WORLD ORAL LITERATURE PROJECT

Oral Poetry

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Ruth Finnegan, *Oral Poetry*. Cambridge, UK: Open Book Publishers, 2025, https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0428

This is a revised and enlarged edition based on two previous editions of *Oral Poetry: Its Nature, Significance and Social Context* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977 and Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1992).

Digital material and resources associated with this volume are available at https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0428#resources

Information about any revised edition of this work will be provided at https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0428

ISBN Paperback: 978-1-80511-409-3

ISBN Hardback: 978-1-80511-410-9

ISBN PDF: 978-1-80511-411-6

ISBN HTML: 978-1-80511-413-0

ISBN EPUB: 978-1-80511-412-3

DOI: 10.11647/OBP.0428

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Cover design: Jeevanjot Kaur Nagpal

8. Poetry and society

The last chapter may seem like a mere list of possible functions and effects, with little analysis of the more difficult areas. But it is important to look at these down-to-earth questions first, before considering more abstruse ones, and to bear them in mind when approaching the monolithic theories that appear in 'the sociology of literature'. These more general theories are the subject of this chapter.

8.1 The link between poetic and social institutions

It seems obvious that the content and context of literature, and the way literary activity is organised are closely correlated with the institutions of the society in which it is situated. This emerges from any consideration of function and contexts, for these relate to specific social groupings in any society, and to its social occasions and activities.

It is clear too that the organisation of poetic activity plays a wider part in society, over and above the particular groups and occasions on which it is practised, and without the participants necessarily including this among their conscious intentions. There are a number of ways in which this can be approached.

The existence of specialist or expert poets, for one thing, is a part of the division of labour in that society, and when there is a distinct class of influential poets this provides one powerful group in society and perhaps a channel for mobility. Again, poetic practice may be connected with the patterns of economic exchange. Poetry can provide one means for an expert performer to supplement his basic livelihood with minor gifts or even substantial payments; or for a professional to depend wholly on his art in a society which has the economic resources to support a practitioner of this kind.

 https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0428.08

Poetry and its performance can also be seen as a way in which a heritage of artistic performance (and of social values and ideas) is passed on from one generation to another—with changes and development, no doubt, but providing a basic continuity of artistic form and outlook between generations. This is so whether the artistic process includes relatively specialist art-forms (like the heroic epic tradition in Yugoslavia and Central Asia or the witty *qene* short poem in Ethiopia), or when it comprises the less differentiated but still conventionally formulated oral art of cultures with less marked divisions between specialist and everyday performer.

The continuity of cultural tradition may extend, too, over space as well as time. In large and otherwise diverse countries and regions, the activities of poets have not infrequently played an important part in creating or maintaining cultural unity. This is so in the large and heterogeneous region of West African savannah in which travelling Mande-speaking minstrels have contributed to a certain cultural unity. In Ethiopia, the wandering *azmari* poets helped to create poetic uniformity among otherwise heterogeneous groups (Chadwick, III, 1940, p. 525) while in early Ireland the poets 'were the only national institution ... in the absence of towns or any centralized political system' (Green in Dillon, 1954, p. 85). This type of cultural influence has been noted in many other areas, from the territories of mediaeval Europe traversed by travelling minstrels to the widespread poetic culture of China and Tibet, and any analysis of social relationships throughout the area would have to include the effects of this poetic activity.

Even a brief list like this of probable connections between poetic activity and the general functioning of society shows that both the links between poetic activity and the society in which it takes place, and its over-all functions in that society can be of far-reaching importance. One can neither understand the organisation of literary activity in isolation from its social setting, nor grasp the functioning of the society without reference to the poetic activity which takes place among its members.

So much is easy to say: to go on and give a precise formulation is more difficult. To say that there is a relationship between 'society' and 'poetry', and that neither can be fully understood without reference to the other, is too general to be meaningful—even though it is the kind of point an analyst of oral poetry will want to make, particularly in the face

of accounts which treat oral poetry as mere 'texts' without reference to their social settings and significance, or which ignore the part played by literature in the general functioning of society.

One way of trying to grasp the precise relationship is to avoid the more *general* propositions, and instead to analyse the realisation of oral poetry in a specific society at a given time. This is the kind of analysis which gives meaning to generalities.

This sort of study has not been as common as one might suppose. Researchers with a primarily literary interest have tended to concentrate on stylistic and textual matters and taken little interest in the *social* organisation of poetry or its wider effects, while sociologists and anthropologists have often gone for analysis of the overtly political and officially recognised groupings rather than the activities of poets: when poetry has been considered it has often been relegated to some neat pre-determined category. Even the accounts that are available tend to concentrate on certain aspects—not surprisingly, since oral poetry has an infinite range of ramifications, not all of which can be encapsulated in a single account.

But there are some illuminating accounts, and brief reference to two or three may be useful to the reader who wants to follow up more detailed treatments of the ways in which poetic activity and its results can be seen to fit into society.

One of the first instances to come to mind is that of the Somali of the Horn of Africa. It is not accident that they have been referred to frequently, for Somali poetry in its social background is among the more fully analysed cases of oral literature. In the various works by Johnson, Lewis, Mumin, and, above all, Andrzejewski, the historical, cultural and political setting is fully analysed, showing the roles it plays both in the' traditional' nomadic and rural setting and in the modern urban context of entertainment, politics and 'revolution', by word of mouth, radio and dramatic performance to enthusiastic audiences. A very different treatment of the role of poetry within a small closed setting is Jackson's brilliant account (1972) of songs in Texas prisons, from which the description of Johnnie Smith was drawn in chapter 6. Again, there is Strehlow's detailed and impressive analysis (1971) of the style and setting of Aranda and Loritja poetry in Central Australia

and the relation of these poems to totemic ceremonies as well as to more informal occasions.

8.2 Does one type of poetry always go with a particular form of society? 'Heroic age', 'ballad society' and 'oral culture'

Specific cases provide the kind of insights impossible to achieve through generalities, and are clearly to be pursued in their own right. In the end it is only through such specific studies that we can understand the detailed ways in which poetry actually functions within society.

Many analysts however are not content with descriptions of specific historical cases, but are interested in wider patterns. This is a typically sociological tendency: to try to find general relationships and types, rather than resting satisfied with the unique case. It is natural too to speculate that certain kinds of poetry—heroic epic for instance—may fit especially well with a certain type of social order and to wish to try to construct typologies of this kind. Indeed this is not just a recent question. Attempts to connect type of poetry and stage of society were consistent with the romantic and evolutionist interests of many nineteenth-century thinkers. And Victor Hugo probably epitomises fairly well one general approach to the subject when he writes in his *Preface to Cromwell* (1827): 'To sum up hurriedly the facts that we have noted thus far, poetry has three periods, each of which corresponds to an epoch of civilization: the ode, the epic, and the drama. Primitive times are lyrical, ancient times epical, modern times dramatic' (Quoted in Anderson and Warnock, 1967, p. 335).

There have been more recent attempts to discover such wider patterns, and to try to relate certain types of society to certain types of poetry and poetic activity. Among these are the theories concerning the relationship of heroic poetry and 'heroic age' societies as put forward by the Chadwicks, the postulation of the typical 'ballad society' by a number of ballad scholars, and the type of discussion of 'oral culture' fostered by the work of McLuhan and others.

The view of H. M. Chadwick that heroic epic most naturally and commonly goes with a 'heroic' type of society is perhaps the most immediately appealing. It was first proposed in *The Heroic Age*, first

published in 1912, and was then taken up in joint publications by him and his wife Nora Chadwick and later by C. M. Bowra.

Chadwick points out the basic similarities in a number of the poems usually classed together as 'epic'. He prefers the term 'heroic poem' and points to the basic similarity in such poems as the *Iliad,* the *Odyssey* and early Teutonic epic. Parallel forms were also noted among the Mongols, Tatars, Finns, Tamil, Serbs and many others. These poems resemble each other not only in being narrative and designed primarily for entertainment, but also because of a basic likeness in outlook. There is a concentration on the adventures of human beings who act as heroes, fired by the longing for fame and glory. 'The outstanding feature is a pronounced individual interest, both as shown by the poet or narrator, and as attributed to the characters themselves' (Chadwick, III, 1940, p. 727). Chadwick claims, further, that 'the resemblances in the poems are due primarily to resemblances in the ages to which they relate and to which they ultimately owe their origin' (Chadwick, 1926, p. viii). The society in which this epic arises is, he suggests, characterised by an aristocratic and military ethos, itself reinforced by the existence of court minstrels who praise the dominant warrior princes. This is 'the heroic age'. Many societies have had a 'heroic age'—a period in which the splendid deeds of heroes eclipsed all that came later. But in different societies this heroic stage came at different epochs. For the Greeks it was set far back, around and after the fall of Troy, for Russians in the glorious age of Vladimir Monomakh in the twelfth century, for the Southern Serbs in the period before the Turkish destruction of the old Serbian kingdom at Kosovo in 1389, and so on (Chadwick, III, 1940, pp. 727ff; Bowra, 1957, p. 3). It was from these 'similar social and political conditions' that the widely found parallelisms in epic poetry arose (Chad wicks, I, 1932, p. xiii).

For the Chadwicks, the primary evidence on which this theory rested was to be found in the poems themselves. It is significant that it is often unclear in their discussion of the 'heroic age' whether this term refers to the period in which the poems were composed, or to the society actually depicted in the poems. The reason for this is that though they occasionally distinguish between them, the Chadwicks regard them as basically one and the same. Their view is that the poems were primarily composed as celebratory accounts of the deeds of contemporary warrior

princes and heroes: as such, they assume, the poems give a more or less exact picture of current conditions. For an 'accurate description of the Heroic Age' one should therefore look at its literature (Chadwick, III, 1940, p. 731).

If one accepts these two assumptions, the Chadwicks' connection between heroic poetry and the 'heroic' stage of society looks *prima facie* uncontestable. But serious doubts arise.

First, the kind of poetry widely regarded as 'heroic' or 'epic' does not *just* arise in the situation envisaged as natural by the Chadwicks. The poems of twentieth-century Yugoslav minstrels do not celebrate the deeds of warlike contemporaries, but tell the adventures of a long-vanished, glorious and largely imaginary past to local audiences who had gathered in a neighbour's house in the rural village or in coffee shops in town. And yet, as Lord and Parry have argued, these epic poems are as 'authentic' and original as any epic text from the classical past. If this can happen now how can we be certain that, for past epic, only one context was the typical and natural one?

The second difficulty lies in the Chadwicks' implicit acceptance of the reflection theory of literature—the idea that the minstrel gives an accurate picture of the world around him. This is extremely doubtful. May he not be equally likely to select and distort or magnify what he sees? or not to compose directly about what he sees, but to draw on a world of imagination coloured by literary motif and convention as well as by his personal experience? Depicting a heroic society and a heroic ethos in poetry does not mean that this is the historical reality of the society in which the poet *himself* lives and works.

Once this *necessary* link is questioned between content of poem and society in which it is composed, the whole theory becomes more doubtful. Which of the two is being talked about—poetic image or historical reality—is often ambiguous, and trying to resolve the ambiguity either dissolves the theory or else proves it untenable in certain respects. For it is not true that it is only in the aristocratic and warrior-dominated period described by the Chadwicks that heroic poetry arises (unless the definition of 'heroic' becomes circular—which is an evident danger). Similarly, warlike and aristocratic societies may flourish without necessarily producing the kind of epic poetry

postulated by the Chadwicks—witness the stress on panegyric rather than narrative poetry in a number of earlier African kingdoms.

The whole concept of a 'heroic age' tends to dissolve, both when one questions the assumption that the evidence and justification for it can be found in the poem itself, and also when one looks more closely at the terms in which the Chadwicks characterise it. It is seen as 'essentially a barbaric period', coming between the stages of 'primitive' and of 'civilized' times. The terminology reflects the evolutionist models of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. But these simple models of development of society have been increasingly under fire as the complexity, even the messiness, of historical development are more fully realised. When the concept of broad evolutionary stages of society itself comes into question, much of the plausibility of the 'heroic stage' tends to vanish. One is left asking whether there is evidence that societies in which epic poetry has flourished (or does flourish) were all at a roughly identical stage of development? The doubts must be intensified by more recent embellishments of the idea of a 'heroic age'. I am thinking primarily of Bowra's mystical delineation of it as 'a crucial and dramatic stage in the emergence of the individual from the mass', and his contrast between the heroic society and those societies which never reached that stage but 'stayed congealed in a world of tribal terrors and tabus' and of 'theocratic absolutism' (Bowra, 1957, pp. 8 and 28). Even the Chadwicks' more moderately stated theory must remain doubtful until backed by evidence which does not depend on assumptions based on the simple evolutionary sequence of development—or on circular definitions.

I may seem to be dismissing an important and appealing theory very cursorily. And I do not think that it can in the end stand up to analysis. Nevertheless it was a richly productive theory and stimulated much further work. It was, for once, a *comparative* theory and—even before the 'oral-formulaic' approach—led outwards from conventional studies of classical literature to other European literature and then to oral literature throughout the world. It was the impetus of this theory which led, eventually, to the magnificent and unparalleled three-volume work on *The Growth of Literature* which occupied so many years of research by the Chadwicks. They state this genesis explicitly in the Preface to the first volume published in 1932.

> Twenty years ago in *The Heroic Age* one of the authors called attention to many striking analogies between ancient Teutonic and Greek heroic poetry, and endeavoured to show that these were due to parallel development, arising from similar social and political conditions. Subsequent study convinced him that this parallel development between the two literatures was by no means limited to the category or genre in question ...
>
> About nine or ten years ago both authors began to take the work seriously in hand. By this time we had realised that in order to obtain a sound basis for such comparative study it was necessary to make a detailed examination of other literatures, both ancient and backward. But in the course of the next two or three years we became more interested in the general aspect of the problem than in its special application to ancient Teutonic and Greek literature. Hence the work has changed its character and grown to much larger dimensions than was at first intended.
>
> (Chadwick, I, 1932, p. xiii)

The Chadwicks themselves in the end had some doubts of the validity of their initial theory, and modern evidence and analysis have cast further doubts, but this in no way diminishes the intellectual stimulus their work has provided to the comparative study of literature. It will remain one of the classic theories in the field and continues to stimulate scholars.

Another attempt to relate type of poetry to type of society is found in the efforts of a number of scholars to delineate the kind of society in which ballads typically arise—the 'ballad society'. Its nature has been characterised in slightly different ways, but recurrent elements are its supposed isolation, its homogeneity, and its reliance on oral culture. The typical background of European ballads is envisaged, for instance, as a 'small, stable and self-sufficient' community (Entwistle, 1951, p. 7) based on localised governments and norms, 'self-centred and self-sufficient, attached to their own soil by instinctive patriotism' (ibid. 1951, p. 7). Lack of writing is also important—'the *sine qua non* of traditional ballad societies was their non-literacy' (Buchan, 1972, p. 17). For Hendron, similarly, the 'generic characteristics' of a typical 'folksinger' (of which the ballad singer is taken to be the prime example) are that '(1) he lives in a rural or isolated region which (2) shuts him off from prolonged schooling and contact with industrialized urban civilization, so that (3) his cultural training is oral rather than visual' (Hendron, 1961, p. 7). On

one view the ballads were originally aristocratic and later went 'down the social scale, as the tastes of the upper classes changed and drew further away from those of the peasantry', so that 'the traditional ballad became mainly a peasant art' (Hodgart, 1950, p. 138); while for others the 'typical' ballad society is prim agreement that 'the ballad society' is typically a 'folk' and isolated one, based on oral transmission, and that ballads essentially and typically belong 'to the whole people' (Hodgart, 1950, p. 138).

The localised, non-literate and basically homogeneous qualities of this ballad society are envisaged not only as the 'typical' setting for the creation and performance of ballads but, by some analysts, as pre-conditions of their existence—'necessary for the ballads' survival' (Hodgart, 1950, p. 138). This is seen as a parallel to the other conditions (those of 'the heroic society') necessary for heroic poetry.

> The ballad community is essentially mediaeval, in contrast not only to modern but to pre-mediaeval society like that of the wandering Germanic peoples. The latter had their own distinctive kind of poetry, the heroic epic, which is national in that it is about the leaders of the whole people; whereas the ballad is local, and deals only with the affairs of a small, static group.
>
> (Hodgart, 1950, p. 131)

In this kind of approach, ballads are seen as essentially dependent on a certain set of social conditions for their origin or survival—and the relationship between ballads and their 'homogeneous agricultural and feudal environment' can be assumed 'in view of the dependence of literature on social environment' (Housman, 1952, p. 43).

It is worth remembering the background to this concept of the 'ballad society'. It is an attempt to give more precise formulation to the accepted connection between 'society' and poetry, and gains apparent backing from the cluster of ideas about the 'folk society' discussed (and queried) earlier. It also appears to command considerable support from the empirical evidence. In historical terms, what are classified as 'European ballads' did indeed emerge into notice 'after the great migrations and crusades have subsided, and medieval man has settled down to cultivate his own acre', as Entwistle has it (1951, p.

91). Similarities have been noted in a wide range of mediaeval societies ranging from the Danish society commented on by Olrik to the North-East and Border areas of Scotland from the fourteenth to the eighteenth centuries described by Buchan (1972, chapter 3). The theories based on the evidence have been given support by the discovery of existing (or recent) cultures in which 'traditional' ballads have survived, arguably by oral means, and which seem to show the same characteristics as the mediaeval societies in which the ballad first grew up. There are, for instance, the dance-ballads documented in the nineteenth century from the remote Faroe Islands (Kershaw, 1921), or what appeared to be ballads recorded in the far north of Russian or the Serbian mountains. Even more striking support seemed to be provided by the research of Sharp and others in the Southern Highlands of the United States, the Southern Appalachian Mountains. Here ballads flourished early this century, and the social context presented by Sharp seemed to constitute a typical 'ballad society' isolated from urban civilisation, nearly self-supporting, illiterate and sharing a common cultural heritage of song. Maud Karpeles describes her view of this society, when she and Sharp visited it in 1916–18.

> The mountain regions of North Carolina, Tennessee, Virginia, and Kentucky are inhabited by people whose ancestors left the British Isles some two hundred years previously. Until recently they had been more or less cut off from the rest of the world on account of the mountainous nature of the country. Fifty years ago, when we were there, there were few roads: just rough tracks over the mountains or alongside the rivers, or even at times in the river-bed itself. The mountain people lived in small, more or less self-contained communities, for the most part in primitive log-cabins. They scratched the soil and provided for their own subsistence. Few could read or write, but they had a fine inherited culture and this was nowhere more apparent than in their songs: folk songs of British origin. Everyone sang them, old and young alike, and they sang little else. In fact, throughout our stay in the mountains we never heard a bad tune, except occasionally when we were staying at a missionary settlement.
>
> (Karpeles, 1973, pp. 96–7)

In the light of this evidence, it seemed reasonable to speak of the typical 'ballad society', and to go on to postulate causal links between

the conditions pertaining to this type of society and the type of literary genre known as the ballad.

But the matter is more complicated than appears. It is questionable, for instance, how far the postulated characteristics are really applicable to all the societies in which ballads have arisen or have been in circulation. *Are* they so isolated and so cut off from the influence of written literature, for instance? The model in the minds of many proponents of these theories is that of 'pure oral tradition', separate and independent from written forms: the written ballads when they do obtrude themselves, are regarded as 'interference' (Hodgart, 1950, p. 138) or as exerting a 'detrimental influence upon the words of the folk-ballad' and 'vastly inferior to the genuine peasant song' (Sharp, 1972, pp. 125–6). But, as we saw in chapter 5, this model of separation between the 'pure' and 'genuine' 'traditional ballad', and written or broadside forms may appeal to the romantic, but does not accord with the facts of distribution and transmission. Written and oral forms interact and overlap, and—above all with ballads—any attempt at a clear-cut distinction between the 'traditional' 'oral' ballad and the broadside and written ballads quickly breaks down.

'Isolation' and 'self sufficiency' too are very relative terms—highly appropriate to the romantic's model of 'folk society', but not easy to apply unambiguously to actual historical periods. *Were* the mediaeval communities in which ballads are first noted so isolated culturally? What about the effects of wandering minstrels, of the church, of travelling merchants or of popular protest movements? Again, one's faith in the 'isolation' of the Appalachian mountain villages is slightly shaken when one realises that, even in Sharp's time, there were schools, hotels and sizeable towns as well as missionaries in the area; and recent American scholars have suggested that Sharp's view of isolation was much exaggerated. The clear outlines initially demarcating the 'ballad society' from others begin to become blurred when one considers them in detail, and 'ballad societies' are no longer so easily distinguishable.

A further difficulty lies in the ambiguity of the relationship posited between the existence of ballads and the society in which they are circulated.

Merely speaking of 'a ballad society' may sound unexceptionable. But to ask about possible causal relationships immediately brings difficulty. Is a 'ballad society' of the kind described a necessary condition for the existence of ballads? If so, (apart from the ambiguities in the concept itself) how is one to explain the existence of what have been described as 'ballads' in mediaeval China, or of urban broadside ballads, or the popularity of 'ballads' in contexts of all kinds today, urban and commercial as well as amateur and rural? Is it that a society of the type envisaged (supposing this to be clearly distinguishable) is a sufficient condition for the emergence and circulation of ballads? This seems even less tenable, for there have been many groups (in Africa and elsewhere) that romantics would claim to be self-evidently parallel to their traditional 'ballad societies' where ballads in the general sense of 'a narrative song in which the action is focused on a single episode' (to take Karpeles's definition, 1973, p. 39) are *not* particularly significant.[1]

One way round these difficulties is a more rigorous definition of the term 'ballad'. After all, many kinds of song and poem have been broadly classed under this term, some very different from others, and sometimes including what in other contexts writers call 'heroic poetry' or even 'lyric'. Some ballad scholars have tried, by implication at least, to narrow the term through their insistence that they are concerned only with 'traditional' and 'genuine', or perhaps only with 'mediaeval' ballads, and that their theories apply only to them. This certainly makes the possible relationship more specific (if less interesting), but only too often results in tautology. If *only* those 'ballads' and those 'societies' are to count which fit with the pre-defined model (non-literate, 'folk', and 'isolated'), then the theory becomes circular and can tell us nothing of interest about real relationships.

The attractive theory of a relationship between a particular type of society and a particular genre of poetry turns out to be less promising than it seemed at first sight. Its initial attraction lies largely in its ambiguity, and once one tries to resolve this it turns out to be either tautologous or, at best, doubtful (when not positively wrong) as to the facts.

1 This is not to say that such societies did in fact correspond with the romantic 'folk culture' envisaged by such theorists, any more than the Alpacian Mountain once did.

This is worth emphasising, since this kind of theory, postulating a general relationship between type of poetry and social setting, is just the sort that is, rightly, bound to attract interest. It has been popular among ballad scholars, and has been influential. But, though further research on specific aspects of its factual suggestions may be useful, the assumption that it is necessarily proven can be misleading. This is especially so when the theory is used as a basis for historical speculation about what 'would naturally' happen or 'must have been so' in a period for which historical evidence is lacking or not easily accessible. That this is a temptation today as in the earlier days of ballad scholarship is shown by Buchan's interesting analysis of ballads in North-East Scotland. In his discussion of the social background of the earlier period, his approach is speculative, resting on the *theory* of a 'ballad society' rather than direct factual evidence.

> The social patterns that obtained in the rural Northeast from the mid-fourteenth to the mid-eighteenth centuries undoubtedly provided an atmosphere conducive to the singing of traditional tales ... conditions in labour and living where an oral culture would naturally thrive ... such a community as the toun, unlettered, comparatively isolated and self-reliant, living and working co-operatively, would provide an eminently suitable environment for a sturdy oral tradition. An oral culture would thrive in the communal environment, because the processes of oral transmission depend upon corporate activity.
>
> (Buchan 1972, pp. 18, 26)

When reading apparently confident assertions of this kind, it is well to remember that causal connections between the efflorescence of ballads and particular patterns of social organisation are not proved. If anything, the contrary seems to be the case. In other words, insofar as they are a distinct literary genre, ballads, like other forms of literature, seem to be relatively free-floating rather than definitively linked to one form of social organisation—'dependent on the social environment' as Housman had it—and they provide a literary form which people can, if they choose, adapt to many different purposes and contexts.

Besides the attempt to relate types of society to literary genres in terms like the 'heroic age' and 'ballad society'—both related to earlier

evolutionary approaches—there have been a few interesting attempts to correlate specific literary phenomena with particular types of society or of political organisation. Lomax, for instance, has suggested that acephaly in singing correlates with a well-integrated social organisation, such as the Australian—a suggestion that Greenway, for one, would dispute, citing the significantly 'individualistic' nature of much singing in Australia (Greenway, 1964, p. 175)—or, again, that the style and mood of local singing bears some constant relationship to the treatment of women and the over-all sexual mores of a society (Lomax, 1959).

Among these theories one deserves greater attention and must be treated in some detail. This is the theory particularly associated with Marshall McLuhan, about the significance of 'oral culture' and its differentiation from the 'visual' culture of the written word.

McLuhan's basic theory postulates a crucial difference between the world of 'typographic man', whose universe depends on the visual written word, and that of 'oral' or 'auditory man', which includes both the culture of non-literate peoples, untouched by writing, and the 'post-literate' world, in which once again 'oral modes' flourish. In the view of McLuhan and his associates, crucial factors both in social organisation and man's psychical make-up and perceptions, have to do with the technology of communications. The presence or absence of writing is, apparently, the single most important factor for the development of cultural and psychological forms, and to this can be linked the whole range of social and economic institutions that we associate with modern civilisation.

> Until WRITING was invented, we lived in acoustic space, where the Eskimo now lives: boundless, directionless, horizonless, the dark of the mind, the world of emotion, primordial intuition, terror ... A goose quill put an end to talk, abolished mystery, gave us enclosed space and towns, brought roads and armies and bureaucracies. It was the basic metaphor with which the cycle of CIVILIZATION began, the step from the dark into the light of the mind.
>
> (McLuhan, 1970, pp. 13–14)

These views—emotive and ambiguous as they often are—have recently had a considerable vogue, and it may seem an irrelevant pandering to

fashion to bring them in here. But it is often not realised that McLuhan's stance in *The Gutenberg Galaxy*, where he formulates his views about 'typographic man', was directly influenced by Lord and Parry's studies of oral literature among the Yugoslav minstrels. McLuhan makes this clear at the outset of *The Gutenberg Galaxy*, where he opens his 'Prologue' with the following words:

> The present volume is in many respects complementary to *The Singer of Tales* by Albert B. Lord. Professor Lord has continued the work of Milman Parry, whose Homeric studies had led him to consider how oral and written poetry naturally followed diverse patterns and functions. Convinced that the poems of Homer were oral compositions, Parry 'set himself the task of proving incontrovertibly if it were possible, the oral character of the poems, and to that end he turned to the study of the Yugoslav epics'. His study of these modern epics was, he explained, 'to fix with exactness the *form* of oral story poetry ... Its method was to observe singers working in a thriving tradition of unlettered song and see how the form of their songs hangs upon their having to learn and practice their art without reading and writing'.
>
> Professor Lord's book, like the studies of Milman Parry, is quite natural and appropriate to our electric age, as *The Gutenberg Galaxy* may help to explain. We are today as far into the electric age as the Elizabethans had advanced into the typographical and mechanical age. And we are experiencing the same confusions and indecisions which they had felt when living simultaneously in two contrasted forms of society and experience. Whereas the Elizabethans were poised between medieval corporate experience and modern individualism, we reverse their pattern by confronting an electric technology which would seem to render individualism obsolete and the corporate interdependence mandatory.
>
> Patrick Cruttwell had devoted an entire study (*The Shakespearean Moment*) to the artistic strategies born of the Elizabethan experience of living in a divided world that was dissolving and resolving at the same time. We, too, live at such a moment of interplay of contrasted cultures, and *The Gutenberg Galaxy* is intended to trace the ways in which the *forms* of experience and of mental outlook and expression have been modified, first by the phonetic alphabet and then by printing. The enterprise which Milman Parry undertook with reference to the contrasted *forms* of oral and written poetry is here extended to the *forms* of thought and the organization of experience in society and politics.
>
> (McLuhan, 1967, p. 1)

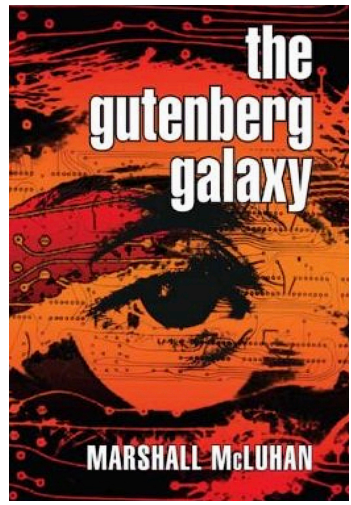

Fig. 8.1. The cover of M. McLuhan. *The Gutenberg Galaxy* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1962). Wikimedia, https://www.wikiwand.com/en/articles/The_Gutenberg_Galaxy#/media/File:The_Gutenberg_Galaxy,_first_edition.jpg

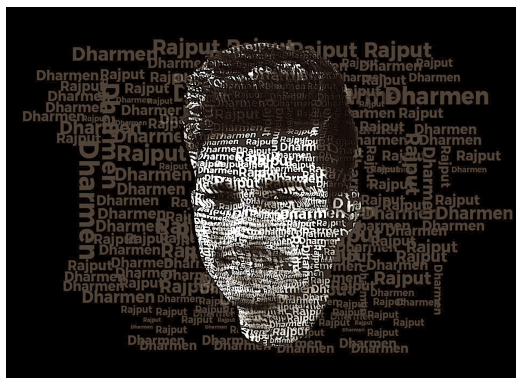

Fig. 8.2. 'Typographic man' caricature. Pixabay, https://pixabay.com/photos/black-typography-man-boy-fonts-2189642/

Some of McLuhan's stimulus was thus derived from the claims in *The Singer of Tales* about the oral nature of Yugoslav rural culture and the special way in which 'oral composition' took place, in a mode—according to Parry and Lord—essentially different from that characteristic of written composition. For this reason alone, McLuhan's theory is worth some attention and re-appraisal in the light of recent assessments of the work of Parry and Lord.

Moreover it is of interest to students of oral poetry to consider how far the postulates of McLuhan and others as to the nature of 'oral culture' are valid: for, if they are, oral poetry must be seen as arising from, and existing in, the context of that culture. Finally, this theory (or group of theories) is worth considering as yet another attempt to sketch out a relationship between poetry and society—in this case between poetry and a certain configuration of cultural and psychological realities.

McLuhan's view of 'literate man' and his culture is of a mechanised, hyper-individualistic and narrowly bureaucratic form of association. In contrast to what he regards as the more emotionally integrated and warmly co-operative world of oral culture, the focus is overwhelmingly on *one* of the senses only: the visual one. Man is 'typographic man'—detached, aloof, over-specialised and cut off from the kind of psychic and emotional unity possible in an 'oral' culture. In non-literate culture, by contrast, man is whole and integrated, closely and emotionally involved with the group of which he forms part, and living in a homogeneous and stable community, rather than the 'visual or civilized and fragmented world' of modern urban life. The increasingly oral nature of modern culture, with its emphasis on oral modes, for instance in jazz and the non-written media of radio and television, brings some of the same consequences. 'Electronic man' has regained the emotional involvement and wholeness of the older 'tribal' man, and once again all his senses are in play. 'In post-literate acoustic space ... we have regained our sensorial WHOLENESS' says McLuhan (1970, p. 16); so we can be 'retribalised' and give up the 'aloof and dissociated role of the literate Westerner' so long imposed on us by the limiting and dryly academic medium of print (1967, p. 12).

> An increase in visual component in any society creates specialism, alienation, fragmentation, civilization, etc. The decrease in the same, as via TV, creates involvement, tribalization, visceral awareness, etc. ... We begin again to structure the primordial feelings and emotions from which 3000 years of literacy divorced us. We begin again to live a myth.
>
> (McLuhan, 1970, pp. 33, 17)

Though McLuhan and his followers write largely in terms of 'man'—'tribal man', 'typographic man', 'electronic man' and so on—it is clear that certain assumptions are made about the nature of the society at

large in which such men exist. 'Oral culture', it seems, involves a warm, closely-knit, non-individualistic and communal society, in which 'rationality' has little play, and action and decisions are taken on a 'corporate' basis within 'the web of kinship' (19671 pp. 88ff). Literate culture on the other hand implies an emphasis on bureaucracy with its 'rational' norms, on large-scale organisation, and on the power of the written word over people's lives.

This kind of approach (at least in part) has also, predictably, been taken up with enthusiasm by a number of those preoccupied with sketching out the 'folk society' and the workings of 'folk tradition' and so on. David Buchan in his recent book on *The Ballad and the Folk* asserts the importance of *The Gutenberg Galaxy* for the study of oral literature, and goes on to speak in terms of 'the oral mind' and the conditions in which 'an oral culture would naturally thrive' (Buchan, 19721 pp. 21 276, 18). McLuhan, it seems, has much to say to some students of oral poetry and its social context.

This is only a brief sketch of the main lines of McLuhan's theory—full understanding of this and associated approaches would involve a more detailed account of his writing, and also that of scholars like H. A. Innis or W. J. Ong (for a fuller account of aspects of this approach see Finnegan, 1975). But enough has been said to show the relevance of the approach as at least a background to the study of oral literature.

In some respects, this general approach has been valuable. It has helped to intensify the current questioning of print as the purveyor of 'proper' culture, and to encourage study of other forms—not only the oral literature of far-off and non-literate peoples but also the oral forms conveyed here and now by word of mouth, radio, television, tape recorder and so forth. The establishment of such forms as a proper area for study, and the awareness of parallels between the so-called 'primitive' and the contemporary industrial world have not been due to McLuhan alone. But he has been adept at taking up such points—along with some of the emotive overtones that so commend themselves to romantics—and giving them a popular appeal to a wider public.

Useful too is the insistence that there are various modes of apprehending reality, and that it is mistaken to regard writing as self-evidently the 'best'. McLuhan and others have helped to remind us that writing may have its drawbacks (and so, he might have added, have

oral media) and that it can be misleading to apply the criteria of written literature to oral forms.

Much in the approach (or the movement) propagated by McLuhan and his followers has therefore been to the good. But, as will be clear from the main lines of argument earlier in this book, I have many doubts about its validity or even—in the end—its usefulness.

The ambiguities and emotive style of McLuhan's writings have been pointed out elsewhere (e.g. Miller, 1971; Finnegan, 1975), and need not be pursued here. It is relevant to take up those main points from his and similar writings which, despite the lack of rigorous argument and clarification, do relate to the study of oral poetry.

The first is that there is something called 'oral culture' and typified in 'acoustic' or 'auditory man' which is essentially to be differentiated from a culture in which writing is the pre-eminent mode of communication and man is 'typographic man'.

> Civilization is built on literacy because literacy is a uniform processing of a culture by a visual sense extended in space and time by the alphabet. In tribal cultures, experience is arranged by a dominant auditory sense-life that represses visual values. The auditory sense, unlike the cool and neutral eye, is hyper-esthetic and delicate and all-inclusive. Oral cultures act and react at the same time. Phonetic culture endows men with the means of repressing their feelings and emotions when engaged in action. To act without reacting, without involvement, is the peculiar advantage of Western literate man.
>
> (McLuhan, 1967, p. 96)

But is this radical divide between 'oral' and 'written' modes, 'oral' and 'visual' cultures, intelligible and valid? In the initial excitement stirred up by the apparent 'discovery' by Parry and Lord of the special form taken by oral composition and published in *The Singer of Tales,* it must have seemed so. Lord stresses the incompatibility of' oral' and 'written' composition, and concludes that once a minstrel takes in the concept of written composition he loses his oral ability (see quotation on p. 160). Furthermore, he and Parry had apparently discovered the secret of this special oral procedure: composition in the process of performance, using the 'oral formulaic' style—a style which itself, according to strict Parry-Lord theorists, was an infallible sign of 'oral composition'.

It was explained in chapter 3 that this initial acceptance of the Lord-Parry research was too categorical. By now many students of the subject have become sceptical about claims that a formulaic style is a dependable sign of oral composition, and there are also indications that 'oral composition' need not always be on the Yugoslav model (joint composition-performance) and that oral and written modes may not really be incompatible after all (see above chapters 3 and 5). In fact, the distinction between 'oral' and 'written' is now realised to be far less sharp than was once thought, at any rate in the context of literature. And if *that* line has become blurred, it is surely much harder than it must initially have seemed to McLuhan to make the clear differentiation between 'oral' and 'visual' cultures, with all that, in his argument, flows from it.

A second related question is whether what McLuhan would term an 'oral culture' necessarily has the postulated characteristics at all. For McLuhan and others, the world of the Zulu or the Inuit is presumably a typically 'oral' one, in which written literature has been relatively recent and the traditional forms of communication dependent on 'oral' not 'visual' means. But it is hard to recognise McLuhan's 'oral culture' in these societies. Consider, on the one hand, the aristocratic and aggressive ethos of the Zulu, resulting in the effective empire-building of the great Zulu king Shaka through his innovation of the short stabbing spear—or consider on the other the deeply personal meditative poetry of the Inuit poet, composed in long hours of poetic effort, pacing outside in solitude. These are just a few of the relevant factors, in two societies. A full refutation would inevitably fill a book; it must suffice to say that anyone acquainted with research on societies of this kind is likely to find laughably over-simplified and off the mark such generalising comments as 'tribal cultures cannot entertain the possibility of the individual or of the separate citizen' or their 'tribal trance of resonating word magic' (McLuhan, 1967, p. 94) or 'the boundless, directionless, horizonless ... dark of the mind' of non-literate culture (1970, p. 13).

This basic divide between our modern industrial society—mechanised, rational, individual and literate—and the primitive 'them', dominated by magic, communal norms and oral communication, and somehow mystically closer to nature than ourselves—this distinction has had great popularity with sociologists (often via the technical-sounding

concepts of *Gesellschaft* and *Gemeinschaft* and others) as well as with romantics who like to dream of the vanished world of integrated emotion and natural feeling which we have lost. This is an old distinction that McLuhan has latched onto—but its antiquity does not make it a good one (even when it is embellished with the extension of a post-industrial reversion to the 'primitive'), and the plenitude of facts that are now known about the complexity and variety of cultures throughout the world, through space and time, makes such simplified generalisations both unhelpful and misleading. Primarily non-literate cultures—to concentrate on them—are not all characterised by the qualities McLuhan attributes to his tribal and auditory culture, and to assume them as necessary properties of some postulated 'oral culture' can only mislead those interested in an objective analysis of oral literature and its detailed social context.

These attempts to relate oral literature (or certain types of oral literature) to particular types of society have all turned out to be unacceptable as they stand. But the question they have been concerned with has been a rational one: can one draw up any causal relationship (or even common correlation) between type of society and type of literature (or perhaps type of organisation of literary activity)? Theories about the 'heroic age', the 'ballad society' or 'oral culture' have proved unsatisfactory. But the question still remains, and doubtless further attempts will be made in the future to suggest other answers.

In the meantime, I have no hopeful over-all theory to venture myself. Certain positive points do, however, emerge from this critical examination of earlier theories.

The first and most important point is the strikingly free-floating nature of literature, the way the same 'poem' or the same genre can play very different roles in different circumstances, and can be changed *or* developed *or* held static according to the manifold intentions of the people concerned at any one time. This was also the main point to emerge from the discussion of functions and contexts in the last chapter. It is reaffirmed here, as the major recurrent reason for rejecting earlier theories: that literature is too flexible (and man too ready to adapt it to his needs) to be directly and closely determined by the societal forms of the culture in which it is being used. Related to social forms, and used in accordance with current social conventions, it surely is; but rigidly

and directly bound by any one 'type of society' or 'social environment' it certainly is not.

This free-floating nature of literary forms leads our attention to the part played by the geographical diffusion over space and time of particular literary genres. The whole notion of 'diffusion' has been out of fashion in anthropology and sociology in recent years, to be replaced by concepts such as the function of a literary genre in an actual society or social situation, and—at the extreme—by the idea of the self-contained 'tribal' or 'traditional' society. Certainly over-stress on the diffusion of literary forms can be misleading, particularly if it is presented as diffusion to passive populations who have no hand in distributive and creative processes, or where the search up the chain of descent to a remote historical origin is assumed to be more interesting than the local meaning or use or active reinterpretation of a given form. The underplaying of diffusion as a relevant concept may also be reasonable in certain areas. Functionally defined poems like love songs, dirges or wedding songs have such a wide incidence that they can be regarded as a near-universal aspect of human culture, with no need to postulate specific historical connections between their occurrence in areas as far apart as the Inuit north, Southern Africa and Fiji. But now that the amount of contact and communication between even the most rural and 'primitive' peoples is more fully recognised, along with the much wider effect of literacy than used to be supposed, it makes sense once again to raise questions of the possible diffusion of genres and styles of performance. This is clearly appropriate for the European ballad form, and it has been suggested for the epic: 'the ultimate sources' are 'the same for the Greek epic as for the rest of Western Europe' (see Carpenter, 1958, p. 18). At the very least the ballad and epic seem to be associated with a wide European culture area, in the same way perhaps that Alan Lomax has demarcated wide culture areas in respect of musical styles (Lomax, 1959). For certain forms at least, it is still worth pondering Nora Chadwick's assessment, based on her long and sympathetic study of oral literatures all over the world: 'From the great centres of civilization ... like ripples made by pebbles cast into a pond, the waves of culture spread outwards from the great cultures of the past—Mesopotamia, Egypt, Etruria, Greece, China; and again in more recent periods—Rome, Persia, Arabia, India, Turkestan' (Chadwick, 1942, p. xiv).

This capacity of literature to be used in a wide variety of human situations, historical periods and geographical settings makes it difficult to envisage *any* very generalised theory about the relationship between type of society and type of literature. This is the second main point to emerge from this discussion of earlier theories. It may be that all one can hope for are on the one hand fairly general (and therefore vague) comments about recurrent patterns, and on the other detailed analyses of particular situations and relationships, drawn up in a more modest framework. The general comments are perhaps useful as initial parameters or even hints about where to look—the likelihood, for instance, that a society with greater division of labour and economic resources is better able to give scope for the development of specialist poets and provision of leisure for their performances (a point well made long ago by the Chadwicks)[2] or that oral poets are likely (but not certain) to respond to changing economic and political conditions, if only because the interests and opportunities of their audiences are liable to change. Beyond this, it is perhaps better to try to build up understanding of social and literary interrelationships through detailed studies like those of Andrzejewski and Johnson on the Somali, Deng on the Dinka or Strehlow on the Central Native Australians, rather than continuing to search for high-level theories linking type of society with type of literature. At any rate, it is clear that such theories cannot be simple ones, but will need to take account not only of certain apparently recurrent patterns, but also of the manifold ways in which man makes use of literature, and the inventiveness and imagination of human beings.

8.3 Literature as the reflection and consequence of social forms

The difficulty of generalisation is even clearer when one moves on to consider some of the very general theories about the relationship of literature and society that have been postulated or implied within the sociology of literature. In each case one needs to insist that even if each

2 But one which does not necessarily imply anything about the quality of poetry or the general degree of poetic cultivation in societies with differing degrees of economic development.

highlights certain facets of literature, no one theory gives a full picture of the great variety and complexity of literature and literary activity; and if applied rigidly can distort our understanding.

Many of these more general approaches envisage literature as basically dependent on its social environment: poetry following from, and affected by, 'society', as it were, rather than the other way round. In this light, literature is seen as primarily a reflection of the circumstances and norms of the society from which it springs, or the result of economic and technological conditions.

This 'reflection theory' of literature—implicit as often as explicit—has been influential. It is inherent in much of the speculation about 'ballad society' and 'heroic age'. From the writing on these topics it becomes clear that the 'evidence' often adduced to lend support to the claimed relation ship between the society and its literature often depends on the *assumption* that the literature directly reflects the society in which it arose. In his chapter on 'Some ballad communities' Hodgart, for instance, moves be tween the picture of society depicted in ballads and the actual community in which the ballads were composed—'such was the community which some of the ballads describe and by which some were produced' (Hodgart, 1950, p. 137)—and it is not always clear to the reader which he is discussing. Of course, if the ballads can be assumed to reflect the social conditions in which they arose, there is no need to make the distinction. The same assumption is implicit in much other writing about 'ballad societies' as well as in Chadwick's description of 'the heroic age'. Chadwick in his first book argues from the parallel of the Teutonic 'heroic age' (where there is some historical support for the picture depicted in the poetry) to that of the Greek' heroic age' where he suggests that Homer gives an accurate account of contemporary society: 'We possess no evidence which affords us grounds for doubting that the [Homeric] poems give an equally faithful reflection of conditions and ideas which prevailed in real life' (1926, p. 432). Because of this assumption one is never quite sure in the Chadwicks' writings whether the 'heroic age' is, so to speak, in the poetry or in actual historical fact—and of course if the reflection theory *is* correct it comes to the same thing.

As soon as one states it explicitly it is clear that in any literal and direct way the reflection theory cannot hold. The exact forms of housing or food or love or leadership, or the amount of wealth, power or heroism

belonging to various individuals or groups depicted by a poet in the literature he composes need not reflect an exact correspondence with those of everyday life around him. As soon as one considers the matter directly, it is obvious that any writer selects from the world known to him, and does this according to his own personal philosophy and perceptions and making use of the literary conventions of his culture and/or his particular group within that culture. The notion of direct and literal reflection of current conditions does not work for oral any more than for written literature. The glorious heroes and sumptuous courts in the epics sung by Avdo Mededović and other Yugoslav minstrels bear little resemblance to conditions in rural Yugoslavia in the 1930s. The references to horses in nineteenth-century Ob Ugrian poetry have poetic significance even though the poets and audience did not own horses, and the lords, beautiful ladies and 'lily-white hands' in the songs Sharp collected in the Southern Appalachian Mountains are literary, not social, realities.

What comes into poetry may reflect certain aspects of society and express ideas and reactions which are of concern to people at the time—but to take literary forms as representing a direct and full reflection, or as a *direct* source of social history can only be misleading. If one wants definite information, in other words, about the social conditions in which a poet composes and performs—whether it is the world of Homer, of ballad singers or of the Beatles—one must have evidence over and above what can be found in the poetry.

If the simple and direct kind of reflection presupposed in some writing will not do, this does not mean that the idea of literature as reflection is worthless. On the contrary, all literature in an indirect and subtle way must reflect the society in which it exists. Provided the complex and selective nature of this relationship is recognised, we have a useful reminder that a poet is, after all, a product of his own culture, rather than the free untrammelled genius of romantic theory. Ian Watt sums up the position so well that it is worth quoting his remarks at some length, and extending his comments to apply to oral poetry as well as the written literature which is his prime concern

> There is a rather misleading simplicity about the word 'reflects'. In some senses all writing cannot but be a 'reflection' of society, since it contains many elements which are socially derived. Language, to begin with, is a social product; and most writing—certainly most literature—is related

> to some established tradition or model of expression. More specifically, literary works usually reflect various surface features of the life of a society. Yet although the clothes and meals and customs described are rarely invented, they may not be those current at the time of writing; and since this is often true of more important matters, literature cannot be assumed to be necessarily a reliable reflection of the society of any specific period ...
>
> Literary genres often reflect the social attitudes of the particular group which produced them, rather than that of the society which their content overtly portrays. Pastoral poetry, for example, does not tell us much about the economy or institutions of the Sicilian shepherds whose lives it pretends to describe, but it does reveal the taste for a fashionable kind of escape which arose in the later days of Greece and Rome among certain urban and leisured audiences. The influences of the author's particular social orientation in distorting his picture of social reality may not be conscious, but it is always present to some degree. Most of the court literature of the past made the nobles much more noble and the rustics much more rustic than they were in reality; while in the last hundred years the various radical, socialist, and communist movements have produced proletarian fiction in which the picture of the worker is a good deal more heroic or tragic than would probably be substantiated by objective sociological investigation.
>
> Even the kinds of writing which aim at the most literal and detailed description of their society are far from being sociologically reliable mirror images of reality; for, quite apart from the influences of the social group, the author's own individual temperament and his personal ideology playa compelling, though usually unconscious, role ...
>
> Literature, then, reflects society, but it usually does so with various degrees of indirectness and selectivity. The particular 'society' which it reflects is often equally difficult to determine; we hardly know, for instance, how far Homer describes the period of the Trojan War, and how far his own.
>
> (Watt, 1964, pp. 306–8)

This general caution also applies to social norms. It is tempting to take clear statements in literature about, say, the importance of heroism or of love, or the general ethos pervading some genre of poetry, as a true reflection of the moral code held or even followed by members of a society. This view is all the more appealing when we lack other detailed 'sources about people's behaviour and views, or as part of a theory about literature's role in social control.

But this simple reflection of social norms in literature applies no better to oral than to written literature—where its falsity as a general assumption is well recognised. Certainly, some oral poetry represents certain moral views or a general ethos which is widely acceptable and followed in a society, and certain kinds of poetry are sometimes, in non-literate or in literate contexts, used by elders to inculcate certain values into youth: didactic song riddles in Makua initiation rites in East Africa, for instance, or the way Homer was taught in classical Greek schools as an earnest of their cultural heritage, or the use of religious hymns and chants all over the world.

But equally literature can also express the views of minority or divergent groups within the society at large, or convey ideas pleasing in a literary context but not necessarily acceptable in everyday life. Such examples are by no means uncommon—even in what used to be mistakenly regarded as the 'homogeneous' and 'communal' context of 'primitive society'—as will be clear from the examples cited earlier (chapters 6 and 7). It is also clear in such instances as the Bagre religious poetry (sometimes known as the Bagre myth) of the Ghanaian Lodagaa people, where the views about God expressed in the poetry of this group are notably different from those of Lodagaa society at large: 'the whole myth of Bagre is very much more theocentric ... than is the experience of everyday religion' (Goody, 1972, p. 30). Another striking instance can be found in the anti-saint literature of the Somali, which challenges the over-devoutness of the orthodox and established religion of the area (Andrzejewski in Shils, 1981) or in the poetry of minority groups or sub-cultures, or rebels against age and authority all over the world. All in all, though the social norms of any established 'community' may be reflected in a complex way in their literature, it is likely to be in an indirect and subtle fashion. Literature as such does not provide any crude basis for neatly deducing a society's group norms and ideals.

The general idea that types of literature and of literary activity are likely to follow from the nature of the society in which they occur, and be influenced by it, has also taken the form of trying to draw over-all connections between the general economic and technological development of a society and the literature which might be said to 'result'.

It seems, on the face of it, a common-sense idea that a society with little economic or material development is likely, equally, to have a

poorly developed literature. This idea is supported, too, by the fact that a society with surplus economic resources and developed division of labour is more likely to foster the development of a professional category of poet (i.e. one dependent more or less solely on the practice of his art for economic livelihood) and perhaps of a distinctive 'leisured' class with the propensity for entertainment by specific genres of literature. It may seem sensible to go on to assume that poetic development in a wider sense is correlated with economic development.

It is perhaps a surprise to discover that—even in the most down-to-earth ways—this equation does not hold. 'Economic development' is not a clearly measurable concept, but in most equations of this sort it is usually assumed to be clear enough—with modern urban industrial economies and, to a lesser degree, rich agricultural societies coming near the top. And yet poetry often flourishes strikingly in pastoral societies, where people have few material possessions, minimal division of labour and little economic surplus in any obvious sense. The Somali nomadic wanderers in the semi-desert stretches of Northern Somalia are famous as a 'nation of poets' while the mobile cattle-herding Dinka of the Southern Sudan, with their simple material culture and limited raw material have created in their poems rich allusions and images woven around the beauty of their cattle (Lienhardt, 1963; Deng, 1973).

Many similar examples could be cited. Indeed it has been suggested that far from being a hindrance to poetry, the absence of material technology among such peoples who must perforce travel light may even encourage them to turn their energies to literary creativity. Hunting and gathering peoples, commonly regarded as low in the scale of economic development, can show great literary talent and sustained interest in the cultivation of poetry. The poems of the Inuit, for instance, deserve to be widely known for their deeply meditative, ironic and personal insight, a poetic development in no way inhibited by the harsh material conditions and limited economic resources with which they have traditionally had to contend. The Native Australians were once regarded as the most 'primitive' of mankind—a judgement partly founded on their poverty and (apparently) meagre technology—and yet it is among one of these groups (the Arnhem Landers) that some of the most symbolically complex of poetic cycles have been composed and performed: among them the great Djanggawal song cycle recorded and

translated by R. Berndt (1952). It is clear that poetry can flourish and can reach a high level of conscious art without the existence of complex economic and technological organisation or, indeed, the presence of kings or specialised religious and political institutions.

As soon as the question is considered directly, it becomes clear that, as Kirk puts it, 'it is an obvious fallacy that poetry can only flourish in comfortable or luxurious surroundings' (Kirk, 1965, p. 60). But unconscious assumptions connecting material and poetic development have often influenced assertions about a people's poetry or lack of it, so that one encounters the not uncommon idea that the Homeric epics 'could not have been' composed in the early Greek 'Dark Ages', or the common expectation that the cultivation of poetry is unlikely to be found among people living in slums or in 'backward' colonial areas. It has been a matter of constant surprise to collectors and (even more) to local 'knowledgeable' people to find that in many a poor and despised near-by community oral literature was flourishing—the poor whites of the Southern Appalachian Mountains, the seventeenth-century Irish 'vagabonds and rymers...', Zulu labour migrants in the urban areas of South Africa or Black prisoners in American jails. The prejudice which connects poor material conditions with lack of artistic achievement dies hard. But it must be clear to a dispassionate enquirer that in the light of the evidence now available from all over the world, any generalised attempt to postulate a direct correlation of economic with poetic development would be simple-minded. The Chadwicks state the matter with due caution when they conclude at the end of their massive account of 'the growth of literature' that 'intellectual progress would seem to be not wholly governed by material civilisation' (Chadwick, III, 1940, p. 900).

Some of the impetus towards making this correlation has come from earlier evolutionist theories, which sought (in many cases) to place societies in a single ascending ladder of development. According to such views—based often on speculation, or wishful thinking, rather than evidence—it was 'obvious' that certain types of literary development went with certain earlier stages of society and that cultures gradually moved up a scale of increasing complexity in all respects. Bowra, for instance, draws a direct connection in terms of evolutionary stages, between 'Palaeolithic

conditions' and both ancient and recent 'Palaeolithic song' which is necessarily 'simple', 'emotional' and 'primitive'.

> If we try to construct the history of early song, we are by the nature of things prevented from finding any materials for it. This means that we must reshape the problem and ask whether there is not some method of enquiry which is not historical in the sense that it explores the past, but may none the less throw some light on song at its most primitive stages. We may look at those songs available to us which are primitive not only in the sense that they are less organized and elaborated than modern songs but are also the products of conditions in many respects close to those of the Late Palaeolithic Age and reflect the outlook of societies which live in a primaeval simplicity. Such songs contain in an undifferentiated and unspecialized form elements which more advanced poetry contains in much more differentiated and more specialized forms. They may not resemble the lost songs, if any, of the historical Stone Age, but they are products of savage societies which still eke out a precarious existence in some parts of the world by the same means and in much the same conditions as Late Palaeolithic man. They reveal what human beings, living in the most elementary conditions, do to make words rhythmical and memorable and different from the parlance of every day. They represent a stage in the evolutionary development of song before it has branched into many later varieties and while it is still closely connected with certain urgent human needs, which call for it as a means of expression but are confined to the lowest level of subsistence known to us. Though we can discover nothing about historical Palaeolithic song, we can examine living primitive song, which is born from what are in most respects Palaeolithic conditions and bears many marks of them.
>
> (Bowra, 1962, pp. 15–16)

Similar assumptions of a corresponding evolutionary series of stages in poetry and economic development are made in the analyses of Mackenzie (1911), who suggests the dance, then the dance-song, as the most primitive and early forms, with poetry followed only later by prose narrations, and the line of development characterised by increasing economic and poetic complexity as one moves up the evolutionary scale of 'material and psychical stages'.

This kind of analysis sounds neat and scientific, as well as fitting with the popular assumption that in all societies poetry emerges at an earlier stage than prose, but it is as well to remember that there is no evidence for it in the early prehistoric stages: this part is pure speculation. In so

far as there is evidence about recent non-industrial societies, it provides many counter-instances to the supposed lines of development envisaged.

It is as well to be clear about the doubtful nature of a number of these assumptions, for though few people would wish to postulate economic and technological institutions as a basis for predicting poetic development in a literate industrial society, the continuing influence of evolutionist assumptions has made this line sometimes appear better-founded than it really is in the case of non-industrial societies. So it must be asserted clearly that the evidence we now have suggests no straight line of development correlating economic, poetic and chronological stages.

In the various approaches which tend to see literature as in a sense the *consequence* of social conditions, and affected by them, the danger lies not in entertaining them as suggestive ideas, but in trying to apply them in a simple and literal-minded way. The idea of evolutionary stages is perhaps no longer a helpful concept, but there is much to be learned from approaches which see literature as in a general sense reflecting society; it is here that sociologists have made an important contribution in querying some of the more established romantic interpretations. As Albrecht puts it,

> the reflection theory has done valuable service in challenging older insights and established traditions. It has directed attention to the social and cultural characteristics of literature in addition to its more narrowly formal aspects. It has emphasized the conception of artists as agents of social forces rather than as individual geniuses or great men with inventive imaginations. It has provided social and historical modes of analysis as alternatives to exclusively biographical and aesthetic approaches and offered concepts of cultural relativism in place of absolutist aesthetic principles and social determinism in place of artistic individualism.
>
> (Albrecht, 1954, p. 431)

8.4 Literature as social action

A different approach to the relationship between literature and society is to take the first as the active and initiating factor. For literature can be influential in its own right, as a mode of applying pressure rather than merely a result or epiphenomenon of social institutions.

This is a long-accepted approach and is obviously illuminating in many contexts. It is also particularly worth stressing in the case of *oral* literature. For earlier preconceptions about non-literate (and 'primitive') societies as 'communal', 'unchanging', 'non-individualistic' 'bound to tradition' and 'homogeneous' have tended to lead to the unquestioning assumption that literature can play only a passive role in such societies.

It is here that the usefulness of looking first at the position of poets (chapter 6) and at some of the detailed functions and contexts of oral poetry (as in chapter 7) comes out most clearly. Oral—like written—poetry can be used to bring about a variety of effects on the individuals, social groups, and social institutions with which it is involved. It can be used to influence people's ideas, introduce (or combat) change, uphold *or* challenge the political order—and a whole range of other possibilities.

Much of chapter 7 implicitly exemplified how one can regard literature as potentially *active* (depending on the purposes and understandings of those involved). This approach will not be further elaborated here, but this does not imply that I think it of less importance than the approaches to the relation of poetry and society discussed earlier. On the contrary, I think it a crucially important way of regarding literature (and literary activity), and that it is unfortunate that it has so generally been underplayed in the analysis of oral poetry.

But this approach—like others—ceases to be illuminating when stated only at a high level of abstraction. Pinpointing these more general approaches can be useful if it helps us to understand possible assumptions and preconceptions underlying—perhaps implicitly—assertions we make about literature as a social phenomenon, or pointing us to illuminating aspects of the subject not always considered, such as the active role some times taken by oral poetry. But any search to try to establish some definitive abstract theory—or even 'theoretical framework'—at the general macro level of 'Society' is less likely to illuminate literature as a social phenomenon.

To gain further understanding perhaps one must stop trying to relate the two vague entities 'Literature' and 'Society' and try instead to understand literature *in* society, rather than as opposed to society. To do this one often needs to engage in detailed study of such micro-social institutions as the nature of audiences and patrons, the modes by which poets become socialised and trained in their craft, the complementary and

in one sense identical processes by which individuality and tradition have full play in any given literature. Once more Ian Watt expresses this well.

> Although there is an age-old divergence between those who see man as essentially a social being, and those who insist on his individual uniqueness, the force of the contradiction begins to disappear the moment a writer puts pen to paper: as W. B. Yeats put it, 'art is the social act of a solitary man.'
>
> It is a social act, however, of a very special kind, and one which reminds us that 'literature and society' can be a misleading phrase in yet another way, because it suggests a more absolute distinction between the two terms than is actually the case. If only because, in one perfectly valid sense, literature *is* its own society: it is the subtlest and the most enduring means which man has devised for communicating with his fellows.
>
> (Watt, 1964, p. 313)

Perhaps even to speak of 'literature' in general terms can be misleading, whether or not it is opposed to another supposed entity termed 'society'. For what is interesting and significant is not, most often, something called 'literature' but rather what people do: the ways they act within a literary context, the social conventions connected with literary activity which they observe or manipulate, the different uses to which they can put literary formulations—literature, in fact, conceived as social action by *people* rather than as a static entity in its own right.

Here too one needs to remember that it is not just the words of a poem that may be significant, but the wider question of who actually *controls* the activity of poetry. It is not just poetry, but power over poetry that often concerns people. Thus in Hawaii the person or family to whom it was dedicated owned the poem and took steps to control its distribution. 'Others were not allowed to use them, except to repeat them in honour of the owner. It was just as much criticized, just as serious a crime as plagiarism is in European literature' (Pukui, 1949, p. 255). In Polynesia praise poems were social assets belonging to particular families, and in some cases 'the claim of an heir to rank depends upon his power to reproduce, letter perfect, his family chants and his "name song", composed to celebrate his birth' (Beckwith, 1919, p. 28). A somewhat similar case is the way the Arnhem Land Native Australians regard the right to have 'access to the dream-spirits manifested in the stories' as the significant point about the ownership of a song (Berndt, 1970, p.

588). Control over poets and poetry has been a constant preoccupation of those in authority through the ages. This attempt to gain power over poetry, rather than just to compose or enjoy it, is easy to miss if one insists on staying with the abstract formulation of' Poetry' on the one hand and its relation to 'Society' on the other.

The final point I would like to stress is the inability of any of the general theories to give a *comprehensive* account of literature. One may gain insight from a theory into this or that aspect of literature in society, but to take any of them as *the* definitive explanation or description or delimitation of literature can only close one's mind to the rich variety of ways in which people have formulated their ideas and feelings and insights in the form of literature and in which the composition, distribution and functioning of literature can take place.

The concluding point, then, is the infinitely rich variability of oral poetry and its uses—as well as a final plea that, while the sociologist must (rightly) insist on the significance of the social context of literature and search for the recurrent patterns that manifest themselves in socially organised literary activity, he should also remember the role of literature as the medium for the creative imagination of man. The sociologist as well as the literary student would do well to look again at the question Richard Hoggart raises at the end of his essay on 'Literature and society' and ponder his answer.

> Why *should* men try to 'recreate' their personal and social world? Why should they—as well as analysing it, probing it, generalizing about it, taking it to pieces, finding its component parts—have felt moved to 'make it again'?
>
> One reason seems to be that men do it not so as to effect anything but, so to speak, for its own sake; because they feel wonder and awe about the nature and terms of their life; and because they feel amusement, irony and pride at man's attempts to cope.
>
> Another reason seems to be the wish to be in touch with others. Literature implies an audience: perhaps not a very large audience, perhaps an audience that is 'fit though few'—but always an audience. It assumes the possibility and the worthwhileness of communication with other human beings. Without having to say so explicitly, it says at the back of its mind: we are not alone; though we may be 'poor, bare, forked animals', we can try and hope to get in touch. And this, though it may not at first glance seem to have much to tell the student of society, has a significance for him which he would neglect to his enormous cost.
>
> (Hoggart, 1966, pp. 247–8)