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Prizes from the Borderlands

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What is “the state of the art” as regards the study of literature and oral tradition? That question will have as many answers as there are people to respond. The point most worth making may be that though the battle was lost, the war has been won. By “the battle,” what I mean is the heroic attempt made by Milman Parry, Albert B. Lord, and many other scholars during the mid-twentieth century to determine the mode of composition, whether oral or written, of the Homeric epics, *Beowulf*, and works of a similar character deriving from the ancient or medieval world. By “the war,” what I mean is the general effort to understand such works as examples of a kind of literary production that, while differing markedly from what most people in English departments are accustomed to thinking of as literature, has much in common with texts from various parts of the world that have been recorded through literate persons’ interventions into the ongoing practices of an oral tradition.

When texts of that latter kind are examined, they are often found to represent a kind of literature that has never existed before. They are hybrid texts whose character is deeply affected both by the normal practice of oral poetry and by the special conditions that are inherent in the process of collection and publication. The text may display all of the rhetorical features that are normally associated with oral composition, and it may be a showcase of modes of thought that are characteristic of a dominantly nonliterate mentality. In addition, however, the text may be longer than a record of a corresponding oral poem performed in an ordinary setting would ever be. Its narrative style may be more leisurely and its degree of ornamentation more elaborate. Some elements of a literate mentality (for example, a desire for architectural balance or inner consistency) may enter into the text as well. In short, such a text is a *tertium quid*: a new type of literature that has arisen as a kind of prize, displayed in the public arena after having been captured in the borderlands where literacy meets orality. It is that kind of orally derived poem that seems to provide the best analogy for

what we find when we read long, ornate, structurally coherent works like the *Odyssey* and *Beowulf*.

The war that has been won by the oral theorists is therefore not quite the one that Parry, Lord, and their followers envisioned when they first set out into the field, but it is still one that has been worth winning. As a result of the work of many oral theorists—including, in recent years, such Anglo-Saxonists as Karl Reichl in his impressive fieldwork with Central Asian singers, Katherine O’Brien O’Keeffe in her studies of scribal practice, Andy Orchard in his analyses of Old English oratorical prose, and the editor of this journal in his many investigations into “word-power”—the map delineating the terrain on which literary studies take place is no longer the same as it was fifty years ago. The integrated study of orality and literacy shows great promise at the present time.

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