

IS THE “FORMULA” THE KEY TO ORAL COMPOSITION?

EDWARD R. HAYMES

IN A VOLUME dedicated to the memory of John Miles Foley, it may seem inappropriate to question one of the foundations of oral theory, but Foley taught us that we should always question our sources of knowledge. In fact, the last volume to carry his name explored the use of new media to our understanding of oral theory.¹ In the volume before that, he exhorted us to *read* oral poetry.² On the cover was a singer “reading” a slip of paper on which the song could never be written (we are told that the singer is illiterate in any case).³ In the following, I would like to add what a medievalist has learned about oral theory in a lifetime devoted to it.

“Oral poetry, it may be safely said, consists entirely of formulas, large and small, while written poetry is never formulaic, although writing poets may occasionally repeat themselves or cite other poets to achieve a certain rhetorical or literary effect.”⁴

With these words, Francis Peabody Magoun, Jr. drove the comparative study of tradition-based epic into a dead end, one from which it has yet to escape. The result has been a general loss of interest in the comparative method in general and oral theory in particular, at least among medievalists. In many circles, the expression “oral-formulaic” or the names Milman Parry and Albert Bates Lord bring only a tired smile of indulgence. While this may not be the case in the areas addressed by this collection, it is certainly a serious problem for the medievalist comparatist who wants to make use of oral theory in an attempt to understand the forces shaping early medieval literature. It seemed to me worthwhile to raise a question among friends of the theory that has dogged me for almost fifty years: is the formula really the key to oral form?

Parry based his work on a long tradition of formula studies of the Homeric epics and it was nothing new when he observed a “diction formulaire” in the Homeric language.⁵ His methods, however, were new, a direct result of the more scientific approach that had entered philology through the work of the new grammarians. Parry’s observation of the thrift and extension of the noun–epithet formula in Homer led him to a new explanation for the frequency of formulas in tradition-based epic poetry. The epithets were useful to the poet in producing Homeric lines. He observed that for each metrical position in the hexameter line there was only one epithet for each noun, that is, the metrical situation determined the choice of epithet. He applied the Darwinian theory of natural selec-

1 Foley, *Oral Tradition and the Internet*.

2 Foley, *How to Read an Oral Poem*.

3 Foley, *How to Read an Oral Poem*, 2.

4 Magoun, “Oral-Formulaic Character,” 447.

5 Parry, *L’Épithète Traditionnelle dans Homère*, 27.

tion to explain how such an extensive system could come into existence. He backed it up with a *reductio ad absurdum*; he imagined a writing poet culling the most suitable epithet in each case out of hundreds of manuscripts of hexameter poetry. He reasoned that only an oral tradition could produce such a system, because only the pressure of constant oral composition would provide the proving ground for the formulaic language through which less suitable epithets would fall out of use and only the best, the “fittest,” would survive. The formula was thus something other than an ornamental epithet; it was the tool of a generations-old school of oral epic composition. Parry’s proof was logically complete before he turned to a living oral tradition to show that such a thing was possible in the real world. Influenced by Matija Murko, he sought confirmation of his Homeric hypothesis in South Slavic oral epic.

By linking this new observation with the old term “formula,”⁶ Parry established a new meaning for the word, one which, like Lord’s use of the term “theme,” has led to much misunderstanding. It is clear from Lord’s use of the term in his 1986 review of recent work on the formula that he (like Parry) had reversed the common use of the term so that formula could apply only to a phrase used in oral poetry while repetition was used to refer to rhetorical or expressive passages repeated for effect in written poetry.⁷ There are thus two levels of confusion. On the one hand, the term “formula” has a usage in literary studies that is not the same as that demanded by oral theory; on the other hand, the emphasis on fixed formulas and exactly repeated phrases has led, in my opinion, to serious distortions of the actual functioning of oral composition. This will become clear as we sketch the fate of the term “formula” through the history of oral-formulaic studies.

Parry turned to the South Slavic epic in order to find a living confirmation of his theory in actual oral performance. As we have seen, his theory explained the noun–epithet combinations as the product of an oral tradition. The hypothesis he derived from this assumed that the entire Homeric epic was made up of systems of formulas comparable in extension and thrift to the noun–epithet system with which he had begun. He defined the formula as “*a group of words, which is regularly employed under the same metrical conditions to express a given essential idea.*”⁸ This definition poses a number of problems, both philological and psychological, but it remains the “official” formula definition of the comparative branch of the oral poetry school.⁹ Its application was even more damaging to the validity of oral studies than the problematic definition itself. Parry and others set out to demonstrate that the poetry in question was totally formulaic.

6 De Boor, “Formel,” in *Reallexikon der deutschen Literaturgeschichte*, 367–68, offered a definition that can stand for the world outside the Parry–Lord interests: “Wir erkennen in der Formel die von der Allgemeinheit anerkannte und übernommene und dadurch traditionell gewordene Prägung eines Gedankens oder Begriffes, die in derselben oder annähernd der gleichen Fassung in verschiedenen Zusammenhängen jederzeit wiederkehren kann” (We recognize in the formula the minting of a thought or concept that has become recognized and appropriated by a general public, that has thereby become traditional, and that can recur in different contexts in the same [or nearly the same] form). Unless otherwise noted, all translations are mine.

7 Lord, “Perspectives on Recent Work,” 491–93.

8 Parry, “Epic Technique of Oral Verse-Making,” 272; emphasis his.

9 Rogers, “Crypto-Psychological Character.”

In order to do this, they had to find proof in the remaining corpus of comparable poetry. Parry was willing to let a single repetition of a group of words within the Homeric corpus stand as proof that a given phrase was formulaic, as long as it was in the same metrical position. With the expansion of the theory to Old English poetry through Magoun and his students, the definition was generally limited to phrases a half-line in length, but the practice remained the same. Magoun made the following claim for his formulaic practice: "A word-group of any size or importance which occurs elsewhere in *Béowulf* or other Anglo-Saxon poems unchanged or virtually unchanged is [...] a formula according to Parry's definition."¹⁰ The claim is totally wrong, both in its appropriation of Parry's definition and in its use of a single repetition to prove that a phrase was "formulaic." Magoun and Lord, along with many others, built demonstrations of "oral composition" on text samples analyzed for formulaic content based on this criterion of a single repetition. We were assured by the authors of these studies that we would find that the entire passage was formulaic if only we had a large enough sample of the poetry in question.

Not even this extremely lax formula definition allowed scholars to show the completely formulaic nature of the texts under study. The "formulaic system" came to the rescue. Parry had noticed that certain groups of formulas seemed to form systems, that is, groups of formulas in which one element remained the same while another changed to match the requirements of the verse or of the "essential idea." We find such systems in the common "inquit" formulas in which a speaker is introduced, or in Old English verses in which one word is exchanged to provide the alliteration. Homerists argued early for "flexibility" in the Homeric formula. Strict Parryists and their just-as-strict opponents cried foul. They saw in the formulaic system only a deceptive method of improving the disappointing formula statistics of traditional analyses. If one could not find an exact match, then this was a way of letting an approximate match do the job. This objection still rested on the concept of the formula as a verse or verse-part that could be found elsewhere in the corpus.

Donald K. Fry, however, suggested in 1967 that the formulaic system itself might be a more accurate description of the operation of the oral language in Old English poetry than the fixed formula. He concluded his discussion by defining the formula in his corpus as a "*group of words, one half-line in length, which shows evidence of being the direct product of a formulaic system.*"¹¹ A formula does not exist unless it is a member of a larger system. Fry did insist on retaining at least one stressed word of the formula as an anchor for the development of the system.

Somewhat isolated from the mainstream of Parry–Lord studies, the Munich Slavist Alois Schmaus published an article in 1960 that deserves far more attention than it has received. He suggested that the real key was what he called the "metrisch–syntaktisches Modell" (metrical–syntactical model).¹² The language of oral poetry is thus a collection of metrically fixed syntactical structures that can be filled with any words available to

¹⁰ Magoun, "Oral-Formulaic Character," 449.

¹¹ Fry, "Old English Formulas," 204; emphasis his.

¹² Schmaus, "Formel und metrisch-syntaktisches Modell," 395.

the singer, as long as they are the right length. The epic formula (that is, the repeated phrase) is seen here only as a by-product of the operation of the metrical–syntactical model. A formula, in the sense used by oral-formulaicists, is going to be either an accidental product of the metrical–syntactical model at work with the special vocabulary that is used in telling heroic stories from the past, or, but rarely, a citation of the tradition. Oral poetry can make as much use of these phrases cited “to produce a specific rhetorical or literary effect,”¹³ to use Magoun’s words, as literary poets. Schmaus failed to extend his observations beyond the South Slavic epic that he was analyzing, but his concept of the metrical–syntactical model has implications for most oral epic.

A somewhat similar concept was developed in the two dissertations summarized by Frederic Cassidy in his 1965 article, “How Free was the Anglo-Saxon Scop?” There, the entire language of two bodies of Old English verse was analyzed syntactically; the study found that there were only about twenty-five different syntactical patterns in the verse and that the majority of all verses were generated using the ten most common patterns. Here the metrical–syntactical model is at work, not the fixed formula.

Over the next two decades, there were sporadic attempts to come to terms with the epic language. In 1972, Patrick Conner suggested a linguistic analysis of Old English verse based on generative grammar, but he failed to follow up on the ideas expressed there.¹⁴ In 1974, there was a conference on the formula at the University of Michigan that was edited for publication by Benjamin Stolz and Richard Shannon in 1976.¹⁵ The conference ended up being more of a discussion on oral theory itself than on repetitions, but several scholars were very close to the syntactical description of the formula.

Two scholars concentrated their attention on Middle High German epic. Norbert Voorwinden summed up the difference between the traditional formula and the epic language of oral poetry in a brief article in 1983 (in which he also came close to the idea of the metrical–syntactical model),¹⁶ and Hermann Reichert attempted in 1990 to use the syntactical patterns established in the concordance by Franz Bäuml and Eva-Maria Fallone to show how the Nibelungen-poet worked.¹⁷ Both Voorwinden and Reichert realized that the oral formula was syntactical. Unfortunately, Bäuml and Fallone failed to tie their syntactical patterns to the metrical shape, greatly reducing the usefulness of their list. They did, however, realize that one had to grasp the whole language and order it syntactically in order to isolate the metrical–syntactical models at work.

Just as Parry developed his notion of the formula from Homeric studies, the idea of a radical new approach also came from studies of Homeric language. Egbert J. Bakker finds that “[w]e are concerned, then, not with oral as the special case of poetry, but with poetry as the special case of oral, in other words, with poetry in speech.”¹⁸ His research relates Homeric phrase building to recent work in discourse analysis. His book tries to

13 Magoun, “Oral-Formulaic Character,” 447.

14 Conner, “Schematization of Oral-Formulaic Processes.”

15 Stolz and Shannon, *Oral Literature*.

16 Voorwinden, “Begriff der epischen Formel.”

17 Reichert, “Autor und Erzähler.”

18 Bakker, *Poetry in Speech*, 17.

establish that oral form arose from the attempt to give form to stories from the past. He analyzed Greek hexameter and found that it could be derived from ordinary speech. Much of his analysis is too thoroughly tied to Greek hexameter to be useful here, but his observation that oral epic derived from ordinary speech is very important. Scholars working in the field of Old English made the observation quite early that the verse form was derived from the spoken language.¹⁹ They did not, however, tie this observation to the oral theory nor to the oral origins of poetry.

It is important in this connection to say that the oral theory as founded by Parry and Lord is only valid for long epic poetry, something which does not always emerge from works on orality. There are many types of oral poetry that are built on relatively short forms and thus do not follow the rules given by the theory. We do not know exactly when the theory stops working, but it is certainly when other constraints become more powerful than the metrical–syntactical model and the verse is memorized rather than improvised. We find this in skaldic verse in Old Norse,²⁰ in Somali poetry,²¹ and anywhere that the form is not long enough to require that the poet draw on the special register of language only available to oral epic poets.

Parry had felt himself forced to the conclusion that the language of Homer was traditional and oral by the fact that the Darwinian selection of formulaic phrases tied to specific metrical locations could only have taken place in a situation that allowed for thousands, probably millions of iterations of the Homeric line with varying content that would select the fittest formulaic phrases. The fact that the remainder of Homeric language did not fall into the neatly constructed patterns observed in the noun–epithet system should have alerted Parry to the fact that the literally repeated phrase was only the surface feature of a pattern that actually lies deeper. Schmaus and others saw that Parry's work needed to be expanded to include syntactical units rather than "formulae." Parry made an important breakthrough, one that allowed real oral poets to make their contribution, but it was too constricted, and allowed his followers to get the wrong idea, namely that "formulaic" composition meant orality and orality meant formulaic composition.

Even Parry and Lord could not free themselves from the idea that oral poets thought of their works as "poetry" and worked to make the patterns of traditional language fit an established idea of metrics. Bakker and others have suggested that the process was actually the reverse, that is, that poetry arose from natural language and that the linguistic structures observable in various oral poetries are the result of the working of the process of producing poetically "elevated speech" from the structures of ordinary language.²² It follows that the "metrical" form of the oral poetic languages arises from the special use of the language, not that it is a template applied from outside to an existing language. The resulting poetry looks a bit like the totally formulaic poetry described by Parry, Lord, and Magoun, but it does not look enough like it to satisfy critics of the theory. I propose that the formulaic theory looks at oral epic poetry from the wrong end.

19 Daunt, "Old English Verse"; and Bliss, "Appreciation of Old English Metre."

20 Haymes, "Germanic *Heldenlied*."

21 Andrzejewski and Lewis, *Somali Poetry*.

22 Bakker, *Poetry in Speech*, 2.

It sees the product as the tool and still works from an impossible notion of poetry put together out of traditional formulaic expressions.

Two points must be conceded. First, oral-derived epic poetry *does* have more repeated phrases in metrically fixed positions than poetry written without such a model. Second, all tradition-based poetry includes fixed phrases that belong to the tradition as a whole and are not the product of the moment. Neither concession affects my main point, that all “oral-formulaic” epic is composed using metrically determined syntactic structures that are the unconscious building blocks of the special kind of “elevated speech” we recognize as oral epic. This patterning of speech through metrical–syntactical models is the unique part of the special register of the poet/singer’s language that generates epic poetry. The rhythmic shaping of the special language of heroic poetry produced the special register we would recognize today as oral epic. This is true whatever language is used as the basis, but it differs according to the special characteristics of the language involved. In ancient Greek, we have a verse built on the length of syllables and the number of such lengths in a line. In Old English, we find a verse built on rhythmic units we would today call a half-line, held together by alliteration. In Middle High German, we find that the emphasis has shifted to end-rhyme and the alliteration has all but disappeared, but the lines are bound together in strophes.

I had reached a similar conclusion in my study of Middle High German epic several decades ago. Much of what I have to say in the following was already developed in my dissertation in the late sixties, but it has not become a part of the “oral theory” as practiced by comparatists.²³

Like many scholars of the second generation of oral studies, I was irritated by the fact that the poetries I studied would not conform to the theory as put together by Parry and Lord. No poetry “is composed entirely of formulas, large and small,” as Magoun had put it.²⁴ I was particularly irritated by the large number of phrases that were repeated once or twice in a relatively large corpus. This did not sound like “regularly employed” to me. Under the influence of Fry and Schmaus, I explored the “formulaic systems” in Middle High German epic and discovered that they were extensive, far more extensive than the relatively few half-line “straight formulas” the theory had led me to expect in great numbers. I even discovered that there were morphological elements of the language around which similar expressions seemed to cluster. Adjectives and adverbs ending in *-liche*²⁵ determined the shape of many half-lines. This observation brought together hundreds of otherwise unrelated verses. I devoted many pages of my dissertation to demonstrating this.²⁶ Curschmann and Voorwinden came to essentially the same conclusion without citing the extensive evidence collected there.²⁷

23 Haymes, *Mündliches Epos*.

24 Magoun, “Oral-Formulaic Character,” 447.

25 The etymological equivalent of English *-ly*, but metrically much heavier.

26 I presented a version in English of my work on the syntactic basis of the oral language in Middle High German at the MLA convention in 1972, but unfortunately I did not publish it, relying on the German publication of the dissertation which appeared in 1975.

27 Curschmann, “*Nibelungenlied*”; and Voorwinden, “*Zum Begriff*.”

Unfortunately, I was additionally seduced into an incautious conclusion, also based indirectly on Magoun's either/or statement cited at the beginning of this paper: that the *Nibelungenlied* was an oral poem whether it was penned by the author or not. This stirred up a hornets' nest of opposition and no one saw the methodological points I had tried to make. My attempts to rephrase the point have fallen on deaf ears and the camps are still divided between those who see the theory as an indication that the presence of formulas (of any kind!) indicates some kind of proximity to orality and those who reject this notion entirely, who declare the oral-formulaic theory to be an "entbehrliches Konzept"²⁸ (dispensable concept) for medieval German and Germanic literature. Despite my numerous attempts to state the contrary,²⁹ some German colleagues still think I am a proponent of a purely oral *Nibelungenlied*.

It is not the purpose of this article to raise again the question of whether a specific or indeed any repetition density can "prove" an ancient poetry to be oral, that is, composed by an illiterate poet using traditional materials. I have addressed this question elsewhere and came to the conclusion that the means proposed by Magoun and approved by Lord cannot distinguish between an oral poetry and its imitation, although I insisted then, as I do now, that there can be no imitation without an original.³⁰ Formulaic (that is, repetition) density does point in the direction of a traditional oral epic, but it does not prove "oral" provenance, that is, that it is an "oral-dictated text," for a specific written poem out of the past. It can only be used together with other clues to show that the poet drew on the *means* of composition, on the poetic language of the traditional poetry, either because it was the only form of poetry known to him in the vernacular (for example virtually all Old English narrative) or because he wanted to identify his poem with traditional values and contents (the *Nibelungenlied*). An examination of the language used in such works can tell us what the oral poetry of that period and place was probably like, but does not identify the works showing these characteristics specifically as part of that tradition, that is, as oral-dictated texts, as Larry Benson triumphantly showed fifty years ago.³¹

The concept of the oral formula from Parry via Lord and Magoun to the "oral-formulaic school" has led to the picture of oral poetry as a kind of mosaic in which the poet arranged the pieces during performance to produce a finished epic. This model led, on the one hand, to the exaggerated claims of the sort quoted from Magoun at the beginning of this paper. On the other hand, Richard M. Meyer already maintained in his monumental study of formulaic language in the Germanic poetries that the language of oral epic was a kind of "dialect" of the spoken language.³² It had to be close enough to the spoken language to be understandable, but it could have special expressions that were reserved for it. I have chosen the term "register" rather than dialect because it

28 Andersson, "Oral-Formulaic Poetry," 12.

29 Haymes, *Mündliche Epos*; Haymes, "Chevalerie und alte maeren"; Haymes, *Nibelungenlied*; and Haymes, *Das Nibelungenlied*.

30 Haymes, "Formulaic Density."

31 Benson, "Literary Character."

32 Meyer, *Die altergermanische Poesie*, 483ff.

seems to indicate more accurately the relationship between ordinary speech and epic poetry. Registers are the complexes of usage and vocabulary that we choose when we are in specific speech situations. We choose a different register when we are talking to the UPS delivery man than when we are discussing fine wines with our friends or epic poetry with our colleagues. We often judge a person's social graces by his or her ability to choose and use the proper register in a given social situation. Social comedy is often based on the inability of a character to adapt to the register of those around him or her. The more I work with this area, the more I am convinced that the technique of oral poetry is more like a register of a natural language than a box of linguistic Legos that can be assembled into an epic.

The rhetoric of public speaking is an example of a controlled register that is perhaps only mastered by a few within the society. In pre-teleprompter days (actually since antiquity), politicians and others needing to address large groups actually learned to express themselves in a special rhetoric that was designed to make the speech effective. This rhetoric included rhythmical elements as well as organizational and grammatical ones. Bruce Rosenberg analyzed a special usage of this kind of register under the influence of the oral-formulaic theory in his book on the American folk preacher.³³ There he found that the rhythmical and verbal patterns used by the folk preachers (all of whom, by the way, were literate and used written material such as the Bible) were very similar to the means used in the structuring of oral poetry.

Bakker's above-mentioned study of Homer's language as "poetry in speech" is a welcome shift of focus from the idea of oral poetry as a mosaic of formulas to the idea of oral poetry as a kind of elevated speech, speech made poetic by a special use of rhythm and poetic language. This sounds very much like the description of a special register comparable to the rhetoric of public speaking described above, a combination of lexical, rhythmical, and other items that make up a way of expressing heroic stories in elevated speech. This register is learned the same way we learn other registers. Lord's description of the training of the young *guslar* describes this process, although I believe he overstates the role of the fixed formula there.³⁴ His description would have had more power to convince if he had provided examples of "apprentice" epics making too much use of fixed formulas. Lord did correctly observe that there was something of a "grammar" of oral poetry, but he never really developed the notion.³⁵

Ideally this discussion should proceed with the analysis of several known oral poetries and their translation into writing, but I am not in a position to do this. The best I can do is to show how the system seems to work in a literate tradition that is (I think) clearly based on an oral model. I am speaking here of the Middle High German epic in strophes that includes the *Nibelungenlied*, the *Ortnit/Wolfdietrich* poems, and several other works. These poems deal with matters that had been in oral tradition for centuries and, although they are themselves literary works, they make use of what appears to be an oral style. In any case, it is a linguistic register very different from that employed in

33 Rosenberg, *American Folk Preacher*.

34 Lord, *Singer of Tales*, 31ff.

35 Lord, *Singer of Tales*, 65.

the composition of courtly romances based on French models. The argumentation here is admittedly circular, but it is based on an observation of the oral models put forward by Lord, Ruth Finnegan, and others. If this poetry is not based on an oral model, then the poet did a very good job of coming up with a style that is highly suggestive of one. I have trouble imagining a poet who would be able to invent such a style without the help of *Singer of Tales* and then be able to circulate it to numerous other poets, some of whom do not seem to have known the original on which they are supposed to have based their style. The manuscript variations in the various poems using this metre suggest that it was a well-established pattern,³⁶ because the scribes sometimes replace one half-line with another having approximately the same meaning, but one which was well-established in other poems throughout the tradition. In other words, the varying fillings of the half-line were easily interchangeable, even in the mind of a scribe transferring the text from one parchment to another.³⁷

The first three lines of the Nibelungen strophe (and all four lines of most of the remaining works) consist of two half-lines each, consisting of four stresses in the on-verse and three in the off-verse. The penultimate lift in the on-verse is usually a long syllable, leaving the final lift on a lightly accented syllable (that is, a feminine cadence). There are many variations on this pattern, but they are all readable with seven beats to the long line:

Do **stvonden in den venstern** div **minnechlichen chint** (377, 1)³⁸

(There stood in the windows the love-inspiring girls.)

The fourth off-verse of each strophe has an extra lift so that it has a total of eight. The pattern is far less complex in practice than it sounds in description.³⁹ The metrical variation that is allowed seems to be that which is possible in a sung strophic melody, rather than a metric imposed from without.⁴⁰ The special ending of the strophe in the *Nibelungenlied*, the *Kudrun*, and elsewhere may have been a mark that the melody used for that particular strophe was the property of the author of that work. There is much we still do not know about the composition and performance of epic and lyric poetry in the Middle Ages.

Repeated phrases in the *Nibelungenlied* belong to two general types. The first is the traditional phrase, of which there are relatively few, if my judgment is correct. The opening of the first strophe of Manuscript B, kept at the Monastery Library in St Gall (Codex Sangallensis 857), is shown to be a traditional song opening by its use in several other places, including a second beginning within the *Nibelungenlied* itself:

³⁶ For the *Nibelungenlied*, see Batts, *Das Nibelungenlied*.

³⁷ For a discussion of scribal recomposition, see O'Brien O'Keeffe, *Visible Song*, especially 47–76.

³⁸ Emphasis mine. All citations from the *Nibelungenlied* are from Bartsch and de Boor, *Das Nibelungenlied*.

³⁹ Wakefield, *Nibelungen Prosody*, 184.

⁴⁰ Haymes, "From Alliteration to Rhyme," 184.

Ez wuohs in Burgonden ein vil edel magedin (2, 1)
 (There grew in Burgundenland a most noble girl)

Do wuohs in Niderlanden eins edelen küniges kint (20, 1)
 (There grew in the Netherlands a noble king's child.)

The phrase is not only a traditional song opening; it is part of a large metrical–syntactical system that consists of a monosyllabic verb in the first lift followed by an adverbial expression that fills the rest of the verse:

Dô gie an diu venster (243, 2a)
 (Then went to the window)

Dô sprach vil minneclîche (3 times 242, 1a; 556, 2a; 561, 1a)
 (Then spoke so lovingly.)

The traditional formulaic phrase fulfils the functions of a formula, that is, it marks the genre, communicates to the listener a certain attitude, establishes an epic community, but it is still part of a larger metrical–syntactical system that generates the verse.

The traditional (non-oral theory) approach to formulaic analysis is often likely to ignore the metrical if the formulaic nature is clear enough. Take, for example, the expression “lant unde liute” (land and people), a formula that is very common in the feudal poetry of the high Middle Ages in Germany. In his *Tristan*, Gottfried von Strassburg makes extensive use of the formula. Here are some samples:

463	er bevalch sin liut unt sin lant
1591	über sin liut und über sin lant
1766	liute unde lande waere
1891	und nerten ir liut unde ir lant

It should be clear from what has gone before that these are formulas of tradition, but something quite different from the repetition as it appears in the *Nibelungenlied*:

109, 3b	liute unde lant
384, 2b	liut unde lant
1147, 2b	liute unde lant
1518, 2b	liute unde lant
2139, 1b	liut unde lant
25, 4b	beidiu liut unde lant
55, 4b	beidiu liut unde lant
2222, 3b	ir liute und ouch ir lant
114, 3b	die liute und ouch diu lant

The expression appears only in the descending half-line, and the word “lant” is always in the rhyme. The first five examples clearly show the metrically bound use of the traditional expression. The next two show the expanded version needed to fit the longer fourth descending half-line. The last two show the pair in a metrically fixed system for word-pairs of this sort.⁴¹ The pages of examples in my dissertation show the use of this metrically formed language *in extenso*. Gottfried uses the phrase twenty-four times

⁴¹ Cf. 130, 1b: “die künege und ouch ir man” (the kings and also their men).

while the Nibelungen-poet, with approximately the same number of verses to cover, uses the term only in the nine verses quoted above. Traditional formulaic analysis would rate the very literary romance as more than twice as formulaic as the tradition-bound heroic epic. We can see by looking at the instances from Gottfried's *Tristan* cited above that the expression is not metrically bound so as to be useful in the rapid composition of verses. The use in the *Nibelungenlied* shows that the pair appears here not only as a citation of a well-known concept in medieval German feudal society, but as a pair of words that could appear in a number of different metrical-syntactical patterns; in other words, the pair made up a metrical-syntactical model.

I should make it clear here that I do not think any of the surviving epics in "formulaic" style are oral, that is, "oral-dictated texts." The poet of the *Nibelungenlied* included quite a number of elements that would have been completely out of place in a traditional epic.⁴² Some of the other epics included in this category also chose elements that would have been out of place in traditional epics, but they drew on their stories in order to make a thirteenth-century (or later) point. I think the authors of "heroic epic" in German in the thirteenth century and later chose these stories because they could be told with emphasis on the points the poets wished to emphasize, or simply because these stories were popular with the hearers. The written versions of these texts became canonical, just as the poems from other sources had, and later writers saw nothing wrong with adding to them or subtracting from them when they saw fit. I do not think any of these texts were oral, but they make use of oral language and form conventions in their composition. Among the form conventions was the use of the metrical-syntactical model.

All the texts surviving from the ancient world or the Middle Ages are written and thus belong to Foley's tAgora.⁴³ There has recently been a flood of books and articles about how oral forms found their way into writing.⁴⁴ Some of the solutions to ancient poetries in particular are ingenious, but do not have any comparable information about oral poetics in the Middle Ages. I have spent my scholarly life with German and Germanic poetries and have designated all the German medieval epic texts as "imitation oral" (except those that clearly were derived from [imitated] something else such as the romances from France in Germany in the high Middle Ages) and imagined their authors making use of the oral style because it was one register that was available to them and because the choice of register meant something to the poet. The use of the oral register was thus a conscious choice. In the case of the *Nibelungenlied*, the use of the oral register and a story that was transmitted orally is more or less a citation of traditional poetry to show the conservative nature of the poem. I feel that if we knew as well as we do in the case of the *Nibelungenlied* when (around 1200) and where (between Passau and Vienna) they come from, then we would have less of a problem in determining why the poet chose the oral style.

⁴² Haymes, *Nibelungenlied*; and Haymes, *Das Nibelungenlied*.

⁴³ Foley, *Oral Tradition and the Internet*, 238–52.

⁴⁴ Two of which are Honko, *Textualization of Oral Epics*, and Mundal and Wellendorf, *Oral Art Forms*.

I imagine the oral epic style coming into being as a species of regular speech. The speaker/singer probably found melody to be a powerful ally in keeping the “metre” straight. The singers in the South Slavic tradition use a monotonous melody so that every line would have ten syllables. Gradually the oral style formed itself into a metrical–syntactical unit that was passed on from father to son, very much as Lord described it. We have no real information about the formation of the oral style, as modern collisions of writing and orality are quite different from those which took place in antiquity or the Middle Ages. Then writing was slow and difficult, and oral composition was quick and easy. Writers who imitated the oral style did so because they wanted to make use of orality in a new way, or because they wanted to add an oral song to their repertoire of written works. We can only guess at the reasons for each text, but the tools provided by oral theory can only tell us that the authors chose the register for oral epic, not why.

Author Biography Edward R. Haymes is Professor Emeritus in the Department of Modern Languages at Cleveland State University. He has published widely in the field of medieval German studies and his books include *The Nibelungenlied: History and Interpretation* (1986) and *Wagner's Ring in 1848: New Translations of the Nibelung Myth and Siegfried's Death* (2010).