

The oral-formulaic structure of the Faroese

kvæði

By Wayne A. O'Neil

In its original form this paper was written for and orally presented at the fifty-fourth annual meeting of the Society for the Advancement of Scandinavian Study (Los Angeles, 1—2 May 1964). What follows is an extensive revision and expansion of that long-ago paper: revision and expansion the function of my being in the midst of finally revising a monograph on Old English poetry and thus heavily onto things oral-formulaic. But in the interim I have also been back to the Faroe Islands (Summer 1965), danced and sung the *kvæði* (at least the refrains) during Olavsøka, and met Chr. Matras, to whom this new essay is presented. Yet the paper is in many ways still as programmatic as it was in 1964; for though it is richer in its theoretical base and for its experience of the Faroes, Faroese, and the *kvæði*, it still follows from an intuitive and quite superficial examination of the *kvæði*. It still wants the support of a more exhaustive examination by someone who is further into the Faroese ballads than I.

So with a sense of the limitations of the present discussion in mind, let us begin. That we may begin with some of the same notions in mind, I wish to make it clear that I use the word 'oral' in the expression 'oral poetry' and 'oral-formula(ic)' in order to refer to a way of composition. Oral

poetry in this sense is not simply poetry performed aloud, more than poetry performed aloud out of memory; for in an oral poetic tradition, performance and composition are only theoretically separable. The oral poet composes *as* he performs just as the jazz musician composes as he performs. And both the oral poet (who in many cultures is also a musician) and the jazz musician come at their separate but similar tasks with a good deal of formal and informal training behind them. There are none but the limits of human endurance on their ability to keep improvising, though certainly the space and boundaries within which they improvise are capable of being well-defined.

Once we accept this sense of 'oral', a number of interesting propositions are entailed. For example, it immediately becomes vain and empty to compare a number of recordings of an oral poem in order to arrive at an 'original' version as one would seek out the *frumrit* of *Njála* or the original text of Chaucer's *Troilus*. For the nature of oral poetry is such that unless a scribe or tape-recorder is present at the first composition/performance of a new oral tale, the word-for-word shape of the premier composition/performance is lost forever, lingering on only in the imperfect memories of the audience, if at all. In fact it is possible that a first performance or an oral narrative poem is its worst performance — the material is new and somewhat strange; only slowly does the poet work the story into easy and satisfactory shape.

Indeed the notion 'original version' is not an interesting concept in an oral tradition. The poem, insofar as it can be said to exist apart from performance is an abstraction like the underlying structures of sentences. It is a type: actualizations of it, its performances, are the tokens. Of course it can happen (especially as an oral tradition lives on into a period of more than utilitarian literacy or comes into contact with a literate tradition, either one that coexists within the same culture or an intrusive one) that one performance of an oral poem will get written down and circulated and thus enter into an active

manuscript tradition. This seems to have been the case with the *Chanson de Roland*.¹ And it is possibly the case with some of the texts of the *kvæði*. Problems of this sort are peculiar to certain, mostly Western and European, oral traditions and not characteristic of them all.

New and significant ways of looking at oral poetry grew up in the late twenties and early thirties of this century, becoming generally available with the publication of A. B. Lord's *Singer of tales* in 1960. Professor Lord, building on the work of his teacher and predecessor, the late Milman Parry, has in this very valuable study provided us with a great deal of insight into the nature of the oral poetic language of Serbo-croatian narrative poetry. Thus it seems clear that each recomposition of a poem is a unique bringing together of the abstract tale and the poetic grammar of Serbo-croatian. The formula, the oral formula, is the most striking characteristic of this poetic grammar. It is the basic semantic unit out of which the poem is built.

It is certainly unfortunate that Parry and Lord chose to use the term 'formula', for they mean it to cover more than the traditional epithet like 'bright-eyed Athene', etc. or the set phrase like 'Béowulf maþelode, bearn Ecgþéowes', etc., though these are certainly included in their expanded sense of the term. Still it is a useful term and can be well-defined to mean more than a verbal handle onto which the poet grasps while he tries valiantly to remember what he should be doing with the story. Formulas are the tiles out of which the poet creates his entire verbal mozaic. More precisely, using Cedric H. Whiteman's definition which leaves enough open so that it can be accommodated to a wide variety of oral poetic traditions:

»a formula . . . is a group of words, a semantic unit, identified with a metric demand and which has a nonanalytic meaning in a way that an idiom does.«²

¹) See A. B. Lord, *Singer of tales* (Cambridge: Harvard University press, 1960) for discussion of this matter.

²) *Homer and the Homeric tradition* (Cambridge: Harvard University

Now what Parry and Lord found to be true of Serbocroatian narrative was that it was totally pervaded by formula: there was little that was not formulaic. And further investigation has led to the following theory of oral poetry and the not obvious or necessary corollary: all oral narrative poetry is formulaic; all formulaic narrative poetry is oral.

The ramifications of this statement are far reaching. In fact Parry had originally searched out a living oral tradition for investigation in order to seek confirmation of his hypothesis that the peculiar nature of Homeric poetic language was a function of oral composition. He was thus finally in a position to say that what he had learned from a living oral poetic tradition and what he knew of written narrative poetry could be applied to narrative poetic traditions about which there was no compositional knowledge. Working backwards from a poem's form it became possible to learn how it must have been composed.

Lord's book, then, is not simply a study of south Yugoslavian narrative: it is a discussion of the general properties of oral narrative poetry, and along the way he deals not only with Homer but also with *Béowulf*, the *Chanson de Roland*, the medieval Greek *Digenis Akritas*, and the *Nibelunglied* (the last only in an original and unpublished version of the book). It has led to a rather large amount of significant work on Old English poetry, Old French, Old Irish, and some little in Old Norse, so that, e. g., it is now clear to many scholars that nearly all of the Old English poetic corpus is formulaic, hence orally composed.

This long preamble finished, it is my purpose here to turn

press, 1958), p. 109. In a recent thesis (*Formula and collocation* [University of Sydney (Australia), 1969] — soon to be published [revised] by the University of Wisconsin press), Terry R. Threadgold has sharply criticized all proposed definitions of 'oral formula'. But it is in general true that primitives in any formal system are best loosely and intuitively defined. It should be added that her 'collocation' (out of the London school of linguistics of Firth and Halliday) is as vacuously defined a notion as man can find.

this sort of examination loose onto one text of *Sjúrdar kvæði*: not (certainly) to answer the question of whether or not this ballad was orally composed, for this is hardly an interesting question to raise in connection with the *kvæði*, rather like asking whether man is innately predisposed to learn to speak: of course he is, of course they are; but rather I want to bring out some difficulties with the theory as it now stands and to make some suggestions for sharpening it. The *kvæði* raise questions that need answering.

The Faroese *kvæði* are narrative ballads remarkable for their length: the eight complete versions of *Sjúrdar kvæði*, for example, all run between four hundred and six hundred and seventy ballad stanzas in length. They are remarkable also in that they are a living preservation of the matter of the *Völsunga-saga* and other *fornaldar-saga* materials and of the medieval ring dance — danced most vigorously at *Ólavsøka*: the end of — July national celebration.

Whether or not the tradition is compositionally alive, i. e., whether or not a performance is a unique bringing together of tale and formula, is not clear. Certainly, it is not dead in the total way the Icelandic *rímur* tradition is, where fixed texts prevail and improvisation is no more. But *kvæði* texts do circulate so that the notion of a fixed text does compete with the older notion of free improvisation: new tokens of established types are probably few. The creative dimension of the tradition is dying; the performance still lives.

Consider now the evidence for the formulaic structure of the *kvæði*. For this purpose I have chosen (more or less at random) a short passage (ten stanzas: 61—70) from the first subsection (*Regin smiður* in the printed text) of the Ba text of *Sjúrdar kvæði*. I chose this version because its headnote implies that it was gathered in the field and gathered early: in 1821 from Daniel Joensen of Skúvoy. I have then marked the text with various kinds of underlining according to the conventions that have been developed in studies of this kind: If a given line or line segment is found repeated at least one

other time (with only minor [mostly inflectional] change tolerated) satisfying the same metric and semantic demands in the Ba text of *Sjúrdar kvæði*, it is considered a formula and underscored with a solid line. If two lines or line segments in the text are quite similar and contrast only in that one significant element is different in the two, what is common to them is underscored with a solid line; what contrasts, with a broken line. This line or line segment is then considered to be part of a formulaic system. Note that a line can be both a formula and part of a formulaic system. If more than a chance number of exact or partial repetitions is found in a passage in the context of the full text, the poem is held to be formulaic, hence oral. Clearly the following marked passage indicates the heavily formulaic character of *Sjúrdar kvæði*:

I. An analyzed passage from text Ba of *Sjúrdar kvæði*.

- 1.61.1 Regin gongur at sterkum stiðja, leggur jarn í eld,
 .2 tíggju næturnar hevði hann tað í gerð.
- 1.62.1 Tíggju næturnar hevði hann tað í gerð,
 .2 tá var snari Sjúrdur riðin har á ferð.
- 1.63.1 Sjúrdur er riðin fyri dyrnar fram,
 .2 Regin kastar øllum smíði, hann tók sær svørð í hand.
- 1.64.1 'Ver vælkomín, Sjúrdur, smíðað havi eg svørð,
 .2 'bilar tær hvørki hjarta ei hug, tú verður til víggja før.
- 1.65.1 'Smíðað havi eg svørðið virðiliga væl,
 .2 'bæði skalt tú vega við tí jarnið so sum stál.
- 1.66.1 'Smíðað havi eg svørðið skært og so reint,
 .2 'bæði skalt tú vega við tí jarn so sum stein.'
- 1.67.1 Sjúrdur gongur at sterkum stiðja, høggur við ein fart:
 .2 'Sundur mítt svørðið í tógva lutir brast.

- 1.68.1 'Deyðin ert tú, Regin smiður, av mær verð,
 .2 'fyri tú hevur svikið meg í váknagerð.
 1.69.1 'Smíða skalt tú mær annað, skal tað verða so,
 .2 'hojr tað, reystur Regin smiður, lív skalt tú ei fá.'
 1.70.1 'Smíði eg tær annað, verður tað ikki so,
 .2 'hjartað úr orminum tað leggi eg treytir á.'

The supporting evidence for the formulaic structure of the preceding passage is as follows:³

- 1.61.1: see 1.71.1; 1.67.11; 1.77.11; 1.78.11; 3.4.12
 1.61.2: see 1.71.2; 1.62.1, 1.72.1
 1.62.1: see 1.72.1; cf. references under 1.61.2
 1.62.2: see 1.72.2; 1.81.11; 1.90.11; 2.85.11; 2.34.22; 2.41.22
 1.63.1: see 1.53.1; 1.73.1; 1.19.12; 2.54.12; 2.55.12; 2.57.12
 1.63.2: see 1.37.11; 1.53.2; 1.73.2
 1.64.1: see 1.54.11, 1.74.1, 2.103.11; 3.15.11; 1.66.11;
 1.75.11; 1.76.11
 1.64.2: see 1.74.2
 1.65.1: see 1.57.1; 1.58.11; 1.75.1; 1.76.11
 1.65.2: see 1.58.2; 1.57.2; 1.75.2; 1.76.2
 1.66.1: see 1.76.1; 1.58.1; cf. 1.65.1
 1.66.2: see 1.76.2; cf. 1.65.2
 1.67.1: see 1.78.1; cf. 1.61.11
 1.67.2: see 1.15.2; 1.13.11; 1.13.12
 1.68.1: see 1.60.11; 2.186.11; 2.187.11; 2.188.11
 1.68.2: see 1.96.2; 1.97.1
 1.69.1: see 1.70.1; cf. 1.65.11
 1.69.2: see 1.39.11; 2.12.11; 2.17.11; 3.41.11; etc.
 1.70.1: see 1.69.11; cf. 1.65.11
 1.70.2: nothing

³) Text Ba of *Sjúrdar kvæði* is from N. Djurhuus and Chr. Matras, edd., *Føroya kvæði: Corpus carminum faeroensium* I (Copenhagen, 1951—63), pp. 34—57. *Sjúrdar kvæði* consists of three parts: *Regin smiður* (= 1); *Brynhildar tåttur* (= 2); *Høgna tåttur* (= 3). Thus a reference like 2.74.1 refers to the first two lines of the 74th stanza of *Brynhildar tåttur*.

But let us now consider the passage more closely, peeking beneath the comfortable and reassuring underlining. For certain matters are curious indeed. Two, at least, are of first importance. First, note the range of the supporting evidence just presented: here we find that the formulaic support shows very little spread. Thus within the range of ten stanzas in either direction the support is very full; outside that range there is very little. Second, note that there is very little evidence for the formulaic structure of the last third of this passage. This is because here lies precisely the difference between this run of stanzas and the next which deals with *Sjúrdur's* second visit to Regin's smithy. For the next time around the sword doesn't break and *Sjúrdur* doesn't threaten, etc. This is one significant change in a rather large scale piece of incremental repetition. Beginning with stanza 1.71, 1.61—67 1/2 are repeated only minimally changed (e.g., 'ten' becomes 'thirty', etc.), but then all is different as the story moves on.

It seems, then, that we can call the *kvæði* formulaic in the sense of Parry and Lord only if we are willing to accept the triviality of so saying. That we can underline and tot up an impressive number of formulas obscures the general fact that the formulaic consistency of the *kvæði* is much different from the thoroughgoing formulaic structure of *Béowulf*, say, or of the Serbocroatian narrative.⁴

Are the *kvæði*, then, since they are hardly formulaic in the sense of Parry and Lord, not the result of oral composition? Or since that conclusion is patent nonsense, is there something basically wrong with considering the Faroese ballad from a too narrow reading of Parry and Lord? The latter is a large question for which I shall attempt only a partial answer. The answer is yes.

As long ago as 1918, Boor noted that it was a characteristic of *kvæði* style that it had not stopped with the formulaic line:

⁴) Formula counting is foolish, tricky business, full of pitfalls. See my »Another look at oral poetry in *The seafarer*«, *Speculum* 35.596—600 (1960).

present in large numbers are formulaic stanzas and runs of stanzas.⁵ Some of what Boor referred to is merely the grand kind of incremental repetition discussed above; the simpler kind, characteristic of the Danish and English ballad, is present too. But important and significant are the single stanzas that appear again when the story calls for them; for example:

II. A. The death of Fáfnir and the death of Guðrun's son:

1.108 Tað var Sjúrdur Sigmundarson, sínum svørði brá,
hann kleyv henda frænarorm sundur í lutir tvá.

3.32 Tað var Hegnir Júkason, sínum svørði brá,
hann kleyv Guðrunar unga son sundur í lutir tvá.

B. Sjúrdur and Hegnir (unga) are born and grow up:

1.28 & 30 Sveipar hon hann í klæði rein, tá hann kom í heim,
Sjúrða bað hon nevna tann gævilega svein. . . .

Hann veks upp hjá síni móður, Gud gav honum vekst,
meiri veks hann í ein mánað enn onnur børn í seks.

3.101 & 108 Sveipar hon hann í klæði rein, tá hann kom í
heim,

Hegnir bað hon kalla tann gæviliga svein. . . .

Hann veks upp í ríkinum, Gud gav honum vekst,
meira veks hann í ein mánað enn onnur børn í seks.

Certainly such stanzas fit at least Whitman's definition of the formula: semantic units identified with a metric demand. For clearly the metric unit of ballad is the stanza — perhaps this is where we should look to define its formulaic unit. Importantly, also, the stanza is the significant structural difference between Old English poetry, Serbocroatian, and Homeric narrative, on the one hand, and Faroese *kvæði* and Icelandic

⁵) Helmut de Boor, *Die faroischen Lieder des Nibelungenzyklus* (Heidelberg, 1918), pp. 8—9, cited but misinterpreted by F. P. Magoun, Jr. »Bede's story of Caedman«, *Speculum* 30.52 (1955).

rímur, on the other. In Old English poetry the rhythmic unit is the half-line or verse: the formulaic unit is also the half-line.

Eddic poetry may well be the bridge from the earlier Germanic tradition to the later Faroese one. For it is there that we find occasional stanzaic repetition, like for example the first stanza of *Baldrs draumar* and the fourteenth of *Pryms-keviða*:

Senn váru Æsir allir á þingi, etc.

This sort of repetition is at a minimum in the *Edda*, the half-line is there still the formulaic and rhythmic unit. But perhaps it was from the *Edda* and from continental ballad that the formulaic stanza of the Faroese *kvæði* was generalized. A thoroughgoing examination of the *kvæði* and their rough Icelandic counterpart, the *rímur*, may yield up the answer and get us to see the formulaic structure of these poems aright.

ÚRTAK

Tað er eyðsæð, at færoysku kvæðini eru munnlig yrking, kortini bera tey ikki til sjóndar ta formils-bygging og tað býti av formlum, ið eyðkend eru fyri munnligan frásagnarskaldskap í siðaarvi aðrastaðni. Tað tykist tí, sum ástøðini hjá A. B. Lord og M. Parry um munnligar formlar eru ov trongt sett til tess at hava gildi fyri byggingina í kvæðunum. Í færoyskum kvæðum ger eindin av ørindislag og orðalag ørindið og ikki reglan ella hálvreglan.