

The Germanic *Heldenlied* and the Poetic *Edda*: Speculations on Preliterary History

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One of the proudest inventions of German scholarship in the nineteenth century was the *Heldenlied*, the heroic song, which was seen by scholars as the main conduit of Germanic heroic legend from the Period of Migrations to the time of their being written down in the Middle Ages. The concept stems indirectly from the suggestions of several eighteenth-century Homeric scholars that since the Homeric poems were much too long to have been memorized and performed in oral tradition, they must have existed as shorter, episodic songs. Friedrich August Wolf's well-known *Prolegomena ad Homerum* (1795) collected evidence for the idea that writing was not used for poetry until long after Homer's time. He argued for a thorough recension of the poem under (or perhaps by) Pisistratus in the sixth century BCE as the first comprehensive written Homer. These ideas were almost immediately applied to the Middle High German *Nibelungenlied* by Karl Lachmann (1816), who was trained as a classical philologist and indeed continued to contribute in that area at the same time that he was one of the most influential members of the generation that founded the new discipline of *Germanistik*. On the basis of rough spots and contradictions (not only Homer nods!) Lachmann thought he could recognize twenty separate *Lieder* in the Middle High German epic. At the same time that Lachmann was deconstructing the German medieval epic, Elias Lönnrot was assembling the Finnish epic he called *Kalevala* from shorter songs in conscious imitation of the Homer (or Pisistratus) described by Wolf.

The *Liedertheorie* advanced by Wolf and Lachmann was revised by Andreas Heusler in the early years of the twentieth century. Heusler (1905) used the songs of the *Poetic Edda* as his models and decided that the way from song to epic was not by stringing the songs together with clumsily

composed bridge passages, but by a process of expansion (*Aufschwellung*).¹ The individual song contained within it the entire story (*Fabel*) and the epic poet simply expanded material contained within the song to produce his work. The relationship between *Lied* and *Epos* was, Heusler argued, like that between an acorn and a tree, not the relationship between individual pearls and a necklace.

A by-product of these theoretical musings is the concept of the Germanic *Heldenlied*, which was essentially a product of cogitation at the writing desk. Few of its spiritual fathers ever heard an oral heroic song or epic of any kind, and they worked out the form mainly from a conviction of what the transmission of heroic legend would have had to be, rather than from a consideration of the surviving evidence. Preliterate poetry, they argued, must have been composed just like literate poetry, that is, by a poet who composed by “writing” on the tablet of his memory, very much as the literate poets of the nineteenth century wrote on paper. The theory came first and the evidence was adjusted to fit. The fact that there is not a single Germanic *Heldenlied* of the type described by Lachmann or Heusler surviving from anywhere outside of Iceland never seems to have bothered them.² Heusler used the heroic poems of the Icelandic *Poetic Edda* as his models for the *Heldenlied*, the assumption being that the Icelanders had maintained the form and content of Old Germanic heroic poetry until they were written down in the late thirteenth century. In the summation of his theory in *Die altgermanische Dichtung* Heusler characterizes the genre in his typical style (1923:147):

Auch das Heldenlied ist ein größeres Werk, etwa zwischen 80 und einigen 200 Langzeilen; vorbedacht und auswendig gelernt, für Einzelvortrag bestimmt. Es gehört zu den objektiven Gattungen, ohne ausgesprochene Beziehung auf die Gegenwart. Sein Inhalt ist eine heroische Fabel aus zeitlosem Einst; eine einkreisige Geschichte von straffem Umriß, sparsam mit Auftritten und Menschen. Die Darstellung ist episch-dramatisch zu nennen: Erzählung aus Dichters Munde wechselt mit handelnden Reden der Gestalten (Ansprachen, Zwiesprachen, auch kurzen Monologen). Summarischer Bericht tritt zurück hinter geschauten Szenen, die sich

¹ Heusler assumed that the *Aufschwellung* would take place in the literary process of epic composition. Ironically it is within purely oral composition that we find true *Aufschwellung* as described by Heusler. See Lord 1956 for an egregious example.

² The Old High German *Hildebrandslied* comes closest, but it shows evidence of being the product of an epic rather than a *Lied* tradition. See Haymes 1976 for a discussion of this point.

ruckweise folgen (“springender Stil”). Zustandsmalerei, beschauliche Rede, lyrischer Erguß halten sich in engsten Grenzen.

The *Heldenlied* is also a larger work, between approximately 80 and some 200 long lines; composed in advance and memorized, designed for individual performance. It belongs to the objective genres without a specific reference to the present. Its content is a heroic story out of the timeless “Once;” a story with but one cycle with a tight structure, economical with characters and scenes. The narration must be called epic-dramatic: narration from the poet’s mouth alternating with active speech of the characters (speeches, dialogues, also short monologues). Summarizing narration is reduced in favor of observed scenes, which follow each other without transition (“springing style”). Painting of conditions, descriptive speech, lyrical outbursts are kept in tight rein.

Heusler cites the poems of the *Edda* as the best examples of this genre. Most Nordists since Heusler have seen the Eddic poems as specifically Norse, if not purely Icelandic poetry (e.g., von See 1978), but that has not kept Germanists from continuing to use them as models for the *Heldenlied*. Heusler disparaged the earlier theory as “romantic” without seeming to realize that his own theory, based on the idea of a single creative genius for each song, was just as romantic, finding its roots in the “genius” idea of art rather than the collectivist notions of the early nineteenth century.

Alongside the Old Norse/Icelandic poetry of the *Edda* we find the far more numerous verses referred to as “skaldic” poetry (Frank 1978; von See 1980; Kristjánsson 1997). “Skaldic poetry” is a modern term based on the Old Norse term *skáld*, which was used in medieval texts (and modern Icelandic) simply to mean poet. These poems seem to have originated as praise poetry at the courts of Norwegian nobles and kings, perhaps as early as the ninth century. The earliest poet mentioned (who suspiciously bears the same name as the Norse god of poetry) is Bragi the Old, who is supposed to have been at the court of Harold Fairhair (reigned c. 870-930). The poems are in complex metrical forms that require exact placement of words and are thus not as susceptible to change in oral transmission as other poetries.³ The skaldic strophes are found today embedded in the sagas of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries where they function as source confirmation, a kind of footnote system to corroborate the truth of the prose narration. In addition to the complex meter, the poets used an equally complex system of figurative language built around *kennings*—metaphors in which one concept

³ Roberta Frank provides an excellent introduction to the art of the skalds together with analysis and metrical description of typical examples of their work in her study *Old Norse Court Poetry* (1978).

was allowed to stand for another, such as “battle-tree” for “warrior.” The kennings of skaldic poetry do not usually enrich the picture of the person or thing depicted, but rather function to hide the meaning from the uninitiated. Skaldic poetry differs from other traditional forms of poetry in that the names of the poets are usually transmitted along with the poems. The poems are neither truly lyric nor narrative, but imply a narration through their allusive style. The kind of poetry represented by the skaldic verses has not received a great deal of attention from followers of oral theory. We will return to this issue later.

Those few *Germanisten* who had heard of oral epics assumed that they had nothing in common with the Germanic form (Schneider 1936). The Swiss folklorist John Meier sketched in 1909 most of the characteristics of oral epic later described by Parry and Lord without having any visible impact on the theories of Germanic transmission taught in universities through most of the twentieth century. Although expert in the area of “folk epic,” Meier himself seems to have accepted without question the traditional description of the Germanic *Heldenlied* for early Germanic poetry.

German scholars generally cite the *terminus technicus* “oral poetry” in English in order to emphasize its status as an alien concept. The cosmopolitan younger colleagues use this alien status positively, in order to emphasize its esoteric glamor. The more conservative colleagues use the foreign language to keep the results of this area of research as far as possible from the *gesicherten* results of solid German philology. Both groups tend to use the term “oral-formulaic poetry” in a relatively undifferentiated and uncritical fashion. Some of the stereotypes of this usage are in serious need of correction.

Some of these stereotypes have to be attributed to Parry and Lord themselves. As pioneers in their field they can perhaps be forgiven a somewhat overstated presentation of their results in contrast to what had gone before. *The Singer of Tales* (Lord 1960) remains an exciting book today at least partly because of this missionary zeal on the part of its author. Both Parry and Lord subscribed to what Ruth Finnegan (1977) has called the “Great Divide” theory in which there was total and absolute difference in thinking, world view, and poetry between preliterate and literate communities. Lord equated this division with the acceptance of a fixed text. In the South Slavic oral epic tradition he studied, Lord believed that the appearance of written and printed texts of songs led to their memorization and thus to the death of the tradition that had produced them. In Lord’s thinking, any poetry that had a fixed text was written poetry, even if it arose and was passed on without the use of writing. He went so far as to speak of

“written composition without writing” on several occasions (e.g., Stolz and Shannon 1976:176).

In spite of this somewhat absurd formulation, Lord’s division of poetry into two types—that which is composed during performance and that which is memorized—may help us to understand some divisions within the dark ages of preliterate Germanic narrative poetry. Lord believed that the two types would be mutually exclusive, since they require very different disciplines. He paid little attention to the memorization of texts, because he saw this mainly as a threat to his object of research, the living oral epic tradition in which poems were recomposed in every performance. Since the appearance of *The Singer of Tales*, several scholars have shown that oral traditions can have relatively or almost totally fixed texts, if there is reason to do so.⁴ There is no question that the model proposed by Parry and Lord has considerable validity in many different traditions around the world, including some that were long thought to be “memorized.” A recent study by the psychologist David Rubin (1995) applies the results of psychological studies of memory to the field of oral epic, ballads, and counting-out rhymes, finding considerable support for the Parry-Lord model; but he also observes that shorter poems with multiple constraints can maintain a remarkably fixed “text” in oral transmission. We should keep in mind that the division is not as sharp as Lord would have had us believe, since there are elements of memorization in almost all oral epics and there are probably changes based on traditional diction within memorized transmission, but the two types represent the ends of a scale that stretches from Avdo Medjedović, the most extreme example of Lord’s improvising poet, to the poets of Somali oral poetry described below, the best documented case of memorized orality in the modern world (Lord 1956; Andrzejewski and Lewis 1964).

There are thus many different kinds of oral poetry in the world and the kind described by Parry and Lord is only one of them.⁵ Their description only applies to a relatively broad epic poetry that is composed in performance. Only this kind of poetry produces the “oral-formulaic” style observed by Parry and Lord because it is the only kind that really needs it. The notion that we can determine which written works of the past were “oral dictated” texts and which ones merely used the register of oral composition for a written text in imitation of the oral style should now belong to the past,

⁴ See Finnegan 1977; Opland 1980; and Andrzejewski and Lewis 1964.

⁵ This journal has documented the wide range of oral poetries in the world. The broad range of the field and the varied approaches to oral composition and performance are explored from many angles in Foley 2002.

but it should be clear that one cannot imitate a poetry that is not there. If there is no original, that is, no oral epic in formulaic language, there can be no imitation in written form (see Haymes 1980).

Ruth Finnegan's surveys (1977, 1988) of differing oral poetries offer a welcome complement to the somewhat narrow focus of the original Parry and Lord studies. Along the range of differing oral poetries described by Finnegan, the poetry of the Somali stands out in comparison to the oral poetry depicted by Lord.⁶ The Somali poets reportedly compose their poems in private and then present them after they have been memorized. The poetry is so complicated in regard to word sequence, alliteration, and meter that only very tiny changes in wording are possible. Composition during presentation would be impossible here. Unfortunately the authors of the study never carried out the kinds of experiments Parry and Lord made to study the actual stability of the verse in transmission, but their description of the poetry is particularly interesting (Andrzejewski and Lewis 1964:44-46):

For the Somalis, listening to poetry is thus not only an artistic pleasure, but provides them with the fascinating intellectual exercise of decoding the veiled speech of the poet's message. Sometimes, however, vagueness and obscurity reaches such a pitch that the average listener would be quite perplexed were it not for the fact that there is a tacit poetic convention to help him:

. . . .

A poem passes from mouth to mouth. Between a young Somali who listens today to a poem composed fifty years ago, five hundred miles away, and its first audience there is a long chain of reciters who passed it one to another. It is only natural that in this process of transmission some distortion occurs, but comparisons of different versions of the same poem usually shows a surprisingly high degree of fidelity to the original. This is due to a large extent to the formal rigidity of Somali poetry: if one word is substituted for another, for instance, it must still keep to the rules of alliteration, thus limiting very considerably the number of possible changes. The general trend of the poem, on the other hand, inhibits the omission or transposition of lines.

One would think one was reading a description of Old Norse skaldic poetry here. The method of composition is reminiscent of the famous passage in *Egilssaga* (Nordal 1933:177-92) in which the skald Egil Skallagrímsson composes his "Head Ransom" in private overnight so that he can perform it for the king the next day and save his life. The transmission of the Somali poetry takes place just as Nordists since the Middle Ages have imagined the

⁶ For a detailed investigation of Somali poetry, see Andrzejewski and Lewis 1964.

transmission of skaldic poetry. And finally the “fascinating intellectual exercise of decoding the veiled speech of the poet’s message” could just as well apply to the reception of skaldic poetry, a form that also lives from “veiled speech” in the form of arcane kennings that can only be deciphered by those who know the tradition.

The development of skaldic poetry, which is usually dated back to the ninth century, demanded a new discipline of memory. Like the poetry of the Somali the skaldic stanzas were complicated enough to demand almost perfect memorization. The transmission of these poems from the moment of their composition until their transcription in the thirteenth century did not always take place without errors, but the idea of a fixed text now had a place in the conception of an almost totally oral tradition of poetry. The fixed text was not only present but necessary for this poetry, and a new discipline of memorization had to be developed.

It must be conceded that writing of a sort did exist among the Germanic peoples from shortly before or shortly after the beginning of the Christian era on. This writing consisted of runes largely used for magical purposes. We find runic inscriptions on artifacts of importance beginning in the second or third centuries of our era. We find later runic inscriptions that can be read as lines of verse, but there is little indication that runes were widely used to preserve skaldic poetry. Joseph Harris (1996) has suggested that runes may have strengthened the concept of a fixed text at some point, noting references to words as objects in the poetry and the fact that Egil Skallagrímsson is depicted as being as skillful with runes as with verses. In one scene Egil inscribes an insulting verse in runes on a *niðstöng* or insult pole, but the saga portrays him as making the inscription *after* speaking the verses. In any case, the vast majority of references to poetic preservation and transmission in the sagas refer to memorization, and only a tiny minority refer to any kind of runic inscription. We may wish to question the accuracy of the sagas in reporting detail from periods of as much as three or more centuries before they were committed to writing, but the unanimity of description in those sagas does suggest that the generations alive at the time of the first saga-writing knew a largely oral transmission of skaldic poetry.

The application of the oral theory to Old Norse poetry has been up to now less than satisfying.⁷ Two articles by Lars Lönnroth (1971, 1981) attempt to find traces of oral-formulaic language in Eddic poetry. He

⁷ For a more extensive survey of scholarship involving the oral theory and Old Norse poetry see “A Survey of Oral-Formulaic Criticism of Eddic Poetry” (Acker 1998:85-110).

recognizes in these articles that the oral-formulaic theory can have only limited usefulness in describing the composition and oral transmission of these poems. Like most scholars he is more interested in formulas as such than in the composition and transmission of the poetry. His discussion (1981) of the heaven-and-earth formula addresses the history of Germanic and Christian concepts in Old Norse poetry, but it is only slightly interesting as an example of an oral formula. Joseph Harris (1983) investigates the two versions of *Helgakviða Hundingsbana* in the light of oral transmission and decides that they are at least partially to be understood as the results of a written attempt to harmonize two oral versions. For him HH I is a skaldic revision of material that is present in an older form in HH II. In a more recent article (1996) he investigates the interaction between skaldic poetry and runes and finds that the fixed form of the runic inscriptions might have influenced the development of a fixed form in the orally transmitted poetry. Both Lönnroth and Harris (along with the handful of other researchers who have dealt with this question) recognize the inadequacy of the oral poetry theory in its traditional form for dealing with the special situation we find in the Old Norse poetries.

On the other hand, the common Germanic narrative poetry was, unless we are seriously misled, of the kind described by Parry and Lord, that is, “oral [epic] poetry” that was composed to some extent anew in each performance.⁸ This form of epic left its traces most clearly in Old English and Old Saxon narrative poetry, little of which is based on traditional subject matter. In spite of the new material provided by Biblical narratives and saints’ lives, we still find the formulaic language, the loose construction of the verses, and a widespread use of typical scenes and “themes,” many of which betray their source in oral heroic epic.⁹ All of these elements can be most efficiently explained as the use of a traditional poetic technique, a poetic register adapted from the oral epic by the first writers of narrative poetry in these languages. None of the surviving texts (including those on traditional subjects such as *Beowulf*) is an “oral” text in the purest sense; all were—as far as we can determine—conceived and executed as written poetry. If these poets were not using the techniques of an actual oral epic

⁸ The most recent objections to this theory (Andersson 1988; Schröder 1991; and Ebenbauer 2001) do not get beyond a reaffirmation of Heusler’s notion of the *Heldenlied*. All three articles are something of a *derrière garde* operation, but they represent a position that is still strong in medieval Germanistics.

⁹ One of the best explorations of the use of traditional themes derived from an oral epic is in an article (Andersson 1988) designed to prove the irrelevance of oral theory to the study of Germanic epic.

poetry, then we would have to imagine someone inventing a narrative style and language that looks very much like our idea of an oral epic, and that without reference to *The Singer of Tales*! One would also have to imagine that these same inventors made up numerous narrative patterns (Lord's "themes") that would be at home in heroic poetry, but have to be adjusted (not always successfully) for use in Biblical and hagiographic poetry.

The poems of the *Edda* are quite different. The similarities between the language and metrics of the Eddic poetry and the South Germanic tradition certainly point toward a common source just as the commonalities of vocabulary, grammar, and structure point toward a lost Germanic common language. The presence of continental legends in some of the Eddic poems strengthens this impression. These poems treat stories that are mentioned in Old English and Old High German poetry and are treated with Heusler's *epische Breite* (epic breadth) in Middle High German epic. There are, however, enough significant differences between the poems of the *Edda* and the South German poetry in matters of both style and form to suggest a relatively sharp break between the two traditions.

The poems that are generally called Eddic—the poems in the *Codex Regius* and those poems that are traditionally associated with them—do not form a uniform genre (Harris 1985). In order to make the following discussion as simple as possible, I shall be considering only the narrative poems of what is generally held to be the oldest layer in the collection such as the Sigurðr and Atli poems, in other words those that are closest to the epic in style and language. The prophetic songs, the large collection of wisdom-strophes, the riddle and flyting poems among the mythological poems, as well as the clearly late additions such as *Grípispá* or *Helreið Brynhildar*, are later stations on the line whose beginning I would like to sketch here (cf. Fidjestøl 1999).

The difference between the poems of the *Edda* and the common South Germanic form goes far beyond the difference between Old Icelandic and Old English as languages. For our concern here we need to consider the marks of oral composition first. The question of the oral formula plays an important role here, even though the formula concept itself has become problematic over the years. Germanistics has used a conception of the formula that arose independently of the oral-formulaic school and is perhaps best expressed in the attempt at a definition by de Boor (1925:379):

[die Formel ist] 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.

[the formula is] the formulation of a thought or concept, which has been recognized and adopted by the general public and thus become traditional, and which can occur at any time in the same—or almost the same—form in differing contexts.

Alliterating pair formulas like “Haus und Hof” (“house and courtyard”) or “Land und Leute” (“land and people”) are among those singled out for special attention. This notion was shared by *Germanistik* and Homeric studies. Writing in Europe at about the same time as de Boor, Parry may have set the oral poetry theory off a bit in the wrong direction by his insistence on using the traditionally defined formula as the backbone of his oral theory. His definition of the formula is couched in somewhat similar terms as de Boor’s with the addition of a metrical component: “The formula in the Homeric poems may be defined as *a group of words which is regularly employed under the same metrical conditions to express a given essential idea*” (Parry 1971:272, emphasis in original). Later studies have indicated that the basis of oral composition in performance may be more profitably sought in the metrical-syntactical patterns underlying the verse than in repeated phrases as such. Indeed, many repeated phrases seem to be more a product of such a metrically bound language than formulas in any traditional sense. Whether oral epic is produced by putting together fixed formulas as the version of the theory put forward for Old English poetry by Francis P. Magoun (1953) and generally by Lord (1960) suggests or whether the repeated phrases are simply the product of metrically shaped syntactical patterns being filled again and again by the same limited linguistic material, the fact remains that poetry whose language is derived from improvisatory oral epic has a much higher level of repeated phrases than does poetry composed individually line by line, whether this poetry is composed orally or on paper (Haymes 1980).

The *Atlakviða* is fairly certainly one of the older poems in the *Poetic Edda*.¹⁰ It is composed in a somewhat old-fashioned style and narrates its story without the help of prose insertions or other aids (if one ignores the notation at the end that the story is told *gleggra* (“more clearly”) in the *Atlamál*). This poem would have to stand closest to the traditional Germanic heroic song if there are any such songs in the *Edda* at all. It differs,

¹⁰ Quotes come from the edition by Neckel and Kuhn 1962. The parallel lines discussed below and in the appendix were sought with the help of Kellogg 1988. Alois Wolf (1999) has shown that even this poem is shot through with relatively “late” features. He also shows extensive evidence of skaldic influence in the surviving poem, further strengthening the argument made in this paper.

however, from the common South Germanic style specifically in those areas that should indicate oral epic composition. Differing studies (using differing criteria) have established that the Old English poetry that has been subjected to formulaic analysis has a formulaic density of some 20 to 30 percent (summarized in Foley 1988). The *Atlakviða* for its part shows a “formulaic” density of less than 10 percent and only 1.4 percent of the poem consists of lines that are repeated elsewhere in the Eddic corpus. Let us look a little closer at the repetitions involved. The percentage quoted above refers to some 25 verses that are repeated elsewhere in the Eddic corpus. Of these 25, however, 21 are repeated only in the *Atlakviða* itself. That means that only four verses of the poem belong to the tradition of Eddic language outside our poem. There are a couple of common formulas such as *sverði hvosso* (“with a sharp sword”; 19, 1b) or *þioðkonunga* (“of people’s kings”; 43, 5b) but these are very rare. The formulaic systems that, according to Donald K. Fry (1967), are the key to Old English formulaic verse are also almost wholly lacking. We do find the common *inquit*-formula *þa kvað Gunnarr* (“then Gunnar said that”; 23, 1a and 25, 1a) twice in the poem, which has 19 parallels elsewhere in the Eddic corpus. But both instances of this formula stand outside the strophic structure of the *Atlakviða* and must be read as a fifth line of the strophe, in other words as extrametrical and therefore possibly a later addition. These fifth lines are also filled out with the common heroic formulas *gumna drótinn* (“lord of men”; 23, 1b) and *geir-Niflunga* (“spear-Nibelung”; 25, 1b), which have no exact but many approximate parallels in the corpus.

The repeated lines are concentrated in the mirror-image depictions of the scenes in which the cook Hjalli is killed so that his heart can be substituted for Högni’s, and then—after Gunnar has recognized that the trembling heart could never have come from his brother—the action is repeated with Högni. This is clearly a repetition for rhetorical and poetic purposes, not a use of traditional building blocks. The other passages involving repeated verses also demonstrate that the repetitions are part of a conscious poetic construction. The whole-line expression “*mar inom mélgreyppa Myrcvið inn ókunna*” (“the horse with foaming-bridle [through] Mirkwood the unknown”) is used to describe Knéfröðr’s journey from Hunmörc to the Rhine in strophe 3 and later the return journey with Gunnar and Högni in strophe 13. Three further pairs of verses connect the two journeys. None of these repetitions can be considered formulaic in the sense of epic composition during performance, nor can they even be considered traditional formulas in the sense of the definition by de Boor cited above. They are clearly expressive poetic devices used to mark off parts of a poem and to connect related scenes.

If the Eddic poems are not the products of epic improvisation as described by Parry and Lord, then they must have been memorized and passed on with little or no change between performances. This means that both major verse forms we know from the earliest period in Old Norse/Old Icelandic literature were dependent on (more or less) verbatim memorization. They were “written poetry without writing,” to use Lord’s problematic term. Proceeding from this observation it is not a great leap to imagine the skalds as poets of the Eddic poems in their current form. Felix Genzmer suggested a long time ago (1926) that the early skald Þorbjörn Hornklofi might have been the poet of the *Atlakviða* (cf. Wolf 1999). In an earlier article (1919), Genzmer described the use of Eddic forms in skaldic poetry to generate what he called *eddische Preislieder*. Harris (1983) describes the commonalities between skaldic poetry and the Eddic poem he is discussing. As late as the early thirteenth century we have a named poet, Gunnlaugr Leifsson, composing a translation of the “Prophecies of Merlin” in the most conservative of the Eddic meters, the *fornyrðislag* (Kristjánsson 1997:332). The fact that the skalds made extensive use of Eddic meters and that Eddic poetry often shows similarities to skaldic poetry indicates strongly that the border between them was unclear and more importantly that the same poets and singers were involved with both genres. All of this suggests strongly that the skalds themselves are responsible for the shape of the poems at the time of their transcription in the thirteenth century.

We do need to ask why the skalds would compose such poetry. The Eddic poems were apparently never admired the same way skaldic poetry was. They were transmitted anonymously while most skaldic strophes have poets’ names attached to them, whether correct or not. It must remain a conjecture, but there are two plausible reasons for the skalds to have composed these poems. In the first place, the skalds needed a version of the heroic and mythical legends that they could present in their repertoire. Lord’s observation that memorized and improvised epic could not coexist in one performer is probably just as true for preliterate poetry as it is for the oral and written poetry of the *guslari*. Poets and singers who were used to memorizing their own and others’ verses would have been more comfortable with heroic and mythological songs with fixed texts. Secondly, the skalds needed a living knowledge of these songs among their audience if the fine points of their special language were to be understood. If Gisli Súrsson refers to Guðrún Gjukadóttir in strophe 12 of the *Gisla Saga*, then he has to assume that everyone who will hear his verse will also know some version of a *Sigurðarkviða*. Since we hear nothing about a special guild of heroic singers, it is highly probable that skaldic and Eddic poetry were passed on by the same singers. If we ask how such a poetry—based on the traditional

Germanic materials, but making use of certain compositional tools of the skalds—might look, then we would have to say that the results would appear very much like the narrative poems of the Codex Regius.

There are other characteristics these poems share with skaldic verse. The most striking formal difference between the Eddic poems and the South Germanic epic lies in the use of a strophe for the Norse poetry. This strophe binds together sequences of what are essentially the alliterative long lines of the southern tradition in strophes of at least four lines. The loose forward motion of the older epic is replaced by the four-square shape of the Eddic strophe. These strophes package the song in units that can be memorized more easily. Although the strophes of Eddic poetry are generally simpler than those common in skaldic poetry, we do find examples of skaldic poets using the Eddic meters for specific skaldic purposes.¹¹ In other words, the line dividing Eddic and skaldic verse could be crossed in both directions.

Throughout this paper I have tried to avoid the question of dating. I cited Genzmer's thesis that the ninth-century *skáld* Þorbjörn Hornklofi was the poet of the *Atlakviða* only to show the nearness of the Eddic to the skaldic style, not to place the composition in the murky past. I think the observations here are correct whether the change to the "Eddic" form took place in the ninth century or the twelfth. There is evidence of both early and late in the development of skaldic and Eddic forms, so we will always be left in the dark about whether the history of these forms is as the sagas tell us or whether the poems were largely composed late in order to fill in the blanks in the Icelanders' knowledge of their past. There may well be an element of truth in both concepts—probably no poem of the collection we call the *Poetic Edda* is very old in the form we have it, but many contain elements that *are* quite old. The composition and recomposition of the poems we know as Eddic probably went on throughout the preliterate period in Iceland. We know that the stories they preserved were somehow transmitted from the period of Migrations in the fourth, fifth, and sixth centuries to their being written down in Iceland in the thirteenth century. We have no idea when these poems achieved their "final" form, but the few Icelandic texts of the thirteenth century that make any mention of these poems assume them to be fixed entities. Both the *Snorra Edda* and the *Völsungasaga* quote from the Eddic texts in a form that is only slightly different from the texts we find in the Codex Regius. In fact, the best examples of variant texts are found within the Codex Regius collection itself: the two Helgi poems, the two Sigurd poems, and the two Atli poems are in each case variant poems on the

¹¹ Probably the best known example is the *Eiríksmál*, one of Genzmer's Eddic praise-songs.

same old story, each showing the way different poets handled the material (see Harris 1983; Andersson 1983).

If the poems of the *Poetic Edda* came into being as the recomposition of traditional materials by the skalds, then they certainly cannot be used as examples of the common Germanic *Heldenlied*. The tradition represented by the poems of the Edda are a new departure that tell us no more about their oral epic ancestors than, let us say, Middle High German heroic epic. That the ethos and plot of the *Atlakviða* look more ancient than the second half of the *Nibelungenlied* cannot be denied, but these characteristics can be seen just as easily as the result of a Norse (or more probably specifically Icelandic) recomposition than as an especially archaic form of the legend. The poems of the *Edda* do not belong to the type of oral epic described by Lord in his *Singer of Tales*, but observations derived from that study, from the study of Somali oral poetry, and from other studies of oral traditions may still help us to understand the history of both the Norse and the South Germanic epic traditions. The failure of the oral-formulaic method to describe the poems of the Edda shows that they belong to a different kind of oral poetry than that described by Lord. When we contrast this with the indications that the South Germanic heroic tradition as seen in the language of Old English and Old Saxon poetry do belong to that kind of poetry, it is apparent that the two traditions used different kinds of oral composition and transmission and that we cannot use the Norse poems as evidence for a description of the South Germanic tradition. In other words, I think we can now respond with a resounding “yes” to Werner Schröder’s (1991) rhetorical question “Ist das germanische Heldenlied ein Phantom?”¹²

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¹² A version of this article oriented toward Old Norse scholarship appeared in German as “Heldenlied und Eddalied” in *Erzählen im mittelalterlichen Skandinavien* (2000:9-20). I am indebted to Bruce Beatie, Robert Kellogg, Vésteinn Ólason, and Ármann Jakobsson for critical reading and suggestions.

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Appendix

The following is a list of all half-lines repeated in the *Atlakviða* along with those few that recur elsewhere in the *Edda* corpus. All quotes, line numbers, and abbreviations are those used in Neckel and Kuhn (1962).

Verses (= half-lines) that are repeated outside the *Atlakviða*:

6, 6 á Gnitaheiði: Grp. 11, 4.
 38, 8 oc buri svása: Hm. 10, 2
 39, 3 hringom rauðom: hringa rauða Rgn 15, 7; Gðr. II 25, 5
 43, 6 þioðkónunga: Hm. 4, 2; Ghv. 14; þioðkónungar Sg. 35, 6; 39, 10
 24, 1 Hló þá Högni Am. 65, 5

Verses that are repeated within the *Atlakviða*:

2, 3 vín í valhöllu : Akv. 14, 11
 3, 3-4 mar inom mélgreypa, Myrcvið inn ókunna;
 Akv. 13, 3-4 mar ina mélgreypa, Myrcvið inn ókunna
 4, 7 dafar darraða; Akv. 14, 9
 5, 3 af geiri gjallanda: Akv. 14, 15 með geiri gjallanda
 11, 2 arfi Niflunga; Akv. 27, 8
 13, 3-4 cf. 3, 3-4
 14, 9 cf. 4, 7
 14, 11 cf. 2, 3
 23, 3 hér hefi ec hiarta; Akv. 25, 3
 23, 4 Hialla ins blauða; Akv. 25, 6
 23, 6 Högna ins fræcan; Akv. 25, 4
 23, 8 er á bióði liggr; Akv. 25, 8
 23, 10 er í briósti lá; Akv. 25, 10 þá er í briósti lá
 25, 3 cf. 23, 3
 25, 4 cf. 23, 6
 25, 6 cf. 23, 4
 25, 8 cf. 23, 8
 25, 10 cf. 23, 10
 27, 8 cf. 11, 2

Formulaic systems:

23, 1 þá qvað þat Gunnar: cf. 25, 1 Mærr qvað þat Gunnar

þá qvað þat	Heimdallr Þrk. 15, 1
	Þórr Þrk. 17, 1
	Loki Þrk. 18, 1
	Prymr Þrk. 22, 1; 25, 1; 30, 1
	Sigrún HH. 54, 5
	Brynhildr Br. 10; 1, Gðr. I 23, 1; 25, 1
	Guðrún Br. 11, 1
	Herborg Gðr. I 6, 1
	Gullrönd Gðr. I 12, 1; 17, 1; 24, 1
	Hamðir Ghv. 4, 1; 8, 1
	Menja Grt. 4, 5 (18)

23, 1b gumna drótinn
 hafra drótinn Hym 20, 2; 31, 2
 ðursa drótinn Þrk. 6, 2; 11, 2
 Niára drótinn Vkv. 6, 2; 13, 2; 30, 8
 skatna drótinn Grp. 5, 2
 seggia drótinn Br. 6, 6
 Gotna drótinn Grp. 35, 6 (10)

24, 1 Hló þá Högni
 Hló þá Brynhildr Br. 10, 1; Sg. 30, 1
 Atla Gðr. III, 10, 1¹³
 Högni Am. 65, 5
 Jörmunrekr Hm. 20, 1 (5)

¹³ This is not, strictly speaking, a syntactic parallel. *Atla* is a dative object of the verb, rather than its subject as in all other examples. The subject occurs in the following half line “hugr í briósti.”