ANTHROPOLOGISTS AND THE SOCIOLOGY OF LITERATURE: AN EXAMPLE FROM THE STUDY OF EPIC

"Can there be a sociology of literature?" is a fashionable question in some circles just now, and there is currently a rapid expansion of interest in the possibilities of the subject. In this paper I want to take up this question and suggest, first, that it is unnecessary, but, second, that it is also important and directly concerns anthropologists.[1]

First, I suggest that it is unnecessary to go on agonising about whether there can be a "sociology of literature" when there quite patently is a sociology of literature - in fact several. To some anthropologists this may sound surprising, or at least irrelevant: "the sociology of literature" is usually associated with what sociologists (and perhaps "literature students") and not what anthropologists do. In fact analyses and assumptions about the social nature and social significance of literature have been widely made both directly by anthropologists and by others who have either built on the work of anthropologists or examined the kind of material which anthropologists usually accept as peculiarly their own. The sociology of literature is thus already part of anthropological study, even if this often goes unrecognised.

I want to illustrate this contention by reference to work on one particular genre of literature: epic. Taking a specific example of this kind seems to me a more illuminating way of making general points about the relevance of the sociology of literature for anthropologists (and vice versa) than remaining on an a priori plane of argument throughout. However, as suits the theoretical and critical nature of this journal, the aim will be to raise questions for further discussion rather than to present empirical findings.

An exact definition of "epic" could be subject of a paper in itself, but briefly it refers to lengthy narrative verse which is usually sung and also often characterised by an elevated heroic tone. It is also sometimes known as "heroic poetry" (Chadwick 1912, Bowra 1952). A common, though perhaps ultimately untenable, distinction is normally made between "secondary" or written epics like the Aeneid, and "primary" epics, like the Iliad, in which oral tradition is believed to play a large part. It is the latter which I discuss here, and I shall concentrate on just four examples: the Iliad, the Odyssey, Beowulf and (marginally "primary") the Nibelungenlied. Briefly, and begging all sorts of questions, the two ancient Greek epics (the Iliad about the siege of Troy, the Odyssey about the wanderings of Odysseus) were probably first written in the sixth century B.C., though probably "composed" in some sense earlier; Beowulf, a much shorter poem in Anglo-Saxon alliterative verse about Beowulf's encounters with various monsters, was written down sometime in the eighth century A.D.; and the Middle High German Nibelungenlied, about the murder of Siegfried and the revenge taken by his widow Kriemhilt, dates from late twelfth or early thirteenth century Austria. There are of course many other recorded epics which would have to be considered in a full account (see Lord 1962, Bowra 1952) but for the purposes of this

paper I have taken these four as a starting point for raising certain more general questions.[2]

There are a number of reasons for choosing epic for treatment, rather than the more conventional areas of anthropological research like "traditional" African literature. It is a topic which, for one thing, has a longer history of scholarly study than, say, Polynesian or African literature, with correspondingly a richer potential for exploitation by anthropologists, while at the same time the various phases in this scholarly study have close links with intellectual phases in the development of anthropology. Again, epic is usually accepted as literature which in some sense comes in the fascinating borderland between the conventionally accepted "primitive" area of most traditional anthropologists and the "civilised" period of most sociologists - for primary epics, though eventually written, are usually assumed to possess an oral element of some kind and to have been disseminated by oral means to a largely non-literate audience; epic belongs, therefore, in an area into which anthropologists are now increasingly entering. Epic, furthermore, has not seemed a standard subject in recent anthropology, so that its treatment here may stimulate further research by anthropologists. "Epic" is a concept that has something of the same aura about it as "myth" - and it is surprising that it has so far attracted so much less attention from anthropologists.

The study of epic has largely been carried out by philologists, historians, classical or mediaeval specialists, literary critics and even archaeologists - scarcely ever by anthropologists. Yet anthropologists will find much that interests them directly in the implicit sociology(ies) of literature that emerge when one considers such studies - at least if we take "sociology of literature" in the wide sense covering the social context and significance of literature and its relation to society.

A number of different aspects of epic could be treated, but I have chosen to concentrate here mainly on <u>the mode of composition</u>. The treatment of this aspect is basic in most analyses, and tends to involve fundamental assumptions about the nature of society and of social relations, and about their connection with the nature and basis of epic.

One of the most influential approaches[3] to studying the mode of composition in epic is what has been dubbed the "historical-genetico" approach. Scholarly research of this type is directed to finding the genesis of each of the various bits of which it is assumed a particular epic is made up. The primary interest is in discovering <u>origins</u>.

Such a preoccupation immediately reminds us of nineteenth century evolutionary anthropology. There is, indeed a certain overlap and many reinforcing links between the two approaches. But one must not be so dominated by the official history of anthropology, with its origins so often declared to be British evolutionism and the reaction against it, that one identifies other strands too readily with this. In fact the profound influence of German philology antedated British evolutionism by many years, and has had a crucial impact in many areas of intellectual history. In the field of epic, perhaps the single most important work was F.A. Wolf's <u>Prolegomena ad Homerum</u> in 1795,

where he put forward his famous view of the composite origin of the Homeric poems. The Iliad and Odyssey, he contended, were composed of a number of short lays, originally separate, which were handed down by oral tradition and later collected together to make up the epics as we know them. This "lays theory" (Liedertheorie) was then taken over for analysing the composition of other epics. Lachmann, for instance, applied it both to Homer and also, in his influential analyses of 1816 and later, to the Nibelungenlied, thus providing the starting point for much later work and, for the Nibelungenlied itself, exerting a dominant influence till very recently indeed (see Fleet 1953, Bekker 1971). Scholars of Beowulf too, if not quite so exclusively preoccupied with origins, were also concerned to identify the stories and possible lays from which Beowulf would prove to have been composed.

Another line was the "kernel" theory: one particular lay formed the original heart of the poem (the "Wrath of Achilles" lay for the Iliad, for example), and "accretions" were then built onto this by later poets. Despite differences of detail, this view of the poems as "a kind of coral-accumulation" (Schücking in Nicholson 1963:35) shares the same general historical-genetico approach as the original Liedertheorie of Wolf, Lachmann and their followers.

The consequence of such theories for detailed research was that attention was naturally directed to trying to separate out and trace the discrete origins of the various constitutent songs, which were assumed to be still identifiable, to locating later interpolations inserted for unifying and other reasons, and to explaining apparent (or imagined) discrepancies by reducing them to their separate origins.

This line received further support in its application to epic from the influence of German Romanticism. Wilhelm Grimm, for instance, was both a fervent Romantic and a keen adherent of Wolf's theory. His analysis of German epic has been summed up as including "all the usual symptoms /of Romanticism/ - belief in the indefinite and remote origins of the material, in a gradual development into the present poetic forms, and, finally, no acknowledgement of any individual authorship" (Thorp 1940: 17). Similar views were expressed in Schlegel's conclusion that epic "must be the work of whole generations, not of one man" (Idem:16).

All this scholarly disputation among German philologists may seem to have little to do with anthropologists. But in fact an implicit sociology of literature is involved in this whole approach. Note, for instance, the view of (non-literate) society held by such analysts: as radically different from their own in that individual authorship was out of the question, that the stage of society at which "epic" arose was basically communal, and that such epics could not be understood in their own terms, for the mentality involved in them was too far removed from our own: they could only be explained, in terms of their origins. Furthermore this sort of semi-unconscious growth could only be organised and finally put together with the advent of the individualised and self-conscious stage of literacy. Thus in this view Beowulf could be seen as a string of pagan lays

edited into its present form by a Christian monk, the Homeric poems as systematised in the age of Greek literacy, and the literate poet taking various existing lays and "out of them fashioning the Nibelungenlied" (Hatto 1969:356, 395). In this view of relatively un-individual processes at a certain stage of society, accompanied by the blind and uncreative handing on of "oral tradition", it is easy to see implicit a model of the development of human society that is still with us: a movement from non-literate communal "tribal" society (Gemeinschaft, mechanical solidarity etc) to modernised, individualised and rational society (Gesellschaft, organic solidarity etc.). "Literature" and its social significance can be seen as closely bound in with this developmental pattern, for until we approach the modern era it can only be explained (away) not assessed in similar terms to our own modern literature. This general view - an implicit sociology of literature - has also had a pervasive influence on analyses of literature among contemporary non-literate peoples.

It is easy to question this kind of approach, both in its application to the study of epics and in the kind of model implicit in it. Many anthropologists would probably reject the kind of genetico-historical questions asked in the German philological tradition as being in practice unanswerable with any certainty and anyway in principle of lesser importance than the contemporary significance of each poem (though of course what "contemporary" means in this context is a bit tricky). Indeed many of the same points which are commonly made against evolutionist theories can also be brought against this approach to epic.

It is also easy to over-criticise this kind of approach to literature. German philology was often in fact both more precise and more modest than evolutionary anthropology: the aim was to answer specific questions about the historical development of particular pieces of literature and not necessarily to speculate about the first origins or unilinear development of some institution in general. In illustration of this difference, one need only contrast an evolutionist writer like Frazer with those influenced by the philological tradition, like Müller or Maine - both so unaccountably neglected in most versions of the history of anthropology.[4] In other words, some of the anti-historical gibes of the early functionalists may have much more justification against evolutionary anthroplogy than against the more reasoned and particularised approach of those influenced by German philology. Indeed, if one can disentangle some of the assumptions, it is possible to see that a number of the questions asked in the philological tradition are very pertinent ones. What is the mode of production of these epics? Is this different in a non-literate from a literate society? Are some of the longer poems composed, in some sense at least, by a poet building up on or making use of extant pieces? An answer to such questions in terms of the lays or kernel theories may seem implausible in some respects and has often involved certain dubious assumptions - but it is not a priori absurd.

Where anthropologists can contribute is in researching such questions and perhaps indicating a more sophisticated and variegated answer. Definitive research on the epics discussed here may prove difficult, but work on possibly parallel twentieth century forms is probably feasible. A certain amount of relevant material is already available: research on the composition of heroic oral poems in Yugoslavia or modern Greece, for instance, probably

tells more against the lays theory than for it (see Lord 1960, Notopoulos 1964) whereas the sequence of events in the Congo, where a series of what some term "epics" has apparently resulted from the compilation by collectors of various separable pieces, would perhaps lend it some credence. But far more detailed and specific analyses of these questions could be carried out by anthropologists and could clearly involve a major contribution to this aspect of the sociology of literature.

Another strand in the historical approach to analysing epic and its composition should be mentioned here, for though in some ways overlapping with the approach just discussed, it also involves somewhat different emphases. This is the attempt to identify certain motifs in the epics which can then be traced either to common beliefs among human beings or to particular historical/geographical sources. This approach differs from the previous one first because the units looked at tend to be relatively small ones, and second in the use made of "anthropological" evidence. "Fairy tales", "folk beliefs", and the kind of "nature myths" propagated through Müller's writings were all pressed into service. Panzer looked to the significance of fairy tales in his interpretation of Beowulf and the Nibelungenlied (the source of Beowulf, for instance, is said to be a widely known folktale "The Bearson", of which Panzer collected variants in over twenty European languages); Wrenn (1958) regards "folklore" as one of the sources of Beowulf; and for Müllenhoff Beowulf's career is really a nature myth culminating in the advent of winter (Sisam 1965:17). Similarly for Homer one has the analysis of "folk tale patterns" in Carpenter (1946, reprinted 1958) or Germain's attempt (1954) to find prototypes for Odyssean folk tales in the myths and rituals of Egypt and the Middle East, as well as nineteenth-century mythological interpretations like the one which assimilates Helen of Troy to the moon (the root for both related to the Greek word for brightness and both were stolen away and disappeared) - Helen therefore originated in a moon myth (see Carpenter 1958:23-4).

Insofar as specific geographical origins are looked for to account for such elements, this kind of historical approach to epic has obviously much in common with the diffusionist phase in the history of anthropology. Like the philological approach, this too might be received with little sympathy by many anthropologists (in contrast to the "folklorists") for the same sorts of reasons as those adduced against diffusionist explanation by earlier functionalist critics. Again, a certain view of literature and of the relation between society and literature is often assumed in such approaches: that what matters is to explain the origins of such elements which have apparently been transmitted by relatively unchanging oral tradition, and that it is of lesser (or no) interest to ask about why poets have taken over some and not others, what use poets have made of them, or what meaning they bear for the contemporary poet and his public. The view of society that tends to be assumed - and one which its adherents might claim to be based on anthropological evidence - is of relatively passive and uncreative poets and audience, with the active agents, as it were, being the travelling and extraneous elements and motifs. Again this is a view that has had much influence on studies of other types of literature among non-industrial peoples.

Such a view of literature and society certainly lays itself open to a critique by anthropologists. It might however be too strong to dismiss it in its entirety as irrelevant for anthropology. The tracing of motifs for its own sake may perhaps be a barren pursuit and involve assumptions some would reject, but the sort of material worked on by the Scandinavian and American historical-geographical school of folklorists, and the reference works they have produced (notably Thompson 1955-8) could well be built on by anthropologists concerned to ask different questions, or even perhaps to disprove the view of passive receptiveness by poet and audience. Again, others may wish to take up the aspect at least shadowed out by some adherents of this approach, i.e. that certain motifs need not necessarily be traced to particular geographical or historical origins, but be universal among human beings (or among a wide section of human beings). The evidence about certain mythical themes that supposedly occur again and again could be an example here. Those interested in the concepts of "deep structure" as put forward by Chomsky and Lévi-Strauss might well wish to dispute the historical parameters of most work on such themes and look instead towards something in the universal constitution of the human mind rather than to free-floating motifs which, as it were, force themselves on literature from the outside. Wherever the truth lies here, it is clear that there are real possibilities for anthropological analysis and controversy.

Having mentioned interpretations which, to some extent, tie in with evolutionist and diffusionist phases in anthropology, an obvious approach to turn to next would seem to be studies which link with functionalist emphases. But the fact is that, perhaps because of the historical nature of the epics concerned, the impossibility of direct fieldwork, or the long-lasting philological influence, this emphasis has not apparently been much to the fore in studies of the epics discussed here. It seems scarcely worth trying to force the evidence on this just to drag in an opportunity to indulge in the current sport[5] of chiding "the functionalists"! On the contrary, it seems to me that one of the gaps in the study of epic has been precisely the absence of such an approach and that, if questions had been asked in imaginative and non-dogmatic terms about the part of such epics in the wider society (or societies?) in which they were composed and/or delivered, the study of epic would be much richer.

One study must however be mentioned in this context: that of H.M. Chadwick on The Heroic Age (1912), supplemented by his joint work with N.K. Chadwick (1932-40). This in one respect resembles some of the emphases of functionalist anthropology: the Chadwicks looked for the causes of the similarities between heroic poetry of various ages in the nature of the society itself, through their concept of the "heroic age".[6] "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", hence "the comparative study of 'Heroic Ages' and the problems which it presents are essentially problems of anthropology" (1912:viii). It is often ambiguous in the Chadwick's work how far this heroic age was the actual period in society when heroic poems were composed, and delivered, the period to which the events in the Poem actually refer, or the poet's view of a previous "Golden Age" - but certainly one aspect, one which has had an impact on later writings, is the first of these. In this view epic arises in a society in which an aristocratic and military ethos flourishes, supported by court

minstrels praising warrior princes. The parallel literary development thus "arises from similar social and political conditions" (Chadwicks 1932 Vol. I:xiii; also Idem, 1940 Vol. III, Part IV, ch.3 passim). To some extent, then, the composition and content of heroic poetry is to be explained by the way it reflects the ethos and constitution of the society in which it arises, and to whose maintenance it contributes through the poet's praise of established rulers. "Heroic princes", as the Chadwicks put it, "were generous patrons of minstrels, partly in order to get their own fame celebrated" (op.cit.:749).

The Chadwicks would probably not have accepted an extreme functionalist sociology of literature, but certain constituent assumptions do seem to be implicit in their approach. The kinds of questions and analyses they pursued, moreover, are still of obvious interest. Is there a particular type of society (we do not necessarily have to call it a "stage") in which epic particularly flourishes? If so, what are the functional (or perhaps symbolic?) interrelationships involved? And are there other genres which can be functionally related to yet other types of society? Or is it over-simple to assume a predictable relationship between the society and the literature it "produces"?[7] These are questions which, quite apart from the way Chadwick is already involved in the history of our subject (he was directly encouraged by Haddon and published his Heroic Age in the "Cambridge Archaelogical and Ethnological Series"), it would be a pity if anthropologists left it wholly to others to pursue.

All the previous approaches discussed have involved in one way or another the historical investigation of the conditions or origins of the epics. There is however another approach, now increasingly influential, which rejects such external explanations, and concentrates on an explication of the text as it is. This links with the general swing away from nineteenth-century intellectual and analytic approaches to literary works (in Biblical scholarship, for instance) towards more "aesthetic" interpretations. In the case of epic, terms like "structure", "unity" or "work of art" have become the acceptable ones, replacing "sources", "strata" or "interpolations", and the concept of interpretation has replaced that of historical explanation. For the study of Beowulf the turning point can probably be dated more precisely than often, in Tolkien's famous and witty lecture in 1936 in which he insisted that Beowulf was not to be regarded as a conglomeration of a lot of separate bits, but as a single poem. In Homeric studies, unitarian assumptions about single authorship came earlier, dating back, for instance, to Andrew Lang's influential work, and have been common throughout this century. For the Nibelungenlied the reaction against the search for historical sources was much later: for instance, Mowatt's insistence in 1961 on a "structural approach" and Bekker's recent assessment of the poem as "a literary monument worthy to be read for its own sake" (1971:xi).

The kind of assumptions about the mode of composition vary and are not always spelt out explicitly, but it is fairly consistently implied in this approach that each poem is an "artistic unity" and in some sense anyway has a single author. For the

aesthetic school the mode of composition seems generally taken to involve the same sort of conscious art and intention as in a modern literary work, and it is assumed that the meaning is in principle accessible to us (even if it needs uncovering). The sociology of literature implicit here is thus very different: authorship is seen as something involving individual creativity and artistry albeit within certain constraints) rather than a passive receptivity to external historical processes, and the poem can be regarded as in some sense relatively free from the determining conditions of the society in which it exists: it makes sense to speak of its analysis "in its own right".

The "structure" that is looked for and analysed in such studies is at various levels. The most common is probably that of the poem as a whole. Tolkien, for instance, stresses this in analysing Beowulf. To a casual reader (or to a philologist) it has often appeared that the poem has little unity of plot and falls into two or three main episodes with little narrative connection between them. But need this be explained by separate historical origins? For Tolkien this would be to start from the wrong question. Beowulf is not a narrative poem and should not be expected to demonstrate a steady advance in plot. "The poem was not meant to advance, steadily or unsteadily. It is essentially a balance, an opposition of ends and beginnings. In its simplest terms it is a contrasted description of two moments in a great life" (Tolkien 1936:271). These oppositions within the poem involve contrasts of youth and age, of first achievement and final death, of beginning and end, rising and setting; and it is the balance and parallelism of these oppositions, not the chronological plot, that give the poem its unity. The metrical form parallels this for the Old English alliterative line presents an analogous balance and opposition in its twofold inner division. The parallel oppositions within the poem as a whole are also, for Tolkien, shot through by the symbolism in which "the monsters" play a significant part and in which Beowulf - and mankind - wars with the world and with evil. This general approach has found favour with many scholars and there is now a large literature directed to showing how apparent anomalies in the poem - the "digressions" for instance - really contribute to the organic unity of the poem (e.g. Bonjour 1950, Brodeur 1960).

A similar change of tone has been evident in recent analyses of the Nibelungenlied. The apparent split between the two halves of the poem or the psychological inconsistencies of the characters are no longer explained by reference to differing historical sources but interpreted in relation to inner patterns and overall structural unity. Mowatt, for instance, interprets the poem as structured by the basic opposition it presents between the patterned and regulated world of the court at Worms, where Gunther and Kriemhilt belong, and its counterpart and opposite, the anti-social uncompromising world of Siegfried and Brünhilt who, in the end, "utterly destroy /the/ cosy little Burgundian society" (Mowatt 1961:269). The dynamic of the poem lies in the way these two different worlds - "society" against "nature" - and their representative characters "are brought together and reshuffled, after the manner of the molecules in Goethe's chemical analogy" (Idem:265). The Nibelungenlied thus represents "what happens when an individual, anti-social ideal of behaviour tries to adopt a set of conventions it does not understand, and a highly formalized society invokes forces which it cannot control" (Idem:269).

Whether and how far anthropologists can take up this kind of approach and advance it further remains to be seen. Some may be sceptical of the position sometimes taken up by the more extreme proponents of the aesthetic school in which every apparent contradiction or lapse can only be interpreted in terms of a perfect and self-sufficient structure of the poem and of the poet's inner meaning. But certainly there would seem to be hints that a further development and/or assessment of some of these analyses in the light of recent anthropological work and controversy (that on myth in particular) might well be fruitful.

Perhaps of even more interest to anthropologists, however, is the series of studies analysing structure at a lower level - that of the so-called "oral-formulaic" style of much epic poetry. Such studies share many of the assumptions of the more aesthetic school just discussed, but differ in certain significant details about the mode of composition; not all furthermore necessarily take a unitarian line as regards authorship. There is a whole literature on this oral-formulaic theory, much of it fairly easily accessible, so I shall only allude briefly to its main lines, and not discuss the detailed internal controversies within this school (on which see Watts 1969).

The main impetus for the development of this theory came from Milman Parry - first his research on Homer, then, more significantly, his field research on Yugoslav poetry in the 1930's. There he recorded and analysed heroic poems in the actual processes of composition, and with the help of his pupil Lord (Lord 1960) showed how they were built up from various formulaic phrases - repeated metrical word groups which could appear in various combinations and transpositions and thus be used by the poet to structure his own poem in the act of performing it. These formulaic phrases also sometimes formed part of yet larger formulaic systems and, again, of even longer narrative themes. In this way both original composition and oral delivery were feasible, for the poet had a stock of formulae which he could exploit and transform for his own poetry without having to turn either to the written word or to rote memory as a crutch for his oral performance.

Parry and Lord argue that the process is essentially the same for the Homeric poems. There too the poet uses and changes around the famous "Homeric epithets" - terms like "god-like", "long-suffering", "lord of men". These and other metrical phrases can, at will, be fitted into specific points in the hexameter line, and thus make oral delivery and composition by a single poet feasible through a process of transformations of traditional formulaic units. Overall this has resulted in a new and influential strand in Homeric scholarship (see Notopoulos 1964, Kirk 1965, Dodds 1968, Watts 1969).

Parry's and Lord's work has also affected Beowulf scholarship. The interest in this approach was initiated by Magoun's classic article (1953) on the oral-formulaic character of Anglo-Saxon poetry and has continued with a whole series of papers analysing Beowulf (and to some extent other Anglo-Saxon poetry) in similar terms to Lord's work on Yugoslav and Homeric poems. Questions are now being raised about how far formulaic poetry must necessarily be "oral", but by and large the existence of

formulaic phrases in Beowulf has been amply demonstrated.[8]

It is surprising that this system of substitutions and transformations, arguably characteristic of "oral" epics, has not apparently been taken up to any great extent by anthropologists. There is much here to interest students of the mechanisms of performance/composition and also the structuralist analysts. One can look both at the relatively small-scale transposable units (the formulaic phrases) and the wider themes like the stock episodes detected by Lord in Yugoslav and Homeric poetry which can be substituted and combined in the same sort of way as the formulaic phrases. Much here reminds us of the often-lauded (but perhaps seldom exploited?) structuralist work of Propp (1958). Indeed it could well be argued (see Jacobs 1971) that for a full structural analysis one should take this approach further still, not resting content with the particular stylistic features that Propp happened to take for his analysis, nor with Dundes' motifemes or Levi-Strauss' oppositions, but extend it also to many other features of style and content - and this could fruitfully include the formulaic phrases and themes of epic. Further possibilities open themselves up too. One Anglo-Saxon scholar suggests that one should look to the basic syntactical patterns or frames rather than just the surface formulae: "The syntactic frame, very much like Saussure's langue, underlies the verbal formula, the parole, and furnishes the scop with a certain area of freedom within the patterned realm of his discipline" (Cassidy 1965:82). Anthropologists may well wish to exploit this concept and the similar analysis of the formulaic system as "a generative grammar which is capable of handling all aspects of ... a complicated cultural production as a narrative" (Colby and Cole, in press).

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In view of the kind of material and questions involved in a study of the epics discussed here, it is hard to continue to leave as an open question whether there can be a sociology of literature and whether anthropologists have anything to say on it. The sociology of literature - at least as far as concerns the study of epic - turns out not to be a new or mysterious subject but one in which anthropologists are already implicated and in which they have a part to play.

But - for all that - the question of "can there be a sociology of literature?" is still an important one, at least in its immediate corollary of "What should such a sociology be like?" Indeed it is all the more pressing just because anthropologists are already involved in the implicit sociologies of literature underlying so many analyses of epic. The assumptions here could be unpacked and further developed or rejected by anthropologists. Controversy about the sociology of literature could benefit not only from becoming more self-conscious but also from being brought within the mainstream of academic anthropology.

Questions about the nature of the sociology of literature are also ones that it is timely for anthropologists to worry about. For they relate directly to questions and controversies currently under debate concerning the nature of anthropology itself (and sociology too for that matter). In certain respects, the study of literature is a particularly good field on which such battles can be fought out.

Take for instance the question that must be faced at some point in any discussion of the sociology of literature: how far can it be "comparative"? With epic, for instance, it will have become obvious that many scholars have taken it for granted that one can in some sense proceed comparatively. But is this really possible, and, if so, how? The poems discussed are very different, in length, metre, period, and probably, the degree of "oral-ness". Are apparent similarities, then, due only to parallel modes of interpreting, attributable to fashions in intellectual history not the poems themselves? Must we retreat to a position of relativism - analogous, say, to the linguistic relativism of Whorf or Sapir - where all we can do is analyse the particularities of each poem and question the status of a general term like "epic"? Other alternatives are certainly not self-evident. The "comparative method" of evolutionary anthropology, for instance, may have seemed easy enough once - but involved assumptions which most would now question. Again, the comparative functionalist aims of Radcliffe-Brown and his followers or the general laws sought by positivist sociology may seem to many scarcely suitable for the comparative study of literature. Can one restate and refine the functionalist approach in more moderate and unpositivist terms and look for comparative patterns in, say, consumption and exchange processes in literature? Or is the only alternative to look for our comparisons in the "deep structures" currently under discussion? And, if so, do we look in the structures of the pieces themselves or to universal cognitive processes in the human mind? Such questions are hardly readily answerable - but they certainly take us right to the heart of much current controversy in anthropology.

Or again, there is the question of which of various possible approaches to choose in analysing literature. Some approaches have been discussed here, in the context of epic, but it is worth looking at further possible approaches too and treating the whole subject more consciously. Here anthropologists may find stimulation in tapping controversies among sociologists about how to approach literature - Marxist analyses, the "culture-and-society" school (Williams 1963, Bradbury 1971), or Escarpit's more historical and detached approach (1971) - just as both anthropologists and sociologists could exploit recent anthropological work on language (see Ardener 1971a), on structural analysis, and on relations between cosmology, social structure and literature (e.g. Beidelman 1967, 1971). But while anthropologists and sociologists (if these really are different) can mutually benefit from considering each others' work, it may be that the anthropologists have the greater contribution to make. Insofar as sociologists tend to study their own cultures, it is difficult to take the questioning stance, involving awareness of one's own ignorance and relativity, which is necessary for a valid sociology of any phenomenon. Ethnocentrism holds its greatest dangers for the student of his own culture. This is perhaps why many of the best sociological analyses of literature are historical - a different period at least sets one barrier to be consciously surmounted. Anthropologists by contrast are aware from the outset of the problem of translation. This sort of self-conscious search is surely fundamental. In their insistence on this anthropologists can now gain support from the phenomenologists and from American symbolic interactionist sociologists like Goffman or Becker and their followers. For them too the "meaning" must be taken as "problematical" at the outset: we cannot assume that we know it

already, even if, when it is uncovered, we are capable of translating and recognising it.

But, granted that this is a necessary preliminary, is this process as far as we want to go? As Mary Douglas pointed out in a recent lecture (1972), translation in itself may not be enough. If so, in what further direction should one go in analysing literature? Which, if any, of the various accepted approaches will prove fruitful? Or is there no one "right" line, merely a series of possibilities of whose existence one must indeed be aware but among which one can choose according to one's own view of the nature of the subject?

These and similar questions which one is led on to from the study of epic and the sociology of literature more generally, are scarcely easy ones to answer and certainly not amenable to easy agreement. But they are surely ones on which anthropologists have something to say, even if they have to search their hearts - and their subject - first.

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Notes

1. The controversy about the distinction between "social anthropology" and "sociology" is too lengthy to discuss here, but let me just say briefly that I myself consider there is no essential distinction in principle in terms of subject matter, aim or method. In practice, admittedly, due to a series of historical accidents, they have developed and become institutionalised as separate subjects, but 1) this is merely contingent, not a difference of essence, and 2) this gap in practice is, in some circles at least, being increasingly closed. There are of course certain differences in outlook between many who call themselves "sociologists" and "social anthropologists" respectively, but these are not all in one direction, or necessarily greater than internal differences within these categories.

   In this paper I therefore use the terms "sociologists" and "anthropologists" merely to refer to those academics who tend to refer to themselves by these labels and am not making judgements about the validity of such a distinction. The term "sociology", on the other hand, I am using in the wide sense which involves "sociologists" and "anthropologists" (as in the phrase "sociology of religion" for instance).
2. My work is still at a very preliminary stage and I hope to go more deeply and comparatively into a number of questions raised here in the future.
3. The treatment of the various approaches within a short paper must necessarily be over-simplified and confined to broad trends. The interested reader is referred to the various works cited in the bibliography.
4. For Max Müller, this neglect should be mitigated by Crick's work (see Crick 1972).
5. A list is scarcely necessary to illustrate this, but some examples are Ardener 1971b, Finnegan 1969, and many of the papers in past numbers of this journal.
6. An idea earlier discussed by W.P. Ker, but developed and made famous by Chadwick.

7. This possibility is well discussed by Goody (1971) who shows the lack of correlation between constitution of society and certain aspects of LoDagaa and Gonja literature, and illustrates the inapplicability of at least one kind of functionalist analysis of this literature.
8. There is no space for full references on this, but detailed discussion and bibliography can be found in Watts 1969. Little or no work on these lines has been done on the Nibelungenlied (which nowadays tends to be regarded as a much more "literary" work, albeit one with oral antecedents). But a summary of relevant work on mediaeval French and German literature can be found in Curschmann 1967.

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