Oral Traditional Approaches to Old English Verse

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Since the publication of Francis P. Magoun's (1953) seminal article on the formula in Anglo-Saxon narrative verse, oral traditional approaches in the field of Old English have undergone a number of transitions, in the process growing more sophisticated and varied in technique and application. Early excitement over the aptness of Parry-Lord "formulas" and "themes" has evolved in definition and purpose: not being content with spotting a formula or theme for its own sake, scholars now interpret and evaluate the highly nuanced oral-aesthetic strategies embodied in the "traditional phraseology" and "type-scenes" of Old English verse (see Renoir 1988; Foley 1991). Early misguided attempts to pour Old English poetry into a mold generated by the study of Homeric and South Slavic poetics have given way to oral-formulaic technique rooted in the specifics of a Germanic language and its idiosyncratic prosody (see Foley 1990). Furthermore, heated debate over oral versus literate provenance has subsided in favor of a more modulated conception of an oral-literate continuum or, to use a slightly different image, of genre- and poem-specific meshings of oral Germanic and literate Latin-Christian rhetorical devices and subject matter (see Renoir 1988; O'Keeffe 1990). From the contemporary reader's viewpoint one result of these studies is that passages of poems that once seemed either confusing or pleasantly mysterious have grown in coherence and power: optimally, with the filter of oral traditional interpretation these texts seem to flip from a slightly warped 2-D image to a high-tech 3-D surround-sound experience.

In addition to oral-formulaic theory, Old English scholars are drawing upon such approaches as Reader-Response theory, Ethnography of Speaking, Ethnopoetics, Performance theory, and Immanent Art in search of ways to interpret and respect the aesthetic vitality of the extant corpus of verse (see, for instance, Howe 1993 and Doane 1994). Recently, John Miles Foley (2002) has called attention to the promising application of ethnopoetic approaches developed along different lines by Dennis Tedlock (1972) and Dell Hymes (1981). Ethnopoetics may be summarized as the textual

preservation of both words and the meaning-rich formal and paralinguistic features employed in the performance of a poem, whether that performance is live or has already been encoded in a literary medium. In a field such as Old English, where the only available "performances" must be reconstrued from vellum "scripts," Hymes' structural approach is more applicable. Drawing on ethnopoetics, oral-formulaic theory, and immanent art, Foley creates a modern-English structural translation of Beowulf's opening lines, making apparent such aesthetically loaded features as half-lines, the prologue, an inset story, proverbs, and the sea voyage/ship burial scene. Hopefully this precedent will encourage similar attempts. Imagine the entire poetic corpus ethnopoetically reconfigured and retranslated to the best of our abilities! Such a project would no doubt graphically and acoustically wed many insights into the aesthetic resources being tapped by a poem's manipulation of traditional patterns and foster further research and debates.

At minimum, two paths employing ethnopoetics are forseeable: one would involve the creation of original-language editions referencing significant oral traditional cues, the other ethnopoetic translations into modern English. For example, a structural translation (or perhaps even better, structural translations) of the so-called "elegies" (*The Seafarer*, *The Wanderer*, *The Wife's Lament*, *Deor*, and others) would inevitably shed light on their unique synthesis of features from native Germanic genres and those derived from Christian-Latin influences.[1]

Due to confusion over issues such as genre, rhetorical purpose, number of speakers, and a poem's "back-story," the majority of the poems falling into the category of "elegy" have a wide variety of conflicting interpretations. Perhaps modern English translations foregrounding such oral-traditional strategies as riddling diction, proverbs, and the typical scenes of Exile, Beasts of Battle, and Joy in the Hall would not only contribute to richer and more cogent expositions, but also make more apparent the cognitive filters or interpretations that a specific scholar-translator applies to the Old English, whether at the micro-level of morphemes or at the macro-level of narrative. I can imagine, for starters, a collection of *Seafarer* poems ethnopoetically translated into modern English, each translation accompanied by its own justification. Any takers?

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[1] For a thorough consideration of the Exeter Book elegies, see Klink's 1992 edition.

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