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Hybrid Poetics in Old English Verse

Beyond an Old/New Dichotomy

How we imagine the poetics of the Old English literary tradition will either limit or expand the range of interpretive possibilities. In one imagined scenario the formulaic systems, themes, and typescenes of oral tradition persist in Old English poems because they suit nostalgic or antiquarian interests or because appreciation for homegrown traditions supports their ongoing use, even though they sometimes seem, to use Tolkien's word, "incongruent." In another scenario—the one that I explore in this book—authors writing in Old English create a rich interweaving of oral, written, and ritual traditions, which showcases their skill and pleases and informs their audiences. A purposeful mingling of the signifying strategies of these traditions creates imaginatively complex works of verbal art.

How we imagine the poets and audiences of the past can profoundly shape how we interpret their work. I thus want to resist a developmental model that ascribes "newness" to literacy and "oldness" to oral tradition. An oral tradition's expressive features should not be treated as signs of transitional development toward a fully fledged written tradition, but rather as dynamic components of multilayered, hybrid poems. The characterization of orality as a definitively older (but ongoing) mode of composition can be traced to Francis P. Magoun Jr.'s case for the influence of oral tradition on Old English poetry, where he characterizes Christian stories as "novel,"

compound phrases for the Christian God as “young,” and the act of writing as something new and relatively tangential to oral composition in performance.¹ To one degree or another, subsequent scholarship associated oral tradition with Germanic and heroic poetry in contrast to the written biblical and allegorical verse (which adapted oral-traditional formulas and themes to Christian subject matter). In the past few decades the biases that generated these categories have been deconstructed, yet even a scholar as sensitive as Andy Orchard resurrects them (just as many others do).²

Orchard, who has written extensively on oral-formulaic and acoustic devices in Old English poetry, states in the collection *Anglo-Saxon Styles* that Cynewulf’s verse is a “combination of old and new,” the former being “the native, secular, vernacular, and ultimately oral tradition,” the latter being the “imported, Christian, Latinate” tradition (“Both Style” 271).³ He mentions the intersection of two cultures (Latinate and Germanic), two ideational systems (Christian and heroic), two poetic styles (for example, literate allusion within a textual community and oral-traditional phraseology), and two time periods (new and old). The naturalization of these homologies within scholarly interpretation deserves interrogation. One danger in stressing a dichotomy between oral and literate traditions is that notions of “old” and “new” accrue to each tradition and, thereby, legitimate interpreting the presence of oral-traditional style as something that has been largely assimilated, perhaps nostalgically, to literacy as a practice and to written text as a product.

More generally, phrases such as “residual oral features” and “transitional orality” suggest that instead of oral and written communication intersecting productively, the oral necessarily gives way to the written.⁴ Walter Ong uses “transitional orality” to describe an early phase of writing within a culture, where writing remains marginal and functions only to support oral-traditional practices (or “primary orality”).⁵ Although “transitional orality” aptly represents the role of writing in certain cultural contexts, it is easily overgeneralized. The terms “residual” and “transitional” also run the danger of depicting oral-traditional features as the dying embers of an outmoded cultural practice. “Transitional” writing indicates a developmental stage in a teleological progression toward writing that is less oral and more literate. Although, it has not always been used in this manner, “oral-derived” can signify a deracination of oral-traditional expressive features from the contexts in which they derive their meaning.⁶ Such terms

can obscure the likelihood that, for the Anglo-Saxons, the verbal arts of oral and written traditions were communicative resources on more or less equal footing.

I take the position that oral traditions—in such forms as the narration of inherited and new stories, proverbs, lyric songs, medicinal and cooking recipes, healing incantations, riddles, and jokes—continued unabated, although continuously changing, until at least the mid-nineteenth century in all corners of the British Isles. (Jack Goody notes that “near-universal literacy was achieved in Europe during the last quarter of the nineteenth century” [*Myth* 43].) Depending on the period, these traditions resounded in Irish, Welsh, Old Norse, Old English, Middle English, modern English, Scottish, Old French, Anglo-French, and probably Latin. Their audiences, tradition bearers, and genres varied across regions and time, and they were influenced by each other and by written traditions.⁷ Some scholars have deemed the textual evidence for an oral tradition, such as recurrent phraseology and themes, to be the echoes of an ancient but increasingly marginalized practice that writing supplanted during the Anglo-Saxon period.⁸ The reader does not need to agree with one viewpoint or another about the prevalence of living oral traditions, specifically an Old English tradition in Anglo-Saxon England, to profit from an analysis of hybrid poetics in Old English texts. Such a reader may still hear “echoes” of an oral tradition in written texts, but the echoes will necessarily be fainter if one presumes that Anglo-Saxon audiences no longer had a point of comparison: memories of traditional verbal art being created and recreated by a tradition bearer.⁹

In *The Aesthetics of Nostalgia*, Renée Trilling offers an alternative approach to thinking about Old English poetics, using the image of the constellation as it has been developed by Walter Benjamin to describe the links made between notions of the past and present: “[C]oncepts, rather than stars, appear to the critic in such a way that their relative arrangement is suddenly perceived as meaningful and becomes an image, or an idea” (31).¹⁰ She explains that this critical mode, which she perceives at work in Old English poems, “skirts binaries” (31) and allows the past to resonate in the present. Attributing the stylistic characteristic of polyvalence to an “aesthetics of nostalgia,” Trilling builds upon and revises Fred Robinson’s discussion of the polysemy of heroic diction, which he says points simultaneously to a heroic past and Christian present (8–10). For Trilling, the

formal features of Old English verse conjure “a dialectical notion of history that ultimately resists the totalization of a single perspective, whether Christian or pagan” (9). Such resistance warrants using nostalgia (in the Benjaminian sense) as a heuristic device for investigating how Old English verse moves between the poles of Christian teleology and a vernacular dialectic. Although Trilling does not apply this approach directly to the notion of oral tradition in relationship to a written tradition (see, for example, 37n18), she largely does not characterize the “traditional” features of Old English poetry as signs of the past. By implementing the image of the “constellation” as an interpretive tool, she frames stylistic features associated with both the oral-derived (her term) and the written as aspects of a “vernacular historiography” that relates past events to the present moment (23).

We can apply the image of the constellation to the rhetorical practices of oral, written, and ritual traditions by seeing these as resources for poets that have little association with old versus new and pagan versus Christian. Instead, I argue that writers conceived of these resources as a communicative (and interpretive) inheritance, verbal riches with which they could craft their poems. These riches include: heroic diction and idioms with metonymic signification from oral tradition; the practice of allegorization and finding metaphors in literal description from written, literate tradition; and—in parallel with oral-traditional metonymy—metonymic signification of words, gestures, bodily postures, images, and concepts from ritual tradition.

Poets played with written, oral, and ritual expressive strategies to enrich the craft of their poems and appeal to a sensibility that values the positional interleaving of rhetorical gestures, images, structures, and ideas, rather than symmetry, hierarchies of value, the illusion of effortlessness, and other traits admired in the ancient classical system.¹¹ Anglo-Saxon poems could appeal not only to the eyes and the ears of Anglo-Saxon audiences but also to diverse notions of what constitutes a signifier and how such signs “sing” with multilayered meaning. To provide a foundation for the discussions in subsequent chapters of specific oral-traditional, literate, and ritual expressive strategies, I present an overview of terminology and concepts related to each of these strategies. As we will see, not all verbal expressions engage their audiences in the same manner.

Expressive Strategies of Oral, Written, and Ritual Traditions

Expressions in oral and literate traditions can differ because their modes of creation, presentation, and reception differ. Generally speaking, written communication in a primarily literate paradigm requires text-based clues that guide readers in the act of interpretation, from punctuation and spacing to clarifications and examples. In contrast, the audience of an oral account uses, among other things, the performance context and vocal delivery as a guide. An oral-aural audience may be able to interrupt the speaker for clarification, but usually the mode of presentation, taking place over a specific duration of time, follows a linear path. In contrast, solitary readers have the luxury of self-pacing, rereading, cross-referencing, and reflection.¹² Thus, literacy can support practices that are less common when oral tradition is the primary mode of communication.

In early medieval textual communities, literate monastics became acquainted with a tradition of biblical commentary that attuned them to such notions as intertextuality, authoritative writings, textual sourcing, and typological connections within Old and New Testament narratives.¹³ Monastics were trained to engage in multiple levels of interpretation, such as those described and practiced by St. Augustine of Hippo and St. Bede.¹⁴ For example, Augustine explains in book 3 of *De doctrina christiana* that the reader of scripture should search for “an interpretation contributing to the reign of charity” (3.15.23): a literal interpretation may suffice, but more obscure passages of the Bible require figurative interpretation. The influence of Augustine upon the interpretive practices of early Christian writers, including Bede, reinforced the treatment by Anglo-Saxons of narratives in both biblical and extra-biblical stories as rich ground for the creation of analogies and metaphors.

At the same time, authors or scribes composing in classical poetic meter of the Old English vernacular continued to use oral-traditional expressions, such as one finds even in the simple “The Lord’s Prayer I” (also titled *Exeter Lord’s Prayer*), with its somewhat unconventional meter.¹⁵ Here one finds, for example, the verse *folca waldend* (10b), an apparent product of the common formulaic system “[x]-(in the genitive plural) *waldend*” (ruler of [x]-plural), which occurs at least seventy-seven other times in the verse corpus.¹⁶ The variable term [x] bears the alliteration in the line, making this type of verse system flexible enough to suit many contexts. In this

case, the word *folca* (of the people) alliterates with *freedom* (freedom) in the previous half-line, metrically linking humanity to the Christian God's gift of spiritual freedom.

Recurrent but flexible phraseology forms the verbal fabric of oral-traditional communication. It requires far less contextualization than written expressions, because idiomatic meanings are tacitly understood in relationship to the tradition. For this reason, John Miles Foley in his "immanent art" theory describes traditional phraseology (including formulaic verses, collocations, and echoic lexemes), themes, typescenes, and ring structures as "metonyms"; they refer for their greater meaning to the "tradition," or what I prefer to imagine as the experiential knowledge of the tradition's participants.¹⁷ In a similar manner, liturgical gestures and verbalizations receive little explanation in the context of their enactment because participants know that every aspect of the liturgy is "heavy" with significance in relationship to Christian textual and ritual traditions, as well as the participants' personal experiences.

Oral Tradition

Interpretation of Old English poetry has long benefitted from knowledge about general principles of poesis in oral traditions. Scholarship on oral poetics since Magoun's 1953 article, "Oral-Formulaic Character of Anglo-Saxon Narrative Poetry," has illuminated the oral-connected phraseology, themes, and typescenes that permeate Old English literature¹⁸ and the scribal practices that presumably resulted in written oral-traditional verse.¹⁹ Oral-formulaic studies have extended the comparative research of Milman Parry and Albert Lord on South Slavic and Ancient Greek verse to Old and Middle English literature, while enlarging the scope of the discussion. Questions about the role of phraseological systems, themes, typescenes, and other structured/structuring devices have moved beyond Lord and Parry's query "how is it possible to create lengthy epics on the spot?" to ask "how do these devices bring aesthetic significance to a poem?" Without a doubt, the exploration of the "how" of oral poetry in the written medieval manuscript has enabled my own discussions of hybrid forms.

What distinguishes oral-traditional verse so profoundly from written verse is the simultaneity of composition, dissemination, and reception.²⁰ The poetic register of oral verse reflects the mnemonic needs of