

ORAL POETRY AND THE GERMANIC *HELDENLIED*

by Edward R. Haymes

“Über den eingreifenden Gegensatz von Mündlich und Schriftlich war die Forschung vor 100 Jahren in gefährlicher Unklarheit.”¹ When Andreas Heusler wrote these words in his article “Das Nibelungenlied und die Epenfrage” in 1919, researchers were still in this “dangerous” state. They had no clear conception of the differences between oral and written poetry. The work of Heusler and his followers did little to clarify the picture. Heusler simply assumed that the short lays, “*Lieder*,” were oral and that the long epics, “*Epos*,” were written.

The basic reason for his assumption lay in the fact that most scholars of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries believed that any poem in an oral tradition had to be composed in fixed form and passed from generation to generation by memorization. Heusler expressed this view in his inimitable style:

Alle diese Skope und Skalden, Spielleute, Ritter und Ritterfräulein haben vorbedachte, auswendig gelernte Lieder vorgetragen, eigene sowohl wie fremde: das eigene Schaffen vertrug sich durchaus mit dem Nichtimprovisieren und mit der bedingten Festigkeit des Liedkörpers.²

Heusler chose the lays of the Elder Edda as the typical model for the Germanic *Heldenlied*. According to his reasoning, they were short enough to be memorized and passed on verbatim. He ignored such large-scale works as *Beowulf*, because *Beowulf* was a long epic and did not fit into the scheme of his theory. It was assumed that *Beowulf* must have been composed by a literary poet and the question was thus resolved. Hermann Schneider simply refuses to entertain the question of large epic in the Germanic past.

Die staunenswerten Gedächtnisleistungen von Indern und Finnen, die viele Tausende von Epenversen mündlich weitergegeben haben, kennen die Germanen auf diesem Gebiet nicht. Wohl auf dem anderen, benachbarten der Erzählung in ungebundener Rede. Hier liegt die Stärke der Nordgermanen, zumal der Isländer, bei denen in jahrhundertlangem Reifen aus heimischen Voraussetzungen der Prosaroman, die Saga erwachsen ist. Sie war zu künstlerischer Rundung und mächtigem äußerem Ausmaß gelangt, ehe sich Feder und Pergament ihrer bemächtigten.³

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Heusler and Schneider represented the extreme point of a concept of heroic poetry that was diametrically opposed to that of the Romantic critics of the early nineteenth century. Far from being the anonymous product of the collective spirit of the people, heroic poetry was, like all later poetry, the individual product of a single responsible poetic personality. Heusler went so far as to deny categorically that *Heldensage* could exist at all "vor und außerhalb der Dichtung."⁴

Hans Kuhn took this last phrase as the title of a very important article, published in 1952 in the *Festschrift* for Felix Genzmer.⁵ Kuhn surveyed the existing heroic lays and found that they all assume a great deal more knowledge of the stories they are supposed to tell than they themselves give. In other words, the hearer of the Eddic lays had to know the story in advance in order to be able to make sense out of the lay being sung. Kuhn concluded that the oldest surviving heroic lays require knowledge of the heroes and of great parts of the story. The lay assumes the existence of the legend and not the other way around. The legends we have cannot have come into existence in lays of the type we have surviving.⁶ Kuhn assumed that heroic legend lived in the form of loose prose narrative, comparable perhaps to folk tales. He did not stress sufficiently that this conclusion made the songs of the Eddic type a derivative rather than a primary art form.

In spite of the damage done to it by Kuhn's article, the Heusler *Liedertheorie* still functions as the basis for all the descriptions of Germanic heroic poetry found in German histories of literature.

Much of the difficulty in understanding the pre-literate history of Germanic poetry arose because the authors of these theories had—at best—a sketchy knowledge of oral epic poetry. Their concept of memorized texts is something that derives almost completely from the literate mind. They thought in terms of actors learning their lines, forgetting that actors need a written text from which to work, a fixed version that does not change each time one reads it. In a world in which there is no written word, fidelity to content is as good as fidelity to the letter. Oral poets often claim to repeat "every word" of a song, but when several repetitions of their songs are recorded many discrepancies can be found. Are they thus liars? Of course not. Their concept of "word" is somewhat different from ours.⁷ If pressed to define a "word," most literate people would come up with a definition that somehow presupposes writing. The pre-literate poet associates "word" with a given content. He thus feels completely justified in saying that he is repeating "every word" when he means that he has repeated every bit of the thought-content.

Studies of various oral cultures, particularly the epic of the Yugoslav *guslari*, have shown that most oral epic poets compose their poems to a greater or lesser extent with each performance. Their art consists of appropriate combinations of word-groups in a formulaic language that allows

them to express almost any possible content of heroic poetry in metrically acceptable language. Detail is provided by the use of stereotyped scenes, and the plots belong to the entire tradition, each story being constantly formed and re-formed by the forces that govern the tradition as a whole. Thus no "fixed text" can exist in such an oral tradition.⁸

Whether the process involved in each performance can correctly be called "improvisation" or not is a moot point. Shorter songs in the Yugoslav tradition do seem to have considerable stability and long texts frequently have relatively stable runs—at least within the performance of a single singer. The careful examination of the Serbo-Croatian tradition initiated by Milman Parry and continued by Albert B. Lord has shown, however, that there is always some element of recomposition involved in each performance of oral epic. The living tradition provides its singers with the tools of composition during performance: formulaic language, stereotyped scenes, and traditional song plots and characters. Studies based on the work of Parry and Lord have worked on the assumption that formulaic language is the most reliable index of oral composition in texts from the past.⁹

Some recent studies have shown, however, that not all formulaic poetry is oral. Andrija Kačić-Miošić and Bishop Petar Petrović Njegoš were literary writers of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries respectively. They both wrote songs in conscious imitation of the epic of the *guslari* and the work of both poets is highly formulaic.¹⁰ Its formulaic density is not as high as that of poetry known to be oral, but it is as formulaic as most medieval poetry considered to be oral on the basis of formulaic content. On the face of it, this discovery would seem to make the oral-formulaic method useless for a determination of oral origin in medieval texts.

I would argue that this information actually extends the usefulness of the method. Neither Kačić nor Njegoš would have written formulaic poetry had there been no oral epic to imitate. Thus even texts we know to be literary, such as the *Heliand*, can provide evidence about the nature of the oral tradition from which they derived their language and style.¹¹

On the other hand, there is oral poetry which is not formulaic and not improvisational. Unless all historical claims for their origins are fraudulent, we must assume that the Old Norse skaldic poems were transmitted orally. The poems were in a rigid form, so highly complex that their being improvised in performance was unthinkable. These poems must have been transmitted by memorization between their composition and their transcription, a period of from two to four centuries in most cases. This consideration forces us to recognize at least two different kinds of oral poetry: improvisational and memorial.¹² We must take into account that the terms are not totally exclusive, but that they represent strongly differing techniques of composition and transmission. Improvisational poems are generally broad

(in the sense of Heusler's "epische Breite") and loose in their construction, containing a considerable amount of material that could occur in any song of similar content. The memorial poems tend to be short and to contain complex forms and/or striking poetic formulations. The greatest length possible in a purely memorial poem is probably in the neighborhood of the 144 lines of the *Höfuðlausn* by the skald Egil Skalla-Grímsson¹³ (although there are claims of much greater achievements, such as the learning of the entire Koran by illiterate Moslems). Improvisational epic does not seem to have any real limitations of length. Parry and Lord collected songs from one particularly talented singer that attained a length of twelve and thirteen thousand lines, although such songs would be impossible in the normal practice of the singer.¹⁴

If the Heusler-Schneider view of the Germanic *Heldenlied* were correct, we should expect to find short, non-formulaic songs with a complicated or striking style as the basic exemplars of the Germanic heroic epic. We find such songs in the late Old Norse *Edda*, but Kuhn has clearly demonstrated that it is almost unimaginable that Germanic heroic legend could have arisen in such songs and we must ask whether the evidence allows the assumption of such a form for the period of our earliest surviving poems (i.e., up to about A.D. 1000) at all. We find that all of the Germanic heroic poetry written down during this period is composed in a broad, loosely organized, and formulaic style. The style is perhaps best demonstrated by the Old English epics, but it is, as I shall try to show here, also characteristic of the Old High German *Hildebrandslied*.

The Old English fragment *Waldere* is often cited along with the equally fragmentary *Hildebrandslied* as examples of the Germanic heroic songs as Heusler imagined them. Heusler himself used the *Hildebrandslied* as an example in his *Lied und Epos in germanischer Sagendichtung*.¹⁵ Heusler saw the essential difference between *Lied* and *Epos* in the breadth and tempo of narration, not in the actual length of the work. We can thus ask reasonably whether the style of the sixty-nine line poem belongs in the category of *Lied* or *Epos*. At the same time we can observe whether the *Hildebrandslied* shows the characteristic loose and impersonal style we associate with improvisational epic or the tightly organized style we associate with memorial poetry.

After the opening reference to oral tradition "Ik gihorta dat seggen" ("I have heard that told") we find five lines describing the situation and the arming of the heroes. Except for "sunufatarungo" (an untranslatable compound of "father and son"), there is not a verse which could not apply to almost any single combat. After the general "iro saro rihtun" ("adjusted their armor"), each item of armor is enumerated in a separate half-line. The looseness of the text is further illustrated by the accidental inclusion of

"Heribrantes sunu" ("Heribrant's son") in a line that required a different completion.¹⁶ This half-line is typical of the sort of epithet added largely as padding in most improvisational oral epic traditions. Further breadth is produced by the variation "ferahes frotoro" ("wiser of mind") added to "her uuas heroro man" ("he was the older man"), both of which are, strictly speaking, gratuitous information, since we soon find out that Hildebrand is Hadubrand's father.

The body of the text is made up of speeches that show a similar breadth of poetic technique. What in true "liedhafte Knappheit" would have been reduced to a single word or half-line is often related in several different ways using the Germanic technique of variation. Hildebrand asks Hadubrand about his father and family and couches this in terms that go far beyond the simple necessity of "hwer sin fater wari" ("who his father was"). The half-line "firoo in folche" ("to what persons in the group") is totally unnecessary (except to provide an alliteration on *f*). One could also consider "chind in chunincriche chud ist mir al irmindeot" ("the peoples in the kingdoms known to me are all peoples"). When I suggest that these lines are unnecessary, I do not mean to suggest that they are ineffectual or that they somehow detract from the poetic effect. I wish merely to point out that the style is not pared to the bone, as most commentaries would have us believe.

Another criterion of epic breadth is the amount of material narrated. The *Hildebrandslied* consists of a single scene. The two warriors arm themselves, meet on the field, exchange words and fight. The fragment breaks off in the middle of the fight.

In contrast, the *Atlaqviða* is one of the broadest of the Eddic poems, but the first seventy lines contain far more epic material than all of the *Hildebrandslied*. In these lines Atli sends a messenger to Gunnar and his court. The messenger delivers Atli's invitation and Gunnar and Högni discuss whether or not they should accept it. In the course of their deliberations they discuss the possible significance of the wolf's hair their sister Gúðrún had wrapped (as a warning) around the ring she had sent as a gift. They accept the invitation, bid farewell to those remaining behind and make their journey to Atli's court. Within the first seventy lines there is still room for the welcome at Atli's court and an additional warning from Gúðrún. The "liedhafte Knappheit" is obvious in the sheer amount of ground covered. Most of the other songs of the *Edda* are even more compact, although few come as close as the *Atlaqviða* to real epic narration.

In addition to its broad looseness of narration, the *Hildebrandslied* possesses another characteristic that suggests its proximity to improvisatory epic. There are very few specific references that bind most of the narrative, particularly that of the arming and battle scenes, to the story of Hildebrand and Hadubrand. Most of the material could be used in almost any battle

situation. It is just such interchangeability that allows the improvisatory epic singer to use his epic materials in so many different situations and thus to reproduce so many different "songs" about different heroes and different events.

All of these considerations lead toward the conclusion that the *Hildebrandslied* does belong to the improvisatory oral-formulaic tradition that produced the Old English epics and the *Heliand*. The paucity of incident involved in the *Hildebrandslied* is the main factor in its brevity. It is not a compendium of some great epic story such as the fall of the Burgundians. It is a single tragedy, concentrated in one scene. It could be a part of a larger epic or it could be considered, as it usually is, as an independent story within the cycle of Dietrich von Bern. It is not, however, a short lay of the same type as the Eddic poems.

The poems of the *Edda* are certainly quite different from anything preserved from the period before the year 1000. In spite of attempts to spread their origins all the way back to the period of migration in the fourth, fifth, and sixth centuries, Icelandic scholars rightly see in them the product of a relatively unified origin in their present Old Norse form. Stefan Einarsson observes "It seems intrinsically more likely that the poems were composed in (Norway or) Iceland by a group of poets related in culture and vying with one another in treating topics and characters each from his own point of view."¹⁷ Assigning the Eddic poems in their surviving form to Norse poets does not deny the antiquity of their contents, but merely the antiquity of their poetic form. There is nothing in the Eddic poems comparable to the impersonal and typical tone of the narrative parts of the *Hildebrandslied*. Heusler's lumping together the *Hildebrandslied* with the Norse poems within the genre *Lied* on stylistic grounds is at least open to question.

The most serious objection to Heusler's simple division of Germanic heroic poetry into oral short *Lieder* and written long *Epen* is, of course, the presence of a broad, improvisatory oral formulaic style throughout the surviving corpus of Germanic poetry. Poems composed in this style were able to function as the origin and sole carriers of Germanic heroic legend, something the short lay of the Eddic style was never able to do. If we postulate early oral poems with the breadth and completeness of *Beowulf*, then we have no need to assume that prose narrative was the main carrier of Germanic *Heldensage* as Hans Kuhn was constrained to do. The short Eddic songs were a departure from the common Germanic style, not its best exemplars. We are thus forced to abandon the Eddic poems as the most faithful representatives of Germanic antiquity and turn to the surviving evidence of much earlier centuries. The evidence suggests that we can now place Heusler's *Liedertheorie* on the shelf next to Lachmann's.

NOTES

An earlier version of this paper was read at the 1974 Convention of the South Central Modern Language Association.

1. "100 years ago, researchers were in a state of dangerous unclarity about the fundamental opposition of oral and written." Andreas Heusler, *Kleine Schriften* (Berlin, 1943), p. 137.

2. "All of these scopos, skalds, minstrels, knights and knightly maidens performed thought-out, memorized songs, their own as well as those by others; their own creation was perfectly compatible with refraining from improvising and with the conditional stability of the body of song." *Ibid.*, p. 134.

3. "The astounding feats of memory of Indians and Finns, who have transmitted orally thousands of epic verses, were unknown to the Germanic peoples in this area. Certainly, however, in the other, neighboring area of narration in unbound speech [sic]. Here lies the strength of the North Germanic peoples, particularly of the Icelanders, with whom the prose novel, the saga developed in a centuries-long process of maturation out of native conditions. It reached artistic rounding and mighty external dimensions before pen and parchment gained sway over them." Hermann Schneider, *Das germanische Epos* (Tübingen, 1936), p. 3.

4. Review of *Germanische Heldensage* by Hermann Schneider, *Archiv für deutsches Altertum* 48 (1929): 161.

5. Hans Kuhn, "Heldensage vor und außerhalb der Dichtung," *Edda, Skalden, Saga: Festschrift zum 70. Geburtstag von Felix Genzmer* (Heidelberg, 1952), pp. 262-278. More easily available in *Zur germanisch-deutschen Heldensage*, ed. Karl Hauck (Darmstadt, 1965), pp. 173-194.

6. Kuhn, "Heldensage," p. 268.

7. The German language has two different words with the same singular *Wort*. The word with the plural *Wörter* means *word* in our sense as a typographical unit while the word with the plural *Worte* means something like the pre-literate notion of word, i.e., a larger idea-unit put into language.

8. One can see this clearly in the three versions of *The Song of Bagdad*, sung by Salih Ugljanin and collected by Milman Parry in *Serbo-croatian Heroic Songs*, ed. Albert B. Lord, vols. I and II (Cambridge, Mass., and Belgrade, 1953-54).

9. The research in this field is listed in my *Bibliography of Studies Relating to Parry's and Lord's Oral Theory*, Publications of the Milman Parry Collection: Documentation and Planning Series No. 1 (Cambridge, Mass., 1973). The standard work is Albert B. Lord, *The Singer of Tales* (Cambridge, Mass., 1960). Parry's pioneering work is collected in *The Making of Homeric Verse*, ed. Adam Parry (Oxford, 1972).

10. Preliminary statistics are quoted by Lord, "Homer as Oral Poet," *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* 72 (1968): 1-46. Further studies are at present in preparation to demonstrate the relative formulaic densities of various poets.

11. Cf. Robert L. Kellogg, "The South Germanic Oral Tradition," in *Franciplegius: Medieval and Linguistic Studies in Honor of Francis Peabody Magoun, Jr.*, ed. Jess B. Besinger and Robert P. Creed (New York, 1965), pp. 66-74.

12. These terms are derived from Alan Jabbour, "Memorial Transmission in Old English Poetry," *Chaucer Review* 3 (1969): 174-190.

13. *Egils Saga Skalla-Grímssonar*, ed. Sigurðar Nordal (Reykjavík, 1933), pp. 185-192.

14. The best of these have been published in vols. III and IV of the *Serbo-croatian Heroic Songs* (Cambridge, Mass., 1974).

15. (Dortmund, 1905), p. 22.
16. This may have been a slip on the part of the scribe, but even in this case it would indicate a looseness in construction.
17. Stefan Einarsson, *A History of Icelandic Literature* (New York, 1957), p. 21.