minstrel authors for publication and dissemination by performing minstrels

who thus served “as intermediaries between [the authors] and their public” (28).

This insight emerges again in a brilliant new form in “Improvisation in the Middle English Romance” (1959), Baugh’s explicit response to the Parry-Lord theory and by far the most important in this series of studies. Raising the question of possible oral-improvisatory origins, Baugh suggests the applicability of two of the oral theory’s key terms, “formula” and “theme,” to this Middle English narrative material. There follows (420-25) an impressive listing of groups of lines with common formulas, which Baugh defines conservatively as repeating phrases consistent in their metrical shape and selecting the same position within the line. Even more formidable, however, is the following section on themes (425-27 and 440-54), in which, working through many examples, he subdivides the typical episodes of a knight’s arming, the inquiry into a stranger’s identity, and battle into recurring sequences of constituent narrative elements. Next (427-31), Baugh adds a notion of his own, the “predictable complement,” which refers to the second line of a couplet in which an initial statement seems “to call up automatically in the mind of the poet or reciter a conventional way of completing the thought” (428); an example would be the striking of a blow that leads, predictably, to the victim’s falling from his horse.

These demonstrations bear out the contention that stock patterns of various sorts play a role in Middle English romance usage. Yet the poems themselves can hardly be oral, since many are translations of French originals. “Are we then to dismiss the whole question of improvisation from our minds and to regard the presence of large numbers of formulas and themes in English romances as proof only of the ineptness of the poets who composed them?” (434). At this juncture Baugh introduces his most important and original contribution to oral-formulaic theory. As he illustrates through several examples, variation between manuscript versions of certain poems occurs on such a scale as to render the “scribal corruption” thesis implausible. On the other hand, these discrepancies might very well reflect the practice of minstrels who supplement memory with improvisation. In other words, while books provide the basis for the minstrel’s performance, his renderings from memory might introduce changes in accordance with oral-formulaic principles that would register in subsequent manuscript versions. Thus oral improvisation has changed its locus

from the compositional to the transmission process.

The precise character of oral "publication" and the role of minstrels, problems treated in brief in the previous articles, provide the main subject for "The Middle English Romance: Some Questions of Creation, Presentation, and Preservation" (1967). Reviewing and elaborating on his thesis that minstrels were primarily performers and not creators, Baugh reiterates his proposal that authors "wrote with oral presentation in mind" (9); he goes on to cite passages attesting to the types of occasions evidently suitable for such entertainment and the variety of appeals on which authors and performers would have capitalized. In the next section he inquires more closely into the nature of oral performance by professionals, concluding that singing and reciting from memory as well as reading aloud from books were all common practices. After examining possible correlations between romance structure and the time constraints under which oral performers would have operated, Baugh closes with a fuller exposition on a concern of his previous article, that minstrels may have covered memory lapses with oral improvisation and may thus be responsible for divergences between manuscripts.

Although this 1967 study concludes Baugh's work on orality and marks one of my boundaries for this phase of Middle English oral-formulaic scholarship, in order to round out the presentation of his views I will mention in brief his final essay in the romance genre. Entitled "Convention and Individuality in the Middle English Romance" (1970), this excellent study, through a comparison of several English-language romances with their French originals, argues that the translation process indeed gave scope for the Middle English poet's creative originality. In fact, the problem of "conventionality versus originality" has much occupied oral-formulaists and their critics. In overview, Baugh's studies collectively offer a rich and insightful perspective on the meaning and nature of "transitional literature." His mastery of his subject and his imaginative tailoring of oral-formulaic concepts to the specificities of the later medieval situation make him the contributor *nonpareil* to the study of orality-literacy interactions as shaping forces in Middle English literature.

The attempts of scholars like Tatlock, Crosby, Waldron, and Baugh to incorporate the recognition of oral and formulaic dimensions into their perception of Middle English literature did not, for the most part, prevail with the critical mainstream, though

sustained criticisms were few. Ralph W. V. Elliott (1961) opposes the oral-formulaic approach to his own visual-imagistic-rhetorical orientation; Karl Brunner dismisses Baugh with the unsupported assertion that manuscript variants “are not to be accounted for by oral transmission, but by the carelessness of scribes who simply exchanged one stock-in-trade phrase for another, or invented new lines when they had difficulties in reading their originals . . .” (1961:224). Somewhat more cautiously, Dieter Mehl (1969:7-10) stresses the lack of solid historical evidence concerning minstrels and the ambivalence of in-text descriptions of minstrel performances or appeals to the audience, which he feels could be literary devices; though Baugh’s oral improvisation might have figured in, “the extant romances appear to be for the most part ‘literary’ creations . . .” (10). Others are similarly reluctant to attach any real importance to oral performance in the interpretation of Chaucer. Paull F. Baum, for instance, disregarding (as it would seem) the problem of historical meaning, argues that “Geoffrey Chaucer reading aloud to certain groups in the late fourteenth century is for us a fiction; what remains is Geoffrey Chaucer addressing us from the printed page” (1958:128). Robert O. Payne more thoughtfully cautions against the too easy equation of “audience” with “listeners,” stressing that Chaucer was concerned with the preservation of his work and its long-term readership (1963:228). In his contribution to *Critical Approaches to Medieval Literature* (1960), Francis Lee Utley expresses reservations about the facile recourse to “oral transmission.” For genuinely “oral” material, he says, “bears the stamp of the collector, place, date, tale-teller, and provides the exact unaltered text”; thus, paradoxically, most “medieval ‘folk tales’ are literary, since that is the only way in which they could have been preserved” (103-4). All these themes were to recur in the scholarship of the next twenty years.

At the same time, during these years immediately following the publication of Waldron’s (1957) and Baugh’s (1959) seminal studies, other scholars were vigorously attacking the problem of oral tradition, often along lines quite outside the usual oral-formulaic framework. Roger S. Loomis’ view that the Arthurian legends were transmitted through both oral and written channels is substantiated not so much by the kind of formal and empirical considerations favored by the Parry-Lord school as by the testimony of medieval authors and especially the evidence of narrative content. Arguing

for Breton origins, "The Oral Diffusion of the Arthurian Legend" (1959a) finds that "internal evidence amply corroborates the external testimony to the oral diffusion of the Matter of Britain before, and even after, it came into favour with poets and prose romancers" (63). More narrowly focused, "Morgan la Fée in Oral Tradition" (1959b) similarly argues for oral diffusion through the activity of "professional entertainers, most of them French-speaking Bretons, who ranged from Scotland to Sicily" (7) recounting tales of the Round Table prior to the involvement of "literary men" (18). Loomis' method here is to cite widely disparate works with common, obscure bits of information or narrative content; in the absence of an extant literary source, these similarities, he argues, are best explained as the results of oral transmission. Though unrelated methodologically, C. A. Robson's "The Technique of Symmetrical Composition in Medieval Narrative Poetry" (1961) similarly calls on oral transmission, in this case to explain discrepancies in an intricate numerological scheme that he sees underlying and informing the Middle English *Sir Launfal* and other Old French and Middle High German narrative works. Although he alludes to Rychner (1955), Robson, like Loomis, is functionally unaware of the oral-formulaic theory, as is illustrated, for example, in his assumption that oral transmission implies artistic naiveté and shorter, unelaborated narrative units.

For both of these authors, writing without reference to Parry, Lord, or Magoun, oral transmission and orality-literacy interactions are fairly conventionally conceived. Such cannot be said of Marshall McLuhan's *The Gutenberg Galaxy* (1962), which, while characterized by its author as complementary to Lord's *The Singer of Tales*, in fact resembles nothing but itself. Praised by some for his exuberance, imagination, and prophetic powers while condemned by others for what are perceived as grandiose and extravagant generalities, McLuhan in this book subordinates his treatment of communications in the medieval world to a larger thesis or cluster of theses relating to the revolution of consciousness precipitated by the invention of the printing press. Since the dizzying eclecticism of McLuhan's argument eludes summarizing, its bearing on our topic might best be represented by quoting several relevant section headings: "In antiquity and the Middle Ages reading was necessarily reading aloud" (82); "The manuscript shaped medieval literary conventions at all levels" (86); "The medieval monks' reading carrell was indeed a singing booth" (92); "Scholasticism,

like Senecanism, was directly related to the oral traditions of aphoristic learning” (102); “The same clash between written and oral structures of knowledge occurs in medieval social life” (114). McLuhan’s writings have exerted little direct influence on oral-formulaic theory *per se*. Yet the topic areas which to a considerable degree McLuhan pioneered have moved increasingly into the center of recent discussions, particularly those concerned with the relationship between communications media and modes of thought.

Returning to the tamer landscapes of literary criticism, we find in the early 1960s the alliterative masterpiece *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* emerging as one of the first testing grounds for the integration of oral-formulaic perceptions into the canons of critical-aesthetic sensibilities. Though her chapter “Style and the Alliterative Tradition” (1962:52-90) attends more to traditional vocabulary (largely in response to Brink 1920) than to traditional phraseology, Marie Borroff compiles several lists of formulaic phrases. In fact, Borroff’s phrase groups are not usually united by common formulas so much as by common words repeating in the same metrical position (usually the ends of lines) in variable lexical contexts. The oral-formulaic approach is adopted at points by Larry D. Benson (1965a), who sees the romance genre, differentiated by its own peculiar brand of “bookishness” from both the epic and the novel (6-10), as drawing nonetheless on a “continuous oral tradition” (118) surviving from the Old English period. Primarily relevant is Benson’s chapter on style (110-66), in which, to demonstrate the formularity of *Gawain’s* phraseology, he performs the customary formulaic analysis on the poem’s first 14 lines (120). Yet despite this debt to oral tradition, Benson views the Alliterative Revival as a sophisticated *literary* movement that drew on many sources; and in the remainder of the chapter he sensitively discusses variation, syntax, methods of narrative linkage, and other facets of *Gawain’s* style, frequently noting both continuities with and departures from the practice of oral poets.¹²

Since A. C. Spearing’s book on the *Gawain*-poet touches on matters of this kind, at this juncture we will depart from strict chronology to review the several relevant contributions by this scholar. In an early article on Langland’s use of “verbal repetition” (which here means the repetition of individual words within a single passage), Spearing, citing Owst, asserts that this device typifies sermon discourse and thus belongs “to an essentially

oral rhetoric" (1963:736). Broader in its purview, *Criticism and Medieval Poetry* (1964) warns that "close readings" of medieval poetry often disregard the conditions of oral delivery. In fact, the oral performance medium accounts for several characteristics of this poetry — its diffuseness and thinness of texture, its reliance on sound to convey meaning, its formulaic and conventional style, and its episodic structuring (see 18-27). Recognizing an originally oral tradition as a formative influence underlying the Alliterative Revival, Spearing's subsequent book-length treatment of *Gawain* (1970) argues that the traditional style is itself "a kind of communal work of art" which the individual poet, to the measure of his own ability, uses "even while being used by it" (18). Formulas abound, although strict metrical-syntactical definitions do not suit Middle English poetry; for this reason, the formula is most profitably conceived as a "lexical and semantic nexus: an associative tendency among certain words used to express a certain idea" (21).

Several other articles from the mid-1960s take up the problem of formulaic style. Recapitulating the conclusions of a 1960 dissertation, Merle Fifield (1963) extends Oakden's type of study into a new genre by examining the alliterative formulaic tradition as manifested in the thirteenth-century lyric. Fifield's method is quantitative: tables and statistics, broken down by genre and historical period, document patterns of continuity and disjuncture from an ancestral Old English tradition through the thirteenth-century lyric and on to the religious and secular lyric poetry of the two centuries following. John Finlayson (1963), on the other hand, brings more of an interpretive and evaluative slant to his comparison of "formulaic technique" in the *Alliterative Morte Arthure* with that in *The Destruction of Troy* and *The Wars of Alexander*. Though he claims to adopt Parry's definition of the formula, Finlayson emphatically rejects Waldron's "rhythmical-syntactical moulds," since these prove only that English "has a discernible syntactical structure" (375). In fact, Finlayson focuses mainly on collocating pairs, such as "gird" and "grip," or "sworde" and "swap," or "cayre" and "conquerour"; his lists of examples and accompanying discussions are intended to show that "a formulaic tradition does not necessarily imply that all poets will use the formulas in the same way with the same effect" (376). Noting further the tendency towards formulaic clustering, Finlayson concludes that the *Morte Arthure*, although composed in writing, is

of “oral character” in Parry’s sense, since it was designed for oral delivery.

This same poem, whose archaisms have always provided a rich mine for oral-formulaists, claimed Karl H. Göller’s attention two years later (1965) in an article stressing the determinative role of the formulaic technique in the establishment of poetic meaning. Generating his own list of examples, Göller argues that semantic, metrical, and formulaic considerations should not be viewed in isolation but in terms of their hierarchical relationship to each other in the context of an oral-formulaic compositional mode. More general and theoretical is Lawrence’s “The Formulaic Theory and Its Application to English Alliterative Poetry” (1966) which, after a discriminating review of the work of Parry, Lord, Magoun, and Creed, devotes several pages (178-82) to the Waldron-Finlayson dispute. Echoing Parry’s concern with metrical and colonic structure, Lawrence judges that Finlayson underestimates “the usefulness of such sub-semantic patterns [i.e., ‘rhythmical-syntactical moulds’] to the worker in a traditional verse-medium—whether oral or written—because he ignores the implications of metre. It is a question of discovering not that the language of alliterative poetry has a ‘discernible syntactical structure’ but that this structure is composed of grammatical units which are co-extensive with metrical units and which exist as such in the poet’s mind” (182).

The last two studies in this section are less exclusively oral-formulaic in their concerns. Scholes and Kellogg (1966), in a major contribution to narrative theory, incorporate a general introduction to oral tradition in their chapter “The Oral Heritage of Written Literature” (17-56), which refers extensively to medieval literature (though seldom to Middle English). Bruce A. Rosenberg’s “The Morphology of the Middle English Metrical Romance” (1967), bringing Proppian as well as oral-formulaic perspectives to the study of story patterns, subdivides this class of narratives into three “structural groups,” those informed by crime-and-punishment, separation-and-reunion, and test-and-reward patterns. Since these categories cut across conventional generic lines, Rosenberg suggests that romance, epic, and ballad might more meaningfully be differentiated by the intended occasion and mode of performance. Although the romances are not formulaic to the degree that *Beowulf* is (74), their structure and governing aesthetic principles (such as the concern for *copia* rather

than brevity) derive from the needs of the performer-audience exchange. This same year, distinguished by the publication of the third of Baugh's articles, marks an end to the first, exploratory stage of oral-formulaic research in Middle English.

III. 1967-1984

Seldom is it possible to date with any precision the boundary between two phases in a scholarly movement. Nonetheless, the proposition generally holds that the late 1960's brought with them a "second wave" of oral-formulaic scholarship, distinguished from the first on the one hand by an increased heterogeneity and methodological experimentation, and on the other hand by a general retrenchment of hard claims concerning oral versus written provenience.

Treading cautiously in the wake of fifteen years' debate in Anglo-Saxon scholarship, Håkan Ringbom's *Studies in the Narrative Technique of Beowulf and Lawman's Brut* (1968) in its relevant portions represents the earliest attempt to apply Parry-Lord concepts of formula and theme to what constitutes the first sustained narrative work of Middle English alliterative verse. Chapter 5, "Lawman's *Brut* and Formulaic Analysis" (58-76), criticizes the looseness in contemporary scholarly parlance that makes the term "formula" virtually indistinguishable from "repetition." Ringbom goes on to perform the standard formulaic analysis on *Brut* 11. 14,898-15,023, selected because it represents a 25-line expansion on a five-line passage in the French source. Ringbom finds that "close parallels to roughly half the passage can be found more than twice elsewhere in the poem" (70), although he stresses the range of variation which cannot be accounted for through strictly formulaic principles. He concludes that "formula" is less suitable as a "term for Lawman's loosely structured, recurrent phrases" than "iteration," referring to "the purely lexical criterion of collocability" (76). Far more productive is the notion of the oral theme or type-scene as a basic unit of narrative. Concentrating again on Middle English expansions on the French original, Ringbom devotes Chapter 6 (77-104) to three main themes (each broken down into its series of constituent elements)—feasts, voyages, and arrivals, as they appear in Lawman's and Wace's versions. Through this analysis Ringbom finds that the oral-formulaic inclination to recur to certain topics,

presented in the same general outlines with similar though not identical phrasing, does indeed characterize Lawman's artistic and narrative method.

From about this same period, the old problem of the origins of the Alliterative Revival began to be attacked with a renewed vigor. In 1966-67 Elizabeth Salter had tried to discredit Hulbert's "baronial opposition" thesis. But in 1969 it was resurrected again, though in a radically modified form. More pointedly than had any before him, Charles Moorman (1969) argued that these latter-day alliterative poets inherited "a common poetical and thematic tradition, one which originated in Anglo-Saxon literature, was continued during the Anglo-Norman period—probably by means of what had become an oral tradition of alliterative poetry—and re-emerged as written verse in the baronial courts of the middle fourteenth century" (345). Relying largely on the stylistic studies of Oakden, Moorman marshalls as evidence the facts of the alliterative meter, formulaic language, stock narrative materials, and certain native attitudes and outlooks to support his contention that, despite the effects of popularization, Middle English poetry at various stages attests to continuities from the Old English period. A similar view is espoused by Jeff Opland in "The Oral Origins of Early English Poetry," published during the next year (1970).

The applicability of the oral-formulaic theory to poetry of the Alliterative Revival soon began to fuel dissertations. Locating extensive oral-formulaic remains in *Gawain* and the *Alliterative Morte Arthure*, Jerome E. Coffey (1969) hypothesizes a gradual evolution from oral to literary styles. James D. Johnson (1970), tabulating the density of formulas (sorted into two categories on the basis of the degree of lexical variation) in the *Morte Arthure* and further examining its oral thematic composition, similarly affirms the value of a modified oral-formulaic approach. Drawing on both oral-formulaic and medieval rhetorical concepts, Hugh W. Tonsfeldt (1975) constructs a model for fourteenth-century alliterative poetry generally and then applies it, again, to the *Morte Arthure*. Two other dissertations, while recognizing an ultimate historical relationship with an oral stage of poetry, prefer to delve into the literary-aesthetic implications of the oral-aural medium, Brenda S. Stockwell (1973) singling out the Middle English lyric and Merrell A. Knighten (1976) Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde*.

Several other studies around the turn of the decade limit themselves to particular formulaic or thematic structures. Laila

Gross (1968) keys on one system of phrases in her "The Meaning and Oral-Formulaic Use of *Riot* in the Alliterative *Morte Arthure*." A review of the semantic complexities surrounding this word shows that, "since context cannot always be a guide for the meaning of a word, oral-formulaic phrases, if they occur, seem the most trustworthy determinants of meaning" (102). Working on the same level of microstructure but more attentive to points of terminological usage, Eiichi Suzuki (1969) examines the word *molde* ("world") in its manifestations as the stable element in a Middle English alliterative formulaic system, the definition of which he borrows from Donald K. Fry (1967). Turning from stylistic to narrative units, the same author's "Oral-Formulaic Theme Survival: Two Possible Instances and their Significance in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*" (1972) finds Stanley B. Greenfield's (1955) theme of exile and David K. Crowne's (1960) "hero on the beach" theme variously realized. Suzuki further suggests that ironic contrasts between the "inherited body of meanings" (27) usually attaching to such themes and their immediate synchronic context need to be recognized in the course of literary exegesis.

In this same burst of scholarly productivity several of Baugh's insights came to further fruition, as younger minds tried to unravel the labyrinthine tangle of orality-literacy processes out of which several of the extant romances evidently originated. In a polemical response to some of Bliss' remarks in his edition of *Sir Launfal*, S. T. Knight (1969) maintains that this poem's author, Thomas Chestre, drew on the earlier Middle English romance, *Sir Landevale*, in an oral rather than a written version. Hypothesizing that oral memorial transmission promotes greater fidelity in the preservation of the source's rhyme-words and greater variation elsewhere, Knight juxtaposes several passages that exhibit this pattern and cites other changes that could be due only to mis-hearing or tricks of memory and not to scribal error. All this evidence bears out the view that "Chestre is a minstrel, rather than a literary poet; this would explain the crudity of some of the poetry and also the bluntness of some of the incidents" (169). Derivation from sources gives way to manuscript variations as the focal subject for James R. Hurt (1970), who brings the ideas of formula and theme to bear on several representative passages from different thirteenth-century manuscript versions of *King Horn*. Hurt rejects the thesis that these manuscripts represent transcriptions of three separate oral performances, advancing the

rival view that “the scribes themselves functioned as oral-formulaic poets and reshaped their source texts” accordingly (57).

Building on the theoretical foundations of his previous article (1966), Lawrence’s “Formula and Rhythm in *The Wars of Alexander*” (1970) resembles Knight’s and Hurt’s projects respectively in that its subject romance has an identifiable source (in this case the Latin *Historia Alexandri Magni de Preliis*) and survives in different manuscript versions. Yet Lawrence’s main point concerns less the genesis of a particular text than the structure and functioning of formulaic traditions themselves, whether oral or written. Through many detailed analyses, Lawrence demonstrates that small variations in word order and word choice in both halves of the line derive from “rhythmical preferences and aversions” (99); in the second half-line, for instance, the poet conspicuously avoids the configuration $-/x/x$ and selects word combinations embodying the patterns $-/xx/x$ and $//x$. In fact, minor variations in unstressed words between the two extant manuscripts often preserve common features of this type. In short, we need to recognize that single formulaic systems can exhibit a plurality of rhythmic forms and that formulaic, syntactic, and rhythmic structures collaborate in the generation of the traditional formulaic style.

The light which a recognition of formulary diction might shed on “the history of existing texts and the reliability of traditional means of textual editing” (89) receives consideration by William E. Holland (1973), who, following generally in the footsteps of Baugh (1959 and 1967), argues that the numerous variations between the five manuscripts of *Merlin* (known in the Auchinleck version as *Arthour and Merlin*) often result from oral improvisation “in the descent of the text” (96). Approaching this problem more systematically than any of his predecessors, Holland analyzes degrees of variation between some 500 corresponding lines from each of three principal texts; despite an overriding consistency on the narrative level, Holland’s evidence highlights differences of wording and phraseology so “continuous and pervasive” (99) as to render any theory of written transmission altogether implausible. Holland takes the argument a step further, maintaining that “the changes consist largely of substitution of one conventional phrase, one formula, for another” (99); as a demonstration, he performs the usual formulaic analysis on two comparable passages in each of four manuscript versions, finding that roughly half of his 150-line

sampling “is reproduced with some accuracy in other Middle English romances” (105). (Like Baugh, Holland does not provide statistics on formulaicity for variant lines specifically, even though higher formulaic density at these points in the orally revised versions is implied by both of their models.) In so profoundly conventional a narrative genre, Holland sums up, oral variation could enjoy considerable scope; and for this reason “it seems unlikely that any unbroken chain of written texts connects the existing manuscripts” (105).

At this juncture it will be convenient to group together a heterogeneous assortment of articles that bear only marginally on our theme. In “Patterns of Myth in Medieval Narrative” (1971), Bruce A. Beatie adopts McLuhanesque and Parry-Lord outlooks in a review of story patterns in a spectrum of medieval works, including *King Horn* (106-7). In her contribution to *Recent Middle English Scholarship and Criticism: Survey and Desiderata* (1971:67-69), Lillian H. Hornstein briefly situates the oral-formulaic perspective (with particular reference to Baugh) in the broader context of Middle English romance scholarship. Michael Curschmann in “Oral Poetry in Mediaeval English, French, and German Literature: Some Notes on Recent Research” (1967) and Utley in “The Oral Formula, its Critics, and its Extensions” (1973) give passing mention to Middle English.¹³ Obviously, the short shrift which I am giving to these articles here in no way reflects on their inherent value or critical interest.

A pair of articles from *Literature and Western Civilization: The Mediaeval World* (1973) offer different slants on the problem of medieval literacy. Developing a model reminiscent of Wilson’s (1926), J. A. Burrow identifies three stages in an evolution of medieval poetry, as are suggested in his title, “Bard, Minstrels, and Men of Letters.” The progressive establishment of the reading habit, which sponsored this complex movement from oral to fully literate composition, engendered literary-artistic difficulties peculiar to each stage, variously figured in *Beowulf*, Chrétien, *Gawain*, *Sir Launfal*, Boccaccio, and Chaucer. In “The Literacy of the Laity” M. B. Parkes, approaching this topic from a historical and sociological rather than a literary standpoint, discusses the degree and (more importantly) the nature of medieval literacy. Parkes proposes, in fact, to differentiate between the literacies of the professional reader (the scholar or cleric), the cultured reader (who reads for recreation), and the pragmatic reader (“who has to read

or write in the course of transacting any kind of business,” 555). Although from the sixth through the twelfth centuries most readers were of the first type, thereafter literacy spread, first among the nobility and later among the middle classes, facilitated by the growth of the book trade towards the end of the Middle Ages. This translates, in literary terms, into a late fourteenth-century minstrel who was “less a transmitter of texts and more a professional musician” (575), even though the formulaic style persisted throughout the period.

To both Burrow and Parkes, the oral theory is a secondary or peripheral concern; the main line of oral-formulaic research resumes with two articles by Johnson, addressing in turn thematic and formulaic problems. “‘The Hero on the Beach’ in the Alliterative *Morte Arthure*” (1975) identifies what the author characterizes as a unique Middle English occurrence of this four-element narrative pattern in its “pure form.”¹⁴ Since the proposed “sources” contain no prototype, this theme must have been made available to the creator of the *Morte Arthure* through an oral tradition descending from the Old English. Johnson’s next article, “Formulaic Thrift in the Alliterative *Morte Arthure*” (1978), argues (*contra* Fry 1968) that the notion of thrift, if appropriately reconceived, has a role in the poetics of English alliterative verse. Substituting alliterative criteria for the metrical-colonic constraints proposed originally in Parry’s discussions of “thrift” in Homer, Johnson’s claim, illustrated through reference to the “FUNCTION-WORD ADJECTIVE knight” formulaic system, is that the noun in question (“knight,” in this instance) collocates with an adjective selected from a limited range of possibilities (usually between one and five different words) under each initial sound. For example, “*gentil*, which occurs eight times in this system, and *galyards*, which occurs seven times, supply the only choices for soft *g* and hard *g* alliteration respectively” (259). Such systems assisted poets in the narration of typical episodes.

Several articles in the next two years attend to works commonly neglected by oral-formulaists. Alain Renoir’s “Crist Ihesu’s Beasts of Battle: A Note on Oral-Formulaic Theme Survival” (1976) locates an example of Magoun’s (1955b) famous theme in 11. 3712-22 of Lydgate’s *Life of Saint Alban and Saint Amphibal*, a literate production in the fullest sense. And as one might expect in such a context, the theme is deployed to a most untraditional end: for instead of glutting themselves on the

carnage in their usual fashion, the wolf and the eagle, appearing on the site of a recent massacre of 999 Christians, set themselves to defending the corpses against the ravages of other wild beasts. Such transformations are to be expected, says Renoir, when oral-formulaic themes “occur in the written works of authors trained in a later or different tradition” (457). Ranging theoretically and speculatively through several literary works and historical periods, Robert Kellogg’s “Oral Narrative, Written Books” (1977) returns several times to Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales* in an exposition on the ironic and rhetorical strategies of works creating “a well defined *oral* narrative persona within a *written* story” (660), usage which Kellogg contrasts with that of genuinely oral poetry. Adverting to the oral theory only indirectly, Francis D. Covella (1976) identifies seventeen major grammatical patterns on the way to contrasting the grammatical styles of the A-, B-, and C-texts of *Piers Plowman*. This “grammatical evidence of multiple authorship” is corroborated by formulaic contrasts between the three texts, a topic that Covella promises to take up in a future article.¹⁵ The author makes no mention of orality; and in fact, as A. J. Colaianne (1978) points out, the possible connection between the “repetitive and digressive style of much of *Piers Plowman*” and the “requirements of oral delivery,” though often casually mentioned, has not yet been the subject of serious investigation (167).

Another major contribution during this period along the general lines set forth by Baugh (1959 and 1967), Hurt (1970), and Holland (1973) is Hoyt N. Duggan’s “The Rôle of Formulas in the Dissemination of a Middle English Alliterative Romance” (1976), which inquires into the source of formulaic language and discrepancies between the versions of *The Wars of Alexander*. Although this work “is at least as formulaic as *Beowulf* or *Morte Arthure* and shares most characteristics of orally composed poetry,” firm paleographic evidence links its two manuscripts to the Latin original “by continuous lines of physical copying” (268). Yet other evidence within the text points equally unmistakably to the “double perspective maintained by a literate poet writing within an essentially oral tradition for oral delivery” (276). Further, many of the differences between manuscripts reflect the operation of a systematic and “consistent variation in lexicon, in formulas, and in rhythmic structure” (273) such as might result from an unconscious transformation in the memory of a performer over the course of

time. As a solution to this tangled state of affairs, Duggan proposes a kind of unintentional poet-performer collaboration: first, a literate author composes with pen in hand in the formulaic manner, and later, manually copying from a manuscript original a poem that he already holds in his memory, a performer acting as scribe inserts “his habitual expressions in preference to the readings of the exemplar” (279). This theory has important implications in the editorial establishment of authoritative texts; and Duggan’s most important principle in this regard, copiously illustrated, is that “the reading that corresponds to an established formula system is likely to be original” (282). He cautiously suggests the applicability of these conclusions to other Old and Middle English alliterative works. This and Duggan’s next article, “Strophic Patterns in Middle English Alliterative Poetry” (1977), both assume a continuous alliterative tradition from the Anglo-Saxon period. Yet this latter study concentrates more on disjunctures, advancing a rather involved theory of 24-line stanzaic structuring that may ultimately have roots in the poetry of Old Norse.

Another leading exponent of formulaic analysis is Susan Wittig, whose approach to the problem of redundancy in the Middle English romance bears the imprint of contemporary developments in linguistic and critical theory. A brief yet substantive treatment of “Formulaic Style in the Middle English Romance” (1977) undertakes to hand-count formulas in 25 narratives, insisting on the strict, Parryist criterion of “verbal-syntactic-metrical correspondence” (253) in the determination of formularity and using each poem separately as the statistical referent. Stressing the conservative character of figures derived by such methods, Wittig tabulates a range in formulaic density from 10% in *Lai le freine* to 42% in *Emaré*. These conclusions are incorporated into *Stylistic and Narrative Structures in the Middle English Romances* (1978), which applies a “linguistic-based model” that borrows from “Kenneth Pike’s tagmemic linguistics and Lévi-Strauss’s analysis of the deep structural patterns of myth” (6). Here Wittig’s hierarchical series of progressively enlarging narrative units, all of them “emic” and therefore holistically defined, is presented as a coherent and integral system. Thus the argument progresses in successive chapters from the syntagmeme, a stylistic abstraction manifested as formulaic expression; to the motifeme, a “minimum unit at the level of narrative discourse” (60); to the type-scene, a “patterned, repeated

configuration of events and characters, composed of obligatory and optional motifs which may be either conditioned or free" (105); to the type-episode, the largest narrative unit within this scheme. Working at all stages through numerous examples from the romance material, Wittig's total exposition threads its course with commendable lucidity through a maze of theoretical abstractions in what stands as the major reinterpretation of Middle English oral-formulaic theory into the terms of structuralist critical discourse.

Two minor treatments of formulaic language appeared at this time. Writing without reference to the Parry-Lord theory, Urs Dürmüller (1975:71-118) tries to sort out "tags" and "formulas," to him pejorative labels, from aesthetically viable instances of repetition in the tail-lines of tail-rhyme romances. Anne H. Schotter (1979) finds subtle and unconventional artistic effects arising from "formulas of clothing in the portrait of the Pearl maiden." The author contrasts her definition of formula as "a recurring collocation of alliterating words used to express a given idea" with the syntactic definition "offered by earlier proponents of the formulaic theory" (189).

With a few minor exceptions I have deferred review of Chaucerian criticism in this section until now, since this area comprises its own discrete field to a large degree. In fact, little headway into the oral dimensions of Chaucer's art has been made in the last two decades, even though the matter is often alluded to. Beryl Rowland, for instance, notes in passing the connection between live presentation and such features of style as "surface simplicity" and formularity (1979:128); John H. Fisher (1980) links oral performance with Chaucer's narrator and stresses the pedagogical value of reading his work aloud. More negative in his view of the significance of the oral medium, Mehl (1974) judges that oral rendering remains for us an "abstract reconstruction which does not really affect our experience when we read Chaucer" (173). Since, moreover, Chaucer envisioned permanence and an ongoing readership beyond the immediate live performance, the oral ambience in his poetry undergoes an inexorable literary reduction and fossilization. Much of the current research seems to proceed on a (usually unstated) platform of this kind. And thus an excellent symposium on "Chaucer's Audience" published in a recent issue of *The Chaucer Review* (1983:137-81) contains only a brief reference to Chaucer's live encounter with listeners (Paul Strohm:

138), even though the orality-literacy problem concerns nothing less than the very medium through which Chaucer's communication with this audience would have been achieved.

Yet the topic of orality has not been altogether abandoned. John Lawlor proposes to develop a view of Chaucer founded on a "steady recognition of the predominantly oral nature of his work," work which was originally published when read "by the author to a small and courtly audience" (1968:9). Trying to mediate between the views of scholars like Mehl and Bronson, Edmund Reiss' "Chaucer and His Audience" (1980) finds authorial ironies and manipulations predicated on an awareness of and reliance on the eventuality of immediate, present listeners. Rosenberg (1980) takes a more radical position, asserting that, in view of its dual design for silent and oral-communal reading, Chaucer's poetry does not fit in with modern attitudes about texts; many of the customary close-reading practices will need to be restructured accordingly. Rosenberg further suggests the relevance of performance factors seldom admitted into literary-critical discourse, such as audience inattentiveness or rudeness, or hypothetical authorial *ad lib* interactions with his audience. Although most of his attention is given to other works, Renoir (1981) briefly recalls the *Canterbury Tales* in a demonstration of the aesthetic relevance of an oral-formulaic context to what would appear from other standpoints to be "fragments." Perhaps the most important study of this group, Rowland's "*Pronuntiatio* and its Effect on Chaucer's Audience" (1982) reviews the history of the arts of recitation and gesture, comprehended in the fifth branch of rhetoric, through the Middle Ages. Emphasizing the predominantly oral character of Chaucer's artistry, Rowland discusses several interpretive consequences of oral delivery, notably the reduction of semantic ambivalence, the identification of poet with narrator, and the limiting of dramatization.

I will conclude this admittedly sketchy review of Chaucerian criticism with two articles that highlight what I feel to be another important implication of the oral theory. In 1977 Julia Dias-Ferreira briefly noted "Another Portuguese Analogue of Chaucer's *Pardoner's Tale*"; four years later, John M. Coggeshall discussed in greater detail the resemblances between the *Nun's Priest's Tale*, *Pardoner's Tale*, *Miller's Tale*, *Reeve's Tale*, and four oral yarns from Vance Randolph's Ozark collections. Since geographic and cultural distances argue against literary influence,

both scholars posit traditional oral sources. Of course, they are not the first to do so, nor can I hope in the present space to run down the history of source-and-analog studies in Chaucerian and other Middle English criticism. Yet many scholars seem to write as though oral storytelling did not exist or as though Chaucer would never have deigned to sully his ears with it. In fact, Chaucer's attitudes in this regard have not yet been properly studied; and in many other connections the Parry-Lord insights into oral tradition as a repository for narrative source materials need to be integrated into critical perceptions of the Middle English period's greatest poet.

Returning to the Alliterative Revival, we find in the later 1970's and early 1980's a wave of adverse reactions to the oral-formulaic approach. The most serious critic is Thorlac Turville-Petre (1977), who objects to the vagueness of the term "oral transmission" and finds the lack of contemporary witnesses discrediting to what is anyway an inherently implausible hypothesis of an oral tradition continuing unbroken over this three-century span. Nor is it "easy to understand why all surviving written poetry should have been composed in the loose alliterative style if a tighter and more 'correct' style had still been flourishing in oral tradition" (16). Turville-Petre does not consider the possibility of an oral tradition that itself evolves. Later, he attacks Waldron for his use of "formula." Since other, more exacting concepts like "collocation" or "grammatical unit" are already available, "nothing is to be gained by conjuring up an inheritance of oral verse and naming [the patterns Waldron identifies as] 'syntactically formulaic phrases'" (91).

Turville-Petre is by no means alone in his skepticism. Salter (1978), in a sequel to her 1966-67 article, dismisses oral-traditional continuities in favor of an evolution of the later alliterative verse form out of semi-alliterative prose. David Lawton (1982b:5-6), having misconstrued Duggan (1976), criticizes what he perceives to be that scholar's theory of oral variation, on the grounds that other, scribal-based explanations are available. Derek Pearsall, while he rejects the "fantasies of the theorists of oral-formulaic composition" (1982:44), feels nonetheless that an oral tradition of alliterative verse does comprise one of the backgrounds to the Alliterative Revival. The character of its contribution, however, can be gathered from his comment that "oral transmission makes wretched what it touches, and . . . the longer the process the more

debased the product" (1981:6). Though few scholars express themselves quite so plainly, this pessimistic view of the capabilities of non-literate peoples seems to enjoy some wide currency.

Orality and the formulaic style also receive attention in several of the articles in a recent collection, *The Alliterative Morte Arthure: A Reassessment of the Poem* (1981). Göller's introductory summary of research devotes several pages (9-11) to relevant applications of the oral-formulaic theory. In a study of the poem's audience, Jutta Wurster emphasizes the distinction between author and narrator and accordingly doubts whether in-text references to performance situations, which by this time had probably become literary clichés, can be taken as evidence of oral transmission (44-45 and 54). Manfred Markus in "The Language and Style: The Paradox of Heroic Poetry," focusing on "lexis and syntax," formulaic phraseology, spatial and temporal structures, and the means employed to engage the audience's imagination, finds that while the "author has not yet abandoned the ideals of heroism and chivalry, yet he reveals a deep skepticism in face of those truths" (69). While he doubts its connection with orality, the formulaic technique contributes to this ambivalence by means of listeners' or readers' associations "through a treasury of common literary experience and of conventional verbal collocations" (63).

Yet from the oral-formulaic standpoint, far the most theoretically enterprising of the essays in this volume are Ritzke-Rutherford's. In the first part of "Formulaic Microstructure: The Cluster," the author sets out to schematize key oral-formulaic concepts. Giving careful definitions at all points (see esp. 75), she proposes an analogy between the microstructural series formula/formulaic system/cluster and the macrostructural series motif/type-scene/theme, for both move from the more constrained to the more free, from the more structured to the more amorphous. Thus the cluster, which she defines as "a group of words, usually loosely related metrically and semantically, which is regularly employed to express a given essential idea without being restricted to a certain form or sequence, or to a certain number of lines" (73), provides a kind of generative pool out of which formulas and formulaic systems arise and acquire their meaning. Using numerous examples, the latter part of the article (76-82) documents continuities at this level between the Old and Middle English and argues for the explanatory power of "cluster" within

the *Alliterative Morte Arthure*.

Though it builds on its predecessor, Ritzke-Rutherford's companion article, "Formulaic Macrostructure: The Theme of Battle," attends less to theory and more to its application and aesthetic relevance. As an artist of quality, the creator of the *Morte Arthure* capitalized on tensions unleashed by the subtle, creative manipulation of conventional forms with conventional meanings. Thus the theme of battle, which usually glorifies war and stimulates "the pleasurable identification of the audience with the action and its protagonist," is here imbued "with a new message: war as an instrument of corruption and thing of growing horror, a law unto itself" (95).

The review of the *Morte Arthure* scholarship concludes with three studies by Valerie Krishna. In "Archaic Nouns in the *Alliterative Morte Arthure*" (1975), she argues that archaic alliterative synonyms such as *berne*, *gome*, and so on are not stylistically elevated and idealizing but, to the contrary, more generalized and indefinite as designations of "man." The introduction to her subsequent edition (1976) contains a valuable discussion of the "Formulas and Rhetorical Style" (27-34) in this "mysteriously anachronistic work" (34). Yet far more detailed is "Parataxis, Formulaic Density, and Thrift in the *Alliterative Morte Arthure*" (1982), which represents the strictest and most systematic application of an unmodified Parry-Lord model to any Middle English poem. Prefacing each section with knowledgeable reviews of scholarship and supporting her assertions statistically, Krishna finds that the Middle English poem, by contrast with *Beowulf* and works of the Cynewulf canon, shows a level of enjambement comparable to that of the poems of the Serbo-Croatian *guslari*; that its formulaic density, according to Johnson (1970), approaches 30% and thus climbs "well over the threshold postulated by Duggan and Lord for oral poetry" (75); and that it is thriftier—draws on a smaller pool of alliterating terms for the hero—than is *Beowulf*. While she stops short of actually claiming that the *Morte Arthure* is orally composed, Krishna does not rule out that possibility, and in any event feels that the poem is highly traditional.

During this same year William A. Quinn and Audley S. Hall, taking *King Horn* for their model text, advance a rather novel theory of oral improvisation in what constitutes a major revision of Baugh 1959. Reduced to its bare bones, the theory runs thus. To the performing minstrel or *jongleur*, rhyming pairs rather than

formulas would provide the real mnemonic key. Therefore, in the process of memorization and in the extemporaneous creation of new lines to cover memory lapses, the poet would employ his “lexicon” of ready-made rhyme associations. Crucial terms are the *cluster*, or the poet’s set of words under a particular rhyme, and the *subgroup*, or particular selections from these that are functionally operative in the processes of recall and invention. The authors explore the implications of their analysis both intratextually (within each *King Horn* manuscript, 49-76) and intertextually (between them, 77-110); they also comment on “stylistic contrasts between the rhyme-crafts of *Havelok the Dane* and *King Horn*, manuscript C” (111-17). Statistically exhaustive by the parameters it sets for itself, *Jongleur* winds its way through many methodological intricacies and incorporates a remarkable number of charts and tables: thus the appendices occupy a full 282 pages. One might in general have wished for greater economy of exposition. Yet the authors have undoubtedly made an important contribution in the attention which they have drawn to the role of rhymes in mnemonic and improvisatory processes.

In the two years following, a pair of articles use oral-formulaic methods on works that had previously been bypassed. Stephen Morrison (1983) studies formulas and formulaic systems (defined according to Waldron 1957) in passages of the *Ormulum* where the poet either addresses the audience or underscores precepts of good behavior as imperatives for the spiritual well-being of Christians. Although formulas occur rarely in the verse of this highly literate poet, these conspicuous exceptions shed light on his compositional practices. In one of the few inquiries at the level of story patterns (1984), I identify in the final 130 lines of *Sir Orfeo* what Albert Lord has characterized as the return sequence. Through a comparison of *Sir Orfeo* with the *Odyssey* and two orally improvised Serbo-Croatian narrative poems, I subdivide this pattern into eleven constituent elements: separation, battle, captivity, release, travel, disguise, an encounter at the boundary, testing, the hero’s self-identification, combat, and marriage (or husband-wife reunion). Drawing on an oral tradition or some other source, the *Orfeo*-poet has fused this highly popular story sequence with a pre-existing Orpheus legend, a fact which not only explains a range of peculiarities in the poem as we have it, but suggests that the poet operated in an aesthetic mode that combined oral and literate features.

This survey concludes with a group of studies concerned with medieval literacy, a subject that seems to have caught fire in the past half-decade. A landmark publication, M. T. Clanchy's *From Memory to Written Record: England, 1066-1807* (1979) far surpasses any previous study of literacy in medieval England through its grounding in a massive encounter with the primary historical documents. The first part charts with illuminating detail the growth of record-making. Successive chapters discuss "memories and myths" in their struggles with encroaching literacy, the "proliferation of documents" at various levels of society, the "types of records," the "technology of writing," and the "preservation and use" of writing. Turning from the sheer facts of literacy to the "mentality" and program of attitudes associated with it, the second part studies the uses of French, Latin, and English, the meaning of terms like *clericus* and *litteratus*, the relations between aural and visual in language use, the slow growth of trust in writing, and "practical literacy." Encyclopedic in its mastery of the subject and richly illustrated with useful examples, Clanchy's book has set research into medieval literacy on a wholly new footing.

Several more recent publications explore other dimensions of the problem. In *English Literature in History, 1350-1400: Medieval Readers and Writers* (1981), Janet Coleman analyzes the complex interpenetrations of oral and literate structures in education and other spheres of English cultural life. She sees a comparable shift in modes of thought in sixth to fifth century B.C. Greece and medieval England, made possible by the spread of literacy, and feels that the Alliterative Revival registers the conflicts and interactions between these two mentalities (157-60). Though its subject matter is Latinate rather than English, Brian Stock's *The Implications of Literacy: Written Language and Models of Interpretation in the Eleventh and Twelfth Centuries* (1983) bears mention here because it represents to date the major inquiry into the interdependencies of orality and literacy in the organization of medieval thought and experience. The author's central premise, that "after the year 1000, oral discourse increasingly functioned within a framework of legal and institutional textuality" (10), sponsors a wide-ranging examination of many aspects of medieval life. Undoubtedly Stock's thesis and the response it evokes will in time exert considerable influence on literary studies.¹⁶

The last author we will consider is Walter J. Ong, for many years a leading figure in the interpretation of orality, literacy, and the relations between them as shaping forces in the evolution of human consciousness and culture. Ong's useful term "oral residue," coined in an article originally published in 1965 and reprinted in *Rhetoric, Romance, and Technology* six years later,¹⁷ denotes the persistence of oral habits of thought and expression in a world whose discourse is increasingly structured by writing. A fascinating study of agonistic instincts and behavioral structures, *Fighting for Life: Contest, Sexuality, and Consciousness* (1981) includes a chapter on "Academic and Intellectual Arenas" (118-48) which traces the tradition of intellectual debate to its roots in the oral noetic. His next book, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (1982), includes discussions of Clanchy, the subterranean persistence of oral habits, and the literate restructuring of consciousness (see esp. 96-101).

Yet Ong's most explicit treatment of the medieval period, "Orality, Literacy, and Medieval Textualization," appears in a special 1984 issue of *New Literary History* devoted to "Oral and Written Traditions in the Middle Ages."¹⁸ Remarking that "in the European Middle Ages interactions between orality and literacy reached perhaps an all-time high" (1), he contrasts the oral-visual character of medieval manuscripts with that of printed books. In fact, the "European Middle Ages were bound to orality" not only by the "heavy residue of primary orality that still marked literate cultures everywhere" (3) but by "academic orality," or the penetration of oral practices into an intellectual framework largely organized around texts. At the same time, literacy fed back into the largely non-literate societies that sustained it through a kind of "cultural osmosis" (3). Nowhere, in fact, is the textualization of language more strikingly illustrated than in the phenomenon of Learned Latin, chirographically controlled, mother tongue to no one in the medieval period, and therefore admirably suited to the detached, objective, diereitic thinking for which it provided the medium. This Latin-vernacular "cultural diglossia" (4ff.) provided one significant backdrop to the massive medieval orality-literacy encounter out of which, eventually, the modern world was born.

IV. Problems and Prospects

When one turns to the task of assessing the oral-formulaic contribution to Middle English studies, one is struck, on the one hand, by a general acceleration of research along these lines, and on the other hand, by the reluctance of many to credit orality with any role at all in the creation or dissemination of Middle English literature. At the outset, then, I would like to recapitulate several of the chief arguments supporting the view that orality exerted a major impact on the structure of literary communications in the later medieval world.

We must begin by acknowledging the bias of our sources. For the object of our search, orality and oral tradition, becomes accessible to us only when it ceases to be oral. Sound, unlike writing, is by its nature ephemeral and eludes direct inspection outside the moment of time during which it resonates. For this reason, it will never be possible to “prove” the existence or influence of a medieval oral tradition through present evidence, in the same way that one can prove, through textual citations, Boethius’ influence on Chaucer. The only irrefutable demonstration in the case of an oral tradition would consist of audio-visual cassettes, which, in the case of the medieval world, will not, unfortunately, be forthcoming. Therefore, to insist on conditions of proof appropriate only to the study of *documents* is simply to foreclose discussion on the subject. By such methods one could never discover an oral tradition even if there was one.

Yet if one allows a measure of indirection, evidence of “oral residue” is quite plentiful. As we have seen, numerous studies document the formulaic and otherwise redundant style of much Middle English romance narrative. It is true that definitions of “formula” vary, and undoubtedly this line of research needs to be systematized. Yet whichever of the available models one prefers, no one has ever denied that the *Alliterative Morte Arthure* exhibits a higher formulaic density than Ezra Pound’s *Cantos*, or Wordsworth’s *Prelude*, or, for that matter, practically any other poetic work of the past several centuries. The arguments of Parry, Lord, and their followers connect this kind of redundant style with the conditions of oral discourse. Undoubtedly, as Benson (1966) and others have shown, writers under certain circumstances will employ the formulaic style as well. Yet this does not sever the connection between formulaicity and orality—quite to the contrary.

It shows instead that written poetry of the formulaic variety is “oral-derived,” that is, composed in proximity to an oral tradition and borrowing from the materials and aesthetic assumptions of an oral poetics.¹⁹ This word “proximity” contains its own ambiguities, of course. Perhaps a sophisticated oral tradition survived as late as the Alliterative Revival; perhaps it stands rather at several degrees of historical remove from that time. Either of these theories is possible, and others could be devised. Yet critics of the oral theory have never, for their part, explained in any way how these formulaic and redundant tendencies could have been generated out of purely written processes without any reference to a prior state of orality. Until they do, and until they can support their view with a clear example, as Parry and Lord did through their studies of Serbo-Croatian oral poetry, the oral-formulaic theory in some modified form will continue to provide the only available account for the genesis of the formulaic style.

Other kinds of internal evidence point to the probability of oral delivery, a practice testifying to continuities with oral tradition at another level. Crosby and Baugh, among others, have reviewed at some length passages in which the poetic narrator addresses a present audience or refers in other ways to the present performance occasion. One must also reckon with in-text descriptions of minstrels and other performers; to dismiss orality is to argue that the historically recognized phenomenon of minstrelsy had no impact on Middle English literature at all. It is possible, as some have pointed out, that references to the oral medium in any particular work are merely literary conventions. Yet the same could be said about certain allusions to readers, writers, and books, information that need not always be acquired through direct encounters with manuscripts; and if Middle English writers held oral tradition in such low esteem as is sometimes argued, one wonders why they would have associated their verse even on a surface level with something so “debauched,” as Pearsall has put it (1981:6). Surely in such a case literary name-dropping would have replaced performance references altogether. The fact is that the mix of allusions to things oral and written defies easy unraveling. Yet as a working hypothesis, the view that it reflects complex orality-literacy interactions has at any rate the merit that it accommodates a historically necessary stage in the evolution of communications.

A thorough and sagacious reconsideration of the evidence

might lead to some surprising insights. For example, one of the most striking allusions to Middle English oral tradition has gone virtually unnoticed. I am referring to the *Canterbury Tales*, which one could with some justice characterize as the description of an oral tradition in action. For no one thinks that the Canterbury pilgrims were reading from manuscripts as they rode, or reciting verbatim from memory. The fiction that Chaucer sustains is rather that they were extemporaneously re-creating tales that they had heard before, selecting and adapting their material to the needs of the performance occasion.

Now obviously evidence of this kind cannot be taken at face value. We can safely assume, for example, that typical monks, knights, and millers of Chaucer's era were not able to improvise rhyming couplets or rhyme royal stanzas in iambic pentameter. Chaucer's drama is a fictional one, used for his own, thoroughly literary ends. One must also remember that frame tales were a medieval literary convention. Yet when all due qualifications have been allowed, a core of orality remains. For can we seriously doubt the reality of oral storytelling of this general type in Chaucer's era? As a realistic artist in many respects, Chaucer's literary imitation of this kind of oral exchange may reveal to us much about the interactional dynamics governing oral traditions in informal settings. Further, in selecting this format for his *magnum opus*, Chaucer apparently assumed that such affairs commanded some general interest. In short, while his testimony must be treated with caution, Chaucer is not valueless as a witness to oral traditional practices and to their shaping power even within the tradition of written literature.

It is probably true, of course, that by the later fourteenth century undiluted, primary orality was largely a thing of the past, even among illiterates. Literacy had indeed made great strides from the times of the Norman Conquest, as Clanchy has shown. Yet one must not forget how slowly monumental historical changes occur. As Eric A. Havelock (1963 and 1982), John R. Goody (1977), Ong (1971, 1981, and 1982), and many others have argued, the movement from orality to literacy entailed a massive transformation in basic patterns of thinking. Only with universal education could one hope to effect such a reform with any degree of thoroughness among a cultural majority. Therefore, to endorse close-reading procedures suited to the exegesis of poetry designed for a fully textualized readership is to assume that the mass-scale

availability of identical-copy editions, translations, glossaries, dictionaries, textual notes, literary interpretive commentaries, source studies, and all the other amenities of modern scholarly life have made no impression on reading and writing habits. Nor should overmuch be made of the fact that medieval narrative presents itself to us in the form of manuscripts, for in doing so we would be confusing ontology with epistemology. Manuscripts define the starting point for our inquiry, naturally, but the mere fact of their existence does not in itself prove what the poems that they record are and how they came into being.²⁰

We need to reconsider the comfortable assumption that literate processes or written sources would always have exerted greater appeal for medieval poets than oral processes and sources. For as a considerable body of research now points out, textuality itself has a history, and authors, as men and women of their time, respond to historically and culturally determined perceptions of “texts” configured between such polarities as oral versus written, or aural versus visual, or event versus thing. The question is not simply whether individual medieval authors or readers *could* have discarded such an inheritance, but *would* they have done so? Would an oral-derived perception of “text” have seemed inadequate? If so, why? At any given time, what relative authority attaches to oral versus written discourse? In what ways, if at all, was this issue consciously articulated in the medieval mind? Given the varying levels of literacy and the legibility of manuscripts, was silent reading “entertainment,” and if so, for whom? Did medieval authors compose for a private elite or a general public? What mental procedures could they reasonably expect their audience (of whatever type) to undertake in order to recover an underlying artistic meaning?

None of these problems are simple ones; and since large-scale changes seldom proceed in unilinear fashion, one might expect considerable variation from work to work. Yet in one respect modern literary scholars operate under a handicap in their explorations in this field. For our own backgrounds, reinforced in most cases by a professional commitment, continually spotlight the value and efficacy of writing. This tends to encourage a reduction of all discourse to the terms of what is most familiar. We would not be the first to err in this way: one is reminded of medieval exegetes who thought that the authors of certain pagan classics had intuited truths of Christian revelation. Such reductionism operates

most powerfully when one's most dearly cherished values are implicated and most fully when one is least conscious of it. For this reason, a prime order of business at the present time must be to augment our understanding of the idea of "text" as an evolving, historical phenomenon.

Yet it has been rightly objected that many crucial oral-formulaic terms have been ambiguously applied to Middle English literature. Because of the extreme complexity of the later medieval situation, in the future scrupulous attention needs to be given to problems of definition. For example, the very phrase "oral tradition" could denote, on the one hand, a virtual apprenticeship in oral verbal artistry such as one finds described in Lord's *The Singer of Tales*, and on the other hand, simple informal storytelling in various communal settings, such as we find depicted in the *Canterbury Tales*. Both phenomena qualify as oral traditions, and neither precludes the possibility of art. Yet different systems of rules may well govern each.

Another problematic concept is oral transmission, as Turville-Petre points out (1977:15). For the orally improvising poet and the literary scholar reading a paper at a Modern Language Association convention both transmit information orally. The difference lies in the mediation of texts, and it is precisely the nature and varieties of this function that need to be clarified. For the author or creator can relate to the text in many ways: he might type into a word-processor; he might compose manually on paper, parchment, or wax tablets; he might dictate orally to a scribe; he might formulate discourse in his mind and write it down or have it written down later; he might be an oral poet who can also write in the formulaic manner, but who when he does so restructures his thought and discourse along the lines that literacy would determine; or he might be an illiterate oral poet who, from time to time, composes for dictation. Further, texts might assume different roles in relation to performance. The performer might read from a manuscript that he holds in his lap; he might recite or sing to musical accompaniment, glancing at some form of text when his own resources fail him; he might recite from memory without a present text, as an actor does; he might supplement memory with invention; he might memorize rhyming pairs, stock episodes, or other extracts from a text and re-create on that basis; he might stitch together chunks from various works memorized with varying degrees of fidelity; or he might function as an orally

improvising poet, with the added proviso that he is familiar with a text and that its memory impresses and shapes his rendering. Such performances might in turn beget their own progeny of manuscripts: a performer might at some juncture copy a poem that he has also memorized, as Duggan suggests; he might simply write it out from memory; a second party might transcribe his performance; another skilled semi-oral poet might remember an oral rendering in some kind of outline and copy or create on that basis. In other words, the possible avenues by which a poem might flow from “original creator” to audience are myriad, and different orality-literacy conditions obtain for each of them.

Whether or not such complexities are fully registered in the surviving manuscripts (since here too a variety of factors may have come into play), they probably define a part of the context in which medieval poets created. Any poet envisions the dissemination of his work and will encode meaning in a fashion suited to the medium of that dissemination. Then what were the ruling paradigms for the creators of medieval literature? Did they conceive of themselves as performers as well as creators? When did the creator-performer dichotomy emerge, and how did these two functionaries interact? Was silent reading a poor substitute for live performance, or was live performance a poor substitute for silent reading? Did authors anticipate and design their art for both possibilities? What does the answer to this last question imply aesthetically? Was literature fundamentally a public or private experience? Was it some curious blend of the two? These are just a few of the questions to which a deepening awareness of orality-literacy interactions is bound to give rise.

Progress on any of these problems relating to the human interactional setting of literature will be impossible to achieve without comparable advances in the study of literary structure. In fact, research into formulaic language has already attained a considerable degree of sophistication, although this is not always fully reflected in Middle English studies. Comparative research has increasingly shown that the nature of the formula is in certain respects tradition-dependent, and that definitions derived from the study of one literary tradition do not necessarily apply to another.²¹ Milman Parry argued the connection between style and orality carefully in terms of the particular characteristics of Homeric epic diction and the hexameter line. Such practice needs to be followed by his modern-day descendants. Scholars should

always specify precisely what constellation of metrical, colonic, lexical, syntactic, and semantic features comprises their definitions of “formula” and “formulaic system.” The pertinence of Parry’s other “criteria for orality,” such as thrift or enjambement, needs also to be established in terms of the specific conditions of Middle English verse. Research into all these areas should be greatly stimulated when computer programming advances begin at last to facilitate extensive statistical analysis.

Until now, the intellectual arena has largely been dominated by such microstructural concerns; to restore the balance, further attention should be given to the various levels of narrative. The scholarship on Old English, ancient Greek, Serbo-Croatian, and other languages has provided many interesting applications of concepts such as oral theme, type-scene, story pattern, and ring structure. Of course Baugh, Wittig, Ritzke-Rutherford, and others have exhibited considerable imagination in their extensions of such methods. Yet the net needs to be cast out more widely. Until now, only a handful of Middle English poems have come under serious review. If we admit degrees between the poles of “oral” and “written” narrative discourse, and if we make appropriate adjustments for each poem, most Middle English literature might profit from such analysis. Comparative perspectives, if judiciously chosen, might well illuminate structures camouflaged within the narrower compass of Middle English literature itself.

The aim of all such study should ultimately be to arrive at a finer understanding of the type of artistry — oral, literate, or some blend of the two — appropriate to each work. Some Middle English scholars, in their assumption that quality means literacy, seem to doubt that oral art can exist at all. Yet in terms of quality, the same conditions ought to obtain for musical composition, in which case one is left, for example, with the problem of accounting for Indian classical music, a highly subtle and developed art form that has never employed musical notation. One must further reckon with the phenomenon of Homer. For even if one grants (as few would) that the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* are in all respects literate productions, it seems hardly likely that literary art itself was a single man’s brainchild, sprung full-grown and mature like Athena from the head of Zeus. Since writing was not in use prior to the age of Homer,²² then presumably verbal artistry existed in oral times. Further, if quality in the verbal arts requires a particular technological base, then logically the history of literature ought to

have been one of progressive amelioration, as the possibilities inherent in literacy were increasingly recognized and exploited. Once again, the example of Homer confounds such a theory from the outset. In short, we might far more sensibly admit that quality is individually determined and that master poets express their talents in the medium that their historical circumstances have made available to them. The fact that few literates could even contemplate the task of improvising an epic poem merely attests to the lack of a lifetime's training in this particular skill.

Yet recognizing the existence of an oral artistry serves us little if we fail to appreciate its distinctive character. Though brilliant inroads into this problem have been laid during the past ten to twenty years, this remains the aspect of the oral-formulaic theory most in need of exploration. In brief, orality seems to promote what we could characterize as a poetics of *presence*. From the synchronic standpoint, the orally improvising poet is present to the performance of his own work and therefore to his own auditors. Further, both he and his audience are present to each same point of narration at the same moment of historical time. And they are both present to the structures through which they access that narration, currently known as "narrator" and "narratee," since the poet-performer actually speaks (narrates) in his own physical voice, and the audience has to structure its responses to the immediacy of his address if it is to understand the narration. From the diachronic standpoint also, the oral performance group participates "presently" in its tradition in a way that silent readers and authors do not. This claim may seem somewhat paradoxical, for in the concrete sense an oral culture's "tradition" does not exist at all: when an oral poet begins to sing or chant, the entire history of song has fallen into silence. Yet precisely this absence of comparands, precisely this lack of present "other" renderings, frees the oral poet from any obligation to valorize his own rendering by differentiating it from his tradition. Rather, his aim—and his vital social function—is to channel traditional lore through his own performance. Thus oral poetry tends to "mean" through traditional associations, through larger narrative or phraseological complexes held in memory by poet and audience and contextualizing the present rendering.

In both of these connections, the synchronic and diachronic, fully literate poetry typically differs from its oral counterpart in that distances intrude far more pervasively and begin to constitute

an important part of the structure of meaning. Poet and reader perform their respective acts privately and never see each other; the line that the poet composes is read a thousand years later ten thousand miles from its source. Since the story thus “speaks itself out” context-free from the printed page, the storyteller is less bound to his own voice and can experiment more freely with narratorial voices. His tradition is “present” to him in the sense that he can recover memory of it in all its specificity through visits to the library; yet the very encroachments of these other texts obligate him to discover his own distinctiveness, to individuate, to assert a degree of distance between his work and that of others. He and his tradition must remain on some level separate, even though he functions within and contributes to that tradition.

This dichotomy, though somewhat crudely delineated here,²³ may point out one of the tensions of the Middle English period. For while oral aesthetics in many ways hung on (as evidenced by the persistence of formulaic language), writing was at the same time precipitating a revolution in thought, in the universities and other levels of society. Thus the Middle English writer looks backward and authenticates his own discourse through tradition; yet more and more regularly his source is a written one, unlike the Anglo-Saxon poet, who usually says “I heard.”²⁴ Thus a Middle-English author might adopt narrative strategies suited to the “fleshing out” of live performance; yet serious artists like Chaucer would be aware of posterity and would want the naked text to be capable of bearing its own weight. Out of such conflicts, no doubt felt but never verbalized in abstract terms, there gradually emerged the concept of verbal artistry that rules to the present day.

Despite the quantity of research that has been surveyed over the course of these pages, in many respects the oral-formulaic study of Middle English literature is still in its infancy. For a full recognition of the oral element in the literature of this period will require nothing less than a rewriting of literary history in many of its aspects. In exposing the relativity of textual-based aesthetic principles often held to be universal, such a process may help us to recover a kind of literary experience that our culture has long forgotten.

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Notes

¹Milman Parry's pioneering studies of the Homeric *epos*, some of them published in French in the 1920's and early 1930's, are collected in translation in *The Making of Homeric Verse* (1971). The sheer quantity of subsequent scholarship in this line is reflected in Foley's recent bibliography of oral-formulaic scholarship (1985), which lists some 1800 items dealing with oral tradition in more than 90 language areas.

²In this perhaps overly ambitious attempt to extend my coverage up to within weeks of the time of writing, I have undoubtedly missed a certain amount of relevant scholarship, particularly from the last year or two of the period. Items thus overlooked will be cited in the bibliographies of forthcoming issues of *Oral Tradition*.

³This notion was later developed by Baugh (1959 and 1967), as discussed below.

⁴Two subsequent stylistic inquiries growing generally out of this scholarly tradition are those of Brink (1920) and Dunlap (1941), both of whom attend primarily to the level of vocabulary and diction.

⁵For a systematic presentation of this concept, see Fry 1967.

⁶See esp. his treatment of *Piers Plowman* in Chapter 9, "A Literary Echo of the Social Gospel," pp. 548-93.

⁷In his later volume *In Search of Chaucer* (1960:25-32), Bronson returns to this theme, criticizing the recent preoccupation with Chaucer's narrative "persona" on the grounds that this notion overlooks the reality of Chaucer's active presence in the context of oral performance.

⁸See Chapter 5, "Topics" (79-105).

⁹See, for example, Margaret Schlauch's casual reference to practices of oral delivery (1956:175-76) or G. V. Smithers' evocation of "oral corruption" (1957:11-12) in the transmission of the *Kyng Alisaunder* text.

¹⁰See also his "Bede's Story of Caedman: The Case History of an Anglo-Saxon Oral Singer" (1955a) and "The Theme of the Beasts of Battle in Anglo-Saxon Poetry" (1955b). In fact, Lord had already suggested the applicability of the oral-formulaic approach to Old English literature in his 1949 dissertation, later published in a revised version as *The Singer of Tales* (1960; see esp. 198-202). For more on this phase in the history of the theory, see Foley 1980b:60-62.

¹¹See, for example, Finlayson (1963) and Turville-Petre (1977), both discussed below.

¹²A brief discussion of the formulaic character of Middle English alliterative poetry prefaces the inquiry into the authorship of *St. Erkenwald* in Benson 1965b.

¹³Curschmann develops his views further, without reference to Middle English, in "The Concept of the Oral Formula as an Impediment to Our Understanding of Medieval Oral Poetry" (1977).

¹⁴Johnson does not cite Suzuki 1972.

¹⁵The major grammatical categories and the evidence presented in the article's six tables derive from Covella's dissertation (1972).

¹⁶Also of general relevance, though addressing itself minimally to English literature, is Saenger 1982.

¹⁷See "Oral Residue in Tudor Prose Style," in Ong 1971:23-47.

¹⁸Though none of the other articles work with Middle English literature to any appreciable degree, nonetheless they represent a new wave of thinking on orality-literacy matters and should engage considerable interdisciplinary interest.

¹⁹For more on "oral-derived" poetry, see Foley 1981.

²⁰Even the briefest reflection will suggest many reasons why orally transmitted poems might be written down; for a sampling, see Baugh 1967:31.

²¹On this point see Foley 1980c.

²²Of course I am ignoring Linear B and other kinds of writing irrelevant to this particular culture.

²³For a fuller discussion of this aspect of orality-literacy differences, see Parks 1986.

²⁴On this subject see Parks 1987.

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