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Michael ZWETTLER, The Oral Tradition of Classical
Arabic Poetry, Its Character and Implications. Colorado,
Ohio State University Press Sept. 1978 (24 cm.,

In 1928 Milman Parry published his study about the
formulaic phrases in the Homeric epithets (L'Epithete
traditionelle dans Homere. Paris, 1928). He became interest­
ed in the formulaic nature of these epithets, which are
often combined with other formulaic phrases; and tried
to prove that the formulaic style of the Homeric poems
was the consequence of an oral formulaic technique which
the poets used to make a poem extempore. The poet
disposed of "building blocks", formulaic elements, tradi­tional patterns, which enabled him to create poems on
the spot without memorizing: (M. Parry, Studies in the
epic technique of oral-verse-making. 1. Homer and Homeric
Style; 2. The Homeric Language as the Language of an
Oral Poetry, Harvard Studies in Classical Philology, 41,
43, 1930-32). He also tries to find proofs for his theory
about oral composition outside classical literature and
with his pupil Albert Bates Lord he studied and collected
many oral heroic poems performed by Yugoslav bards.
On the basis of his Homeric and Yugoslav experiences
they come to several conclusions about the nature of oral
poetry. Their oral-formulaic theory supposes a special
technique to improvise poems with the aid of so-called
'formulas'. A formula is defined as 'a group of words
which is regularly employed under the same metrical condi­tions
to express a given essential idea'. Owing to the
reservoir of formulas at his disposal, the poet does not
need to memorize, but he is able to produce a poem in
performance. The unlettered poet does not rely on a
'fantastic memory' or on a fixed text, but on this formulaic
technique.
The classical work in which is laid down the whole oral
formulaic theory with its implications appeared in 1960
by the hand of Lord, entitled The Singer of Tales.
From 1960 until now there have been more and more
scholars who want to prove the applicability of the Parry­
Lord theory in the field of other literatures. As for Arabic
literature such efforts were done by J.D. Hyde (A study
of the Poetry of Maymün ibn Qays al-'A'shā', an unpub­
lished Princeton University dissertation, 1970, which
unfortunately I was not able to consult), by J.T. Monroe
("Oral Composition in Pre-Islamic Poetry" in Journal of
Arabic Literature III (1972) pp. 1-53) and recently by
Michael Zwettler in his The Oral Tradition of Classical
Arabic Poetry, its Character and Implications, Ohio State
University Press, Columbus, Sept. 1978, which is a rewrite
of his doctoral thesis.
The author of the present book had published earlier
some chapters of his thesis in an article in J. A.O.S. 96.2
(1976), entitled: "Classical Arabic Poetry-Folk and Oral
Tradition".
As said, the book tries to apply the oral-formulaic theory
of Parry and Lord on early Arabic poetry in order to find
an answer to the difficult problems originating from the
many variants, anachronisms, conventionalizations, mis­
attributions, plagiarisms, confusions, inconsistencies, inter­
polations, fabrications, etc. which seem so characteristic
of this poetry, and which have served many times as an
argument to deny the authenticity of the bulk of pre­
Islamic poetry. Michael Zwettler's book appears at a time
when interest in all kinds of forms of oral poetry is growing.
Indeed, a year before Zwettler's book, two books about
oral poetry by Ruth Finnegan came out, a theoretical
book and an anthology, (Oral Poetry, Its Nature, Signi-
ficance, and Social Context, Cambridge University Press,
1977a; Penguin Anthology of Oral Poetry, Penguin, Har-
mondsworth, 1977b).
While Michael Zwettler over-emphasizes the universal
applicability of the Parry-Lord-theory (if 'judiciously
adapted'), Ruth Finnegan puts the emphasis on the diversity
between the different traditions of 'oral' poetry. She
demonstrates the limitations of the Parry-Lord-theory.
She does not even try to give a clear definition of what
is the possible difference between an oral poetic tradition
and written poetry, realising that such a definition cannot
be given. She says: (Oral Poetry 1977a, p. 272): "Through­
out the book I have rejected the suggestion that there is
something peculiar to 'oral poetry' which radically distin­
guishes it from written poetry in nature, composition,
style, social context, or function. This may seem a very
negative conclusion. It may also appear perverse that,
while rejecting the concept of "oral poetry" as an entirely
separate category, I should nonetheless have chosen to
write a book about it: and then spent much of it explaining
away my title.
But the position is not totally self-contradictory or
negative. The rejection of errors — or what seem to me
errors — can have its uses: and dubious generalisations
about 'oral poetry' have long held away.
To bring some doubts into the open is essential as part
of the search after truth and also to combat the idea,
still prevalent, that there is some deep and fundamental
chasm between those of us who are 'modern', industrial
and literate and the supposedly far-different world of non-
literate, 'traditional' or 'developing' peoples. Getting rid
of this particular model of literature — and of society —
will help us, I believe, to understand the continued strength
of oral poetry in a world which (for that matter) still
contains much illiteracy, and also to recognise its ap­
pearance even in the most highly 'literate' and industrial
settings as a normal and valued manifestation of human
artistic expression and activity.
And then, the suggestion that the oral/written distinc­
tion, so far as it exists, is more like a continuum (or
perhaps a complex set of continuums) than a sharp break

between two separate categories does not mean that it is foolish to concentrate on one end of this continuum rather than the other. In practice, poetry which falls towards the oral end has often been neglected in studies of literature, and a comparative book primarily devoted to the topic is certainly overdue. It is not a contradiction to focus on this aspect, while at the same time insisting that

Her vision contrasts with Parry and Lord's, because the latter maintain that to determine if a poem is oral or not is a matter that can be exactly verified: one has only to check if a certain poem contains the necessary percentage of formulas or formulaic sentences or structures and then one can say if the poem is oral or not.

Let us now dwell upon the more detailed elaboration of the application of the Parry-Lord theory to early Arabic poetry given by Zwettler in his book. The first chapter of the book, entitled *Oral Tradition and Traditional Texts: Questions of Application*, has a general character. Various theories often formulated on the basis of data from other literatures are treated here (because of the universal pretension of the Oral-formulaic theory, which the author professes repeatedly, cf. p. 5: "Indeed, "orality" has been demonstrated, not only in other Greek poetry such as Hesiod, the Homeric Hymns, Delphic oracular utterances, and the fragments of Panyassis, but also in areas as diverse as Old and Middle English poetry, medieval French and German epics, Old Testament verse, Babylonian and Hittite epic, Toda ritual songs, Coorg dance songs, Spanish and English ballads, and more", and cf. pp. 217-218); and also additions to Lord's and Parry's observations about Homeric verses made by Russo and Nagler. Russo and Nagler extend the notion of formaulicism. Along with verbatim repetition of phrases formulaicness can mean also phonetic, syntactic verbal rhythmic and ideational resemblances or correspondences. Thus application of the Parry-Lord theory to early Arabic poetry would signify that the stereotyped repetitions or 'traditional features' of this poetry would have a sufficient explanation. It is also the solution of other problems, like the question of the literary plagiarism (the so-called *sarrīqāt*) in early Arabic poetry and the question of its authenticity, which occupied the minds of scholars like Ahlwardt, Margoliouth and Taha Husyin in recent times, but also early Arabic philologists like Ibn Sallām al-Jumahi who already thought in terms of *ne varietur* texts and who regretted the abundance of variants, alternations, misattributions and the general corruption of the tradition (See p. 12; pp. 203, 204).

The author does not agree with Lord when the latter takes for impossible a transitional stage between 'oral' and 'written' culture. Lord's distinction between oral and written is also considered by the author as misleading just as the distinction between performance cum composition and oral performance from a memorized text. Nor does the author think that literacy in the sense of "ability to write" is the 'vast cultural change to develop this kind of poetic' that Lord considered it.

But he follows Parry and Lord in using two criteria which should distinguish oral-traditional texts from texts composed in writing: a) a wide repertoire of phrases, phrase-patterns etc. that recur from poem to pome within a given corpus of poetry and b) a large measure of substantive variation from one version or rendition of a poem to another.

The Parry-Lord theory, the author concludes, can give a correct insight in what were called until now corrupt transmitted texts of classical Arabic poems, 'if judiciously adapted'.

The second chapter deals with the "Oral Tradition of Classical Arabic Poetry". First the author examines whether the early Arabic poetry conforms to Lord's three criteria, i.e. 1), formulaic techniques, 2), few enjambments, 3). well established themes for rapid composition.

The author refers to appendix A, where he takes as an example the *mu'allaqa* of Imru'ul-Qays and tests it for formulaicness. Formulaicness is conceived in the widest sense: 'identical or similar wordgroupes, correspondencial phonetic or syntactic phrases, appearance of like syntactical or grammatical units in the same metrical position'.

The conception of 'thrift' and 'economy' used by Parry and Lord in their investigations of Homeric poetry does not seem suitable for early Arabic poetry. The formulaicness in early Arabic poetry is to be demonstrated 'in its own terms'.

One of the most important aspects of the 'oral-formulaic' theory is the calculation of the percentage of formulaicness. The author makes three kinds of calculations to test the formulaicness of the *qasida* of Imru'ul-Qays: the first table takes only into account verbal formulaic material (the real formulas); the second table only syntactic or structural formulaic material; the third table both verbal formulaic material and syntactic or structural formulaic material (combined formulaic material). The author divides the *qasida* of Imru'ul-Qays in several passages and gives for every passage the percentages in the three tables.

The formulaicness of the whole poem appears to be 38.9 percent. That is higher than that of the Chanson de Roland!

The Arabic philologists, theorists and critics haven't understood this formulaic practice: they come with accusations of plagiarism, where only the use of the same identical formulas is concerned.

In the second part (B) of the second chapter the author deals with the rare occurrence of enjambment in early Arabic poetry. There are several kinds of enjambement described by Parry and Lord and also occurring in early Arabic poetry. (A sinologist said to me in connection with Lord's theory about enjambment that it is very strange to pretend to formulate — as Lord did — an a priori universal theory without taking into account the linguistic context: the Chinese language has e.g. a paratactic structure, in which there is no possibility of *enjambment*. In addition to this he mentioned the fact that in the Chinese early-Tang period (618-713) there existed a *written* court poetry, which structurally fits very well with Lord's principles, but which was decidedly not oral! rev.)

In the third part (C) of the second chapter the author discusses the relation between thematic structures and wording of the *qasida*: 'the well established themes for rapid composition'.

Basing himself i.a. on conclusions of Bloch, the author believes that "the *qasida*'s major thematic divisions (.) may well have existed at one time as separate genres". (p. 81) This corresponds with Lord's theory about the song
structure: he quotes his *Singer of Tales*: "the units within this whole, the themes, have a semi-independent life of their own. The theme in oral poetry exists at one and the same time in and for itself and for the whole song".

In the fourth part (D) of the second chapter the apprenticeship of the oral poet is discussed. The concept of *'rawi* 'transmitter', seems to correspond in a way to that of the apprentice poet such as Lord conceived it.

The third chapter deals with "The Classical *'Arabiyya* as the language of Oral Poetry". The oral-formulaic theory also made some observations concerning the language of the oral poetry. In his study *The Homeric Language as the Language of an Oral Poetry*, Parry professes that oral poetic language has four basic elements: 'the archaic, the new, the foreign, and the artificial'. This is so by nature, because there is not the stabilising factor of a text. These four basic elements are not aimed at because of their effect, but only for metrical reasons.

In the second part (B) of the third chapter the author deals with some characteristics of early Arabic poetic language, which show its intertribal nature; he dwells upon the occurrence of archaisms in it, the difference between the poetic language and the spoken languages, the introduction of anomalies and anachronisms under metrical pressure.

The different dialects of the Arabian peninsula constituted for the poet a rich source on which he could draw, without regard to the tribe he belonged to. The interdialectal nature of the Classical *'Arabiyya* was also recognized very early by the Arabic philologists.

The archaic and dialectal element, which were absorbed in the language of Arabic poetry, were so because of their function in prosodic context.

The same function had the many synonyms which were used for animals while often words with a specific sense were used in the generic sense as synonyms of other words, also for prosodic needs.

In the third part (C) of the third chapter the author discusses the question of the *'i'râb*, the case-endings. It has always been a problem, to what extent the case-endings occurred only in the Classical *'Arabiyya* and how far they existed also in the spoken vernaculars. Generally moslem tradition thought that *'i'râb* was found in the Quraysh-dialect and also in the dialects of some Bedouin tribes, notably in the dialects of the Najd and the eastern part of the Arabian peninsula. Just in the initial phase of the philological activities of the Arabs (II/V century) there were many anecdotes about the linguistic superiority of the Bedouins: especially their correct use of case-endings.

According to Vollers the language of the Bedouins of the eastern part of Arabia had case-endings and was the same as the poetical language. He considered that the Quran was revealed first in the language of Hijaz without case-endings, and later on bedouinized and provided with case-endings. Geier did not agree with the latter, but he also equated the poetic language with the spoken language. He could not believe in a special language for poetry because that would imply a separate artistic poetic language, and he considered Bedouins too primitive to have one.

Nöldeke considered the classical *'Arabiyya* a living language, as the language of the Bedouins, and he believed that the Quran was revealed with *'i'râb*. He was also of the opinion, that *'i'râb* existed in the spoken Arabic of the VII century, while at Mecca the *'Arabiyya* had already begun to devolve "into the later Vulgâsprâche" (quoted on p. 119).

The view of the author is different. The language with *'i'râb* was the language of the poetry and was not spoken. The Qoranic language was the same language as the language of oral poetry. The author refers to Kahle who refutes decisively Nöldeke's opinion that *'i'râb* would have existed in the spoken language of the Bedouins. The author considers the Quran in its written form one of the first attempts to render as well as possible in writing the sounds of the oral poetic language, but that writing was based on the current spoken language at Mecca, and served "for everyday as well as commercial purposes" (Wehr quoted on p. 123). This is the explanation for the divergence between scriptural language and Classical Arabic language.

The author considers it wrong to take the anecdotes about the linguistic superiority of the Bedouins at face value. The Bedouins, according to him, did not speak a language with case-endings. They did so only in cases of 'non-casual utterances' (such as poetry). In the question of *'i'râb* Fleisch, Blau and Fück have opinions opposite to the author. Fleisch, Blau and Fück believed that the *'i'râb* was still in full flower in the Bedouin dialects. In the polemics between Blau and Corriente the author takes the latter's side. Corriente stresses the low functional yield of case-endings in Classical Arabic language.

Diem's study of the case endings in Arabic in connection with the proper names in Nabatean inscriptions confirms the author in his opinion that the case-system in Arabic dialects had already disappeared. The stories of the Arabic philologists about the existence of a case-system in the Bedouin languages have their origin probably in the fact that some Bedouins were *ruwât*, transmitters of poetry, and could therefore be considered as masters of Classical Arabic. An example from the comment on the *Nagâ'id* shows that not every Bedouin was so conscious about correct declension. (The *Naka'id* of Jarir and al-Farazdak, Ed. A.A. Bevan, 3 vols., Leiden, E.J. Brill, 1905-12, p. 1026, l. 5-6).

In the fourth part of the third chapter the author analyzes the reproaches of Mohammad's contemporaries that the prophet should be only a *kâhin* (soothsayer) or a *shâ'ir* (poet). The ground for these reproaches may have been the fact that the prophet used the same language as the soothsayers and poets, a fictitious oral poetic language. Thus he propagated the *'Arabiyya*, the intertribal poetic language which united the Arabic nation. The fixation of the Quran in writing is one of the first attempts to represent orthographically the oral poetic language. Although at the time of the prophet writing was much more widely spread than thought some years ago, it is doubtful if there was any question of composing in writing.

The fixation of the Quran changes this situation. The latter poetry deviates from the original Bedouin ideal so much that the disparity between earlier poetry and later poetry was clearly felt.

The deviations from the old oral pattern perhaps came
The Bedouins were (and have remained until today) the most faithful cultivators of oral poetry.

In the fifth part of the third chapter the author once more takes up the opinion of Parry and Lord, that the oral poetic language is not a language but a dictation, which the poet inherited from his master as a part of the traditional technique for the making of non-written verse.

While the poems themselves are in a state of continuing transformation, the dictation is fixed and transmitted from generation to generation without any change.

The Qoran changed this original situation, because the hitherto unwritten, but only heard, language now becomes written.

The fourth chapter is entitled 'Variations and Attributions'.

The characteristic of early Arabic poetry is fluidity and mutiformity. Many scholars did not see the real oral character which implies fluidity and mutiformity.

Therefore they had doubts about the authenticity of the poetry. But there are also orientalists who did recognize the characteristics of oral poetry. They knew that variant readings and divergences are common in such poetry. They believe that early Arabic poetry, like the French ballad or the Spanish romances, 'lives through variants', or in the words of Bräunlich: (translation by Zwettler on p. 190) 'Even those Arabists who have not been especially concerned with early Arabic poetry are aware that scarcely a single verse which is transmitted in several places is to be found with the same form in these various citations'. This fact Bräunlich sees as the result of oral tradition. Blachere also recognizes the mutiform and unstable transmission of poetry. He considers variation as something inherent in every piece of poetry, from the origin. He also believes this to be the result of oral transmission.

In the first part of the fourth chapter (that consists of five parts A to E) the author investigates the different recensions of 'Imru'ul-Qays' poem (twelve). He comes to the conclusion, that between the recensions there is difference not only in sequence, but also in the number of verses.

It is not possible to reconstruct an archetype on the basis of different recensions, as western scholars are accustomed to do.

In the second part (B) the problem of attribution is dealt with, to which poet can a certain poem be ascribed? The author dwells upon the inadequate theories of plagiarism later developed by the Arabic philologists.

The social role which is imposed on a poet is especially decisive for the fact of whether a traditional poem is anonymous or not. The early Arabic poets had an important social role, and therefore they were not anonymous like early French and Spanish poets. Non-anonymity in the case of an oral traditional poet would by no means signify a conception of 'propriété littéraire'.

To know the name of the author of a certain poem only meant scribal variants (or variants due to grammatical corrections of philologists), but here we are concerned with variants which alternate with each other in the fluid state of the poem. It is no use proceeding here on the basis of the western science of manuscripts.

The author shows that variations in Imru'ul-Qays' Mu'allaqah are not to be attributed to one origin, but each has its own value within a particular context.

In the fourth part (D) the author discusses the fact that in early Arabic poems there seem to be two different kinds of passages (referring also to the Kitab al-'Umdah). There are more 'traditional' passages (like the nusib) and more 'individual' passages.

The author rejects Batesons opinion that carefully reworking and tuning and a high degree of stylistic regularity and verbal patterning are incompatible with oral composition. On the contrary, other oral literatures show such complexity also.

He also refutes Batesons argument where she rejects the applicability of the oral formulaic theory to early Arabic poetry. He stresses the point that one should 'judiciously adapt' the theory to the particular circumstances of pre- and early Arabic culture and Arabic poetry.

Concluding he says (in E) that the fluidity in an oral poem is more important than its precise words. The early Arabic philologists had no eye for the fluidity of early Arabic poetry and the role of improvisation in an oral poetry. 'Abu'Ubayda considered improvisation and fluidity as fraud by the Bedouins.

Finally the author concludes that the following characteristics of many oral traditions are also characteristics of early Arabic poetry: (p. 255): 'Stability of the essential thematic structure, variation of many thematic and verbal details, recurrence of longer and shorter linebuilding phrases and constructions from poem to poem or poet to poet, conservation and lack of selfconscious originality, small regard for literary proprietorship, preservation of non-vernacular, archaic, and often anomalous linguistic features'.

Referring to Naglers words, the author expresses his desire to come to a 'coherent aesthetic theory' in order to understand 'the special nature of oral poetry' or at least to find out 'if such a theory could be validly framed at all'.

As a reviewer of this book I should not refrain from attempting a judgement about its main point, the question of the possible application of the oral formulaic theory to early Arabic poetry and some other questions of detail which are touched upon by the author during his argumentation. As regards the main question, it was not by chance that I quoted a large part from the conclusion of Ruth Finnegan's book on the nature of oral poetry (see above). Ruth Finnegan's study has amply demonstrated not only the uselessness and vanity of a sharp dichotomy between two cultures, a written and an oral one, but she showed also the different kinds of orally rendered poetry there exist in different cultures: differences in content, length, methods of composition, performance, memorisation etc.

This is not the place to discuss the value of the Parry-Lord theory as such, but it is clear that one should take into consideration Ruth Finnegan's findings.

One of the questions that arise in this connection is
the usefulness of the dichotomy between oral culture and written culture.

The author does not have such an extreme point of view as Lord has when the latter does not admit the possibility of a transitional stage between 'oral' and 'written' culture. Though admitting the existence of writing at the same time as the flourishing of the oral poetry, he does not admit that poets of that time compose their odes in writing, as writing in his view is mainly used for commercial purposes.

Occasional exceptions like ‘Adi ibn Zayd or other 'scribal poets' (he quotes in this connection Nāṣir ad-Dīn al-‘Asad, Maṣādīr ash-shi‘r al-jadhili, Cairo, Dar al-Ma‘ārif, 1962, pp. 113-118) require special consideration: “If they did actually write their poems, then formulaic analysis might indicate this fact. Unfortunately the preliminary research necessary for such a “negative check” is wholly lacking to Arabists at this stage” (p. 186 note 150).

Still the author retains the opinion that a dichotomy between early “oral” and later “written” poetry is justified. He tries to find support for his point of view in the Arabic tradition, in which, he asserts, the disparity between earlier poetry and later poetry was clearly felt. In fact, in the later poetry there is felt a deviation from formal, thematic and linguistic “standards” and this is connected with the so-called battle of the Ancients and Moderns, but the question is whether these “standards” are really derived from ancient “oral” poetry, and if the clearcut distinction between Ancients and Moderns is a real one (or perhaps a polemic one) and, above all, if this distinction is a consistent one. (Besides: why should the linguistic, stylistic etc. differences between the “ancient” poets themselves be left out of consideration?).

The solution for this problem furnished by Zwettler’s oral-traditional theory should be supported more in detail, and compared with other results, if such an oral-traditional theory can ever be proved at all other than by way of supposition.

One of the great differences between “oral” and “written” poetry should be the different esthetic conceptions of the two kinds of poetry. The author disagrees with Bateson when she denies that the Parry-Lord theory can be applied to early Arabic poetry. (M.C. Bateson, Structural Continuity in Poetry; A Linguistic Study in Five Pre-Islamic Arabic Odes, Paris and The Hague, 1970, pp. 33-35). He feels that to maintain, as she does, that “Arabic poetry while not stressing originality of content or imagery, does stress form for form’s sake and verbal complexity and conciseness” (p. 35) is to “apply retro-actively to pre-early Islamic poetry criteria established and prescribed only many generations afterwards”. (p. 217).

So Bateson admits at least a consciousness of originality in form (= wording) and verbal complexity. Within the oral-traditional theory however, the dictation is a fixed one, consisting of formulaic expressions from the stock which the poet has at his disposal; there is no originality in it. The poet chooses his words (archaisms, strange words etc.) only for prosodic, not for esthetic reasons.

The reviewer can not refrain from the impression that in the Arabic tradition we could find some support for Bateson’s view. Already in the early poetry we find the phenomenon of mu’āradah (competition by making a poem with almost the same, but better, wordings — e.g. this is the case between ‘Alqamah and ‘Imru’ul-Qays in the description of a horse, cf. Ahlwardt, The Divans of the Six Ancient Arabic Poets, London 1870, ‘Imru’ul-Qays no. 4; ‘Alqamah, no. 1). It is clear that in these cases the poets are competing with each other in rendering the best form and wordings, although using nearly the same expressions. The same situation may exist in the case of the Naqa‘id (polemic and responsory poems).

The phenomena mu’āradah and naqa‘id exist also in later Arabic poetry. The divergence between Bateson and Zwettler makes the reviewer conscious of how many painstaking efforts are still to be made in the field of the esthetica of Arabic literature, which is the more difficult in view of the fact that respectable Arabic theorists like Ibn al-‘Athir (d. 1239) sometimes lack any insight in the nature of Arabic poetry (cf. e.g., al-Mathal as-Sa‘ir, Cairo, 1939, II, p. 372 where he speaks about plagiarism where polemic poems between Jarir and Farazdaq are concerned; other theorists, mentioned by Ibn Rashiq, Kitab al-Umdah, Cairo, 1955, II, p. 289, considered a line of poetry ‘Imru’ul-Qays and šarafah had in common, as ‘a coincidence of thoughts’).

The major indicator of “orality” of a certain poem is according to the oral-formulaic theory its degree of formulaicness. So it seems justified to me again to take up the ideas about formulaicness and to discuss these.

Originally the notion of formula must have been a very clear one: under certain metrical conditions Homeric poetry used a certain epitheton for one of the heroes or gods with the exclusivity of other epitheta which were used in other metrical conditions. This notion was then extended to wordgroups of frequent occurrence. It was defined as: ‘a group of words which is regularly employed under the same metrical conditions to express a given essential idea’.

Later on was also created the related notion of formulaicness. Formulaicness was a very much wider and vaguer notion than formula: identical or similar wordgroups, corresponspsonal phonetic or syntactic phrases, appearance of like syntactical or grammatical units in the same metrical position’. Formulaicness has within the oral formulaic theory a crucial function: the percentage of formulaicness in a poem can prove the orality of it. If the number of formulas and formulaic expressions in a certain poem remains under a certain percentage, then they suggest that the poem belongs to ‘written’ culture; if above the percentage, then it is ‘oral’. One can have two objections against this method:

— formulaicness is an inexact and vague notion and can be extended to all lingual utterances, provided that we use them under metrical conditions. Are 'in the house' and 'on the mouse' formulaic? They are identical or similar wordgroups, corresponspsonal phonetic and syntactic phra ses, like syntactical and grammatical units in the same metrical position.

[Besides: the Parry-Lord theory does not take into account the linguistic context: “The most characteristic feature of the Arabic language is that the great majority of its words are built up from (or can be analyzed down into) roots each of which consists of three consonants and by varying the three vowels and adding prefixes, infixes, and suffixes, according to certain patterns, the actual words are produced” cf. Farhat J. Ziaede and
R. Bayly Winder, *An Introduction to Modern Arabic*. Princeton, New Jersey, 1957, p. 20. We have to keep this in mind, when we judge Arabic poetry, cf. the line of Abu Tamâm (no ‘oral’ Poet!):

15. fa-ṣâni‘atuūn / tusdâ wa-kha‘ / bu‘a‘alâ
wâ-‘azîman / tukfâ wa-jur / hun yâ‘asâ

It is not right to use for such an inexact matter as (early) Tammam (no ‘oral’ Poet!): cf. Divân, ed. 'Azzâm, Khâkhârî at-‘Arâb, Cairo, 1964-65, II p. 265; cf also J. E. Bencheikh, *Poétique arabe*, Paris, 1975, pp. 245ff.

— The only criterion to determine a formula is that the same words under the same metrical conditions are found in more than one formulaic expression? For how much a syllable counts to us) arithmetic notions like percentages. What do we imply ‘orality’; of these characteristics would necessarily imply ‘orality’; see also the remarks about Chinese court poetry above), but he is conscious of the fact that the notion of ‘formula’ (if not too extended) can still be a useful one in future research.

But there is another very useful thing in this book. That is Zwettler’s conclusion about the fluidity and multiformality of the poems in pre-Islamic times.

I agree with Zwettler that it is better not to think in terms of ‘ne varietur’ — texts and to consider the abundance of variants as inherent in a poetry which is by nature fluid and multiformal.

I do not think, however, that we have to connect such a fluidity and multiformality exclusively with orality.

I agree with Zwettler that editors of poetry like Ahlwardt and Noldeke (with partly romantic, partly philological preconceptions) did not understand the true nature of pre-Islamic poetry (its multiformality) and were many times unjustified in judging this poetry unauthentic and spurious.

I think that we have to do here with a universal problem: in a number of literatures we have the problem of ‘variants’ (which seem not to be scribal variants), especially in the early periods. The problem exists not only in ancient Arabic literature, but also in European medieval literatures.

The problem lies in the fact that it is impossible for us to reconstruct an archetype on the basis of different readings in which medieval poems have come to us.

In the case of early Arabic poetry, western scholars were frustrated in their attempts to give a fixed and secure (‘ne varietur’)-text of the poems they edited.

Their explanation for the instability they met in early Arabic poems, was that the majority of this poetry was to be considered spurious. In this respect they had the same judgement as some of their medieval Arabic colleagues, who in many cases did not understand the true nature of the poetry they studied, which is clear i.a. from their unjustified accusations of plagiarism.

Zwettler has been useful to confront us with this aspect of early poetry which is not only true of Arabic poetry, but also of other mediaeval poetry.

In this review are discussed some points of Zwettler’s book which I thought to be of particular interest to the student of pre-Islamic poetry. Many other points of the book (e.g. about the linguistic situation, in pre-Islamic times) we will not try to discuss here: we leave it to others. We limit ourselves to admitting that they are sometimes interesting.

Regarding the whole book we conclude, that, although we are not convinced of the truth of Zwettler’s theory, his book has the merit of being a further incentive (after studies in the same field done by i.a. Bräunlich, von Grünebaum, Jacobi, Bateson) to arrive at an aesthetic theory about pre-Islamic poetry.