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Oral Tradition

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My current research focuses on the interpretive traditions behind lyric songs in Northern Europe. In my understanding, oral tradition refers on the one hand to concrete players and objects observable in an oral performance and, on the other hand, to a murky yet essential body of knowledge that underlies every aspect of the performance as created, enacted, and interpreted. The concrete elements of this ethnographic whole—the performer, the audience, a transcribed or recorded performance (the "text")—offer insights into how oral tradition operates in the here-and-now. The murky body of knowledge ("tradition") includes norms about the form the performance will take (its genre), the time and place it will unfold in (its context), the person(s) who will perform, the person(s) who will listen, the ways in which the listeners will respond, and the ways in which the performer(s) will incorporate the present experience into future performances. Tradition as such is large and shadowy, subject to constant negotiation. Yet by attending to the traces left in the concrete elements of the oral performance, it is possible to gain a sense of tradition and its workings.

Regarding the concrete elements of the performance, we may note that past scholars have devoted great attention to the text, somewhat less to the performer, and little at all to the audience. For this reason, the audience holds great potential for enriching our understandings of tradition. Part of understanding the audience comes in understanding the competence expected of it. That competence lies first in recognizing the genre in which a performance occurs (Seitel 1999), and then in appraising the ways in which the performer has used generic resources to (dis)advantage in the present performance (Foley 2002). In some genres, as Ochs et al. (1996) show, the role of "audience" may in fact become tantamount to "co-narrator." Careful ethnographic studies of performances in the here-and-now are essential for building up scholarly understandings of the audience and its roles, yet performances recorded long ago can also prove enlightening, if we attend to the traces left in the text. Too often, complexity

of texts has been regarded as a sign of the value of the text alone, or of the skills of the performer, but has not been appreciated as a sign of the considerable skills expected of the audience.

As we examine the "traditional" audience, we must also take stock of the interventive figures often responsible for the existence of the texts we study. These may be authors or scribes of the past, collector/editors of the nineteenth century, or ethnographic fieldworkers of the present day. In every case, such figures affect the performances they observe, sometimes to a startling degree, as Mills (1991) has shown in her study of her own fieldwork in Afghanistan. Kuutma (2002) demonstrates how such effects can be recognized in texts recorded in the past, in this case in ethnographic works of the early twentieth century. The fieldworker is never truly "invisible," even when he or she is a member of the community studied: as Nyberg et al. (2000) point out, thorny issues of influence affect the "insider" as well as the "outsider" collector. These influences have too often been minimized in earlier studies; they need to be examined and appreciated as aspects of the audience role in performance.

If scholars of oral tradition attend to theorizing audience with the diligence and stamina that they have devoted to texts and performers, it is certain that a profound and valuable understanding of the audience as a concrete element of performances will emerge. And with it, we will come one step closer to understanding the rich complexity of oral tradition.

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