

Introduction

Every work of scholarship, indeed, every intellectual endeavor is limited by its prior assumptions. That limitation cannot be quite overcome, but it can be kept to a minimum when one's prior assumptions and prejudices are confronted as honestly as possible. The present study, too, has been conditioned by the position taken as its point of departure, which is as follows: Today's texts of both the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* entered the stream of written transmission as two great oral dictated transcriptions originally taken down at two special performances given (perhaps for that purpose) by Homer, a traditional oral poet of the Ionian Greek territories, very likely the best of his time. Further, the remainder of the "Homeric" corpus and that of Hesiod are from the same singing tradition, albeit with certain differences of region, time, and especially of genre; they may well not be oral dictated texts, which would partially account for their inferiority of length and artistic quality relative to the great epics—the main difference, of course, being that they were not composed by Homer—but I believe they were also orally composed and then reduced to writing in some other way.

Albert Lord's thesis that Homer was an oral poet who had dictated the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* directly to a scribe under conditions resembling but not identical to a normal composition-in-performance originally met with offhand disregard in the higher circles of Homeric criticism but is now gaining in popularity.¹ It seems to me to be the simplest explanation for the capturing of great oral epics in writing on the basis of the evidence available today, including that to be presented in the present volume. The

¹ Cf. Lord, "Homer's Originality: Oral Dictated Texts," *TAPA* 84 (1953) 124–134; and now Gunn, *Narrative Inconsistency*; Tatiana Fotitch, "The Chanson de Geste in the Light of Recent Investigations of Balkan Epic Poetry," in *Linguistic and Literary Studies in Honor of Helmut A. Hatzfeld* (Washington, D.C. 1964) 150–155, 159. For my purposes, it actually matters little whether Homer dictated the two performances to be written down, or otherwise taught them to be preserved verbatim in oral tradition (as G. L. Huxley suggests in *Greek Epic Poetry* [London 1969] 194f); in either case one has an unusual but not a premeditated mode of composition. It does matter whether he had had any practice at such long compositions, which I consider very likely on internal and external grounds, respectively, the tight structure of both poems (within the style of oral tectonics), and the available setting of the Pan-Ionian festival.

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following personal observation has also influenced my decision: When I was enabled by the National Endowment for the Humanities to collect some songs in Crete during the summer of 1966 my attitude to fieldwork was that I should make as little disturbance as possible on the environment I wanted to study, going even to the lengths of recording songs without people's knowledge. At the Research Center of the Anthropological Institute of the University of Athens, however, Professor Spyridakis and his assistant, Mr. Aikatherinides, showed me that time and again the best texts—meaning the most complete and coherent texts, those into which the singers put the best of their attention and enthusiasm—were collected when the singers had been acquainted with the marvels of modern recording apparatus and were fully aware that they were performing especially for it. After the initial shock of hearing their own voices had worn off (which required surprisingly little time) they took to the idea of singing for the recorder, and for posterity, with spirit. Furthermore, as Lord had already discovered (see note 1) South-Slavic singers needed only a little further habituation to adapt their normal mode of rapid composition to the slow pace imposed by dictation. Indeed, they quickly learned to take advantage of the new situation to produce longer and better performances. Oral poets combine the advantages of being performing artists by profession while remaining enviably unselfconscious by nature: they are at their best before an audience, even though their best always means their most spontaneous (see Cecil Sharp [chapter 2, note 48] xxvii). I regard the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, accordingly, not as typical of the average performance by the average singer, but as typical of what a great singer could do with his tradition before a highly appreciative audience.

The transmission of this recorded text remains, no less than its genesis, a mystery. For the purposes of the present study. I shall make the operating assumption of most scholars today, that some kind of standard texts came through the Peisistratean period at Athens, through the Ptolemaic period at Alexandria, down to Van Leeuwen, Allen, and other modern critics, still bearing a reasonably good record of what Homer sang.² This assumption may not be as wishful as it seems: although the

² An excellent survey of the textual transmission as now known is Davison's contribution to Wace and Stubbings (pp. 215-266). Papyrus finds in the intervening time have not altered the picture substantially, although Dihle presents a reconstruction which differs in some particulars in *Homer-Probleme* (esp. Chapter IV).

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path that leads back from the Renaissance to Homer is even longer and more obscure than it is to the Classical period, internal and external evidence bespeaks an unbroken admiration of Homer as a great teacher, and the authorship of both epics as an integrity so powerful that it simply prevailed over the political interestedness of the Athenians, the creative enthusiasm of late classical school teachers, and all the other vicissitudes of this unstable life. There is this paradox in oral tradition, that, despite its great fluidity as a mode of composition, when a poetic creation is fastened upon as holy writ, like the Vedas in India or like the Homeric epics in pre-Christian antiquity, oral tradition can be a far more accurate medium of *transmission* than writing, probably because of the mnemonic effect of the sound medium which is an important part of the singer's whole creation. There must have been many "sons of Homer," both professional reciters and individual admirers of his, who may well have exercised a controlling influence over the idiosyncrasies of text compilers and copyists at least until Hellenistic times.

Regarding the "Homeric Question," then, as restructured by oral theory, I confess myself, with Reinhardt, Lesky, and others, an unregenerate unitarian (see my review of Dihle in *CW* 65 [1971] 131f). When one considers both the artistic unity of the poems and the incertitude attending ancient and modern analyses of them, to attribute the bulk of both epics to Homer seems, again, the simplest working hypothesis, especially for the largely synchronic approach I shall be taking in the following chapters. For me, the long tradition of discomfort with the ancient attribution of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* to Homer does not shift the burden of proof to those inclined to accept that ancient testimony. The poems as they exist today are so well composed and have so much to teach that even where one senses anomalies in the texts one should search long and deep for the author's purpose before resorting to theories of interpolation or—as has become fashionable now—the awkward fusion of rigid traditional entities. In adopting an attitude of *credo ut intellegam* toward Homer I have never yet been disappointed.

The special value of Homer lies mostly in his unrivaled poetic genius, but partly also in the fact that he was a true oral poet. This makes him a uniquely important figure for history, linguistics, comparative literature, and for anyone interested in creativity; and as Verdenius has said, "Les greques ont toujours pensé plus oralement que nous," so that Homer's

habits of thought are for this reason, too, particularly important for every Hellenist.³

It is no longer necessary to describe how Milman Parry brought about today's understanding of "orality" in the field of classics and elsewhere, thanks to the great work rendered as a tribute to him by his son Adam, now also taken by a premature end. As a footnote to Adam Parry's work, however (especially *The Making of Homeric Verse*, hereafter cited as *MHV*, and its thorough Introduction), I will attempt to define the implications of Verdenius's statement a little more closely before beginning to formulate my answer to the latter's call for more attention to this important subject.

Oral composition is not different from written composition in every way. Professor Lord's conclusion that there is no such thing as a transitional text (*ST* 128-132) was necessary at the outset and has remained an extremely useful precaution because of a natural tendency to assimilate the unfamiliar "echoes" in oral poetry into superficially similar features of works composed in writing. This tendency has caused us to judge oral poetry by the wrong standards and to overlook precisely those characteristics of the art which would be most revealing: "Were we to train our ears to catch these echoes, we might cease to apply the clichés of another criticism to oral poetry, and thereby become aware of its own riches" (*ST* 65). And yet, as is implied by Verdenius's comparative (*plus oralement*), there can be varying degrees of spontaneity and of other characteristics of orality, both in thought in general and literary style in particular. This is perhaps especially true in Greek, where there was a strong survival of everything Homeric among the later poets. Professor Lord's stricture, therefore, applies historically, in the sense that when writing is introduced into an oral tradition any accommodation of the two methods will prove highly unstable and the use of writing to compose will quickly supplant the oral habit; it does not necessarily mean that the resultant literary works will immediately have utterly different characteristics from their oral predecessors. The density of "formulaic expressions," by the criteria of Parry and Lord, is markedly greater in Homer than it is in Apollonius or Quintus, but there are stylistically transitional hexameter works in Greek, and the distinction between oral and written in other

³ Cf. "L'Association des idées comme principe de composition dans Homère, Hésiode, Théognis," *REG* 73 (1960) 346, also Mabel L. Lang, "Homer and Oral Techniques," *Hesperia* 38 (1969) 159-168. Note Plato's praise of spontaneous speech at *Rep.* 498 D-E.

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traditions where this aspect of poetic diction has been studied is also anything but clear.⁴

For Greek, and perhaps for other literary traditions, one should really speak of not two but three "different literatures" in chronological succession, taking into account both the mode of composition and of appreciation: (a) oral-aural, primarily the great narrative epics, (b) written-aural, choral lyric and the drama, and (c) written-read, the prose genres after Herodotus and all Hellenistic literature.⁵

When all these provisos are taken into account, however, the most striking division still remains that between Homer and his fellow oral poets on the one hand, and almost all other literature on the other. And the most salient characteristic of his kind of poetry remains, not the absence of writing nor the statistical aspects of recurrence, nor any easily definable feature, perhaps, but the general fact that it is—as I should like to propose for inclusion into any definition of oral poetry—*spontaneous-traditional art*. These terms are not mutually exclusive in the senses intended here, indeed, they are complementary: The oral poet is one who, at the moment of performance, makes spontaneous, and therefore original realizations of inherited, traditional impulses.

As regards Homer's tradition, let me first consider how Parry's immediate predecessors, Witte, Meister, and Meillet (along with Arend afterwards), were dismayed by their discoveries of the extent to which Homer's verse was conditioned by meter, inherited diction, and other conventions, as is reflected in Meister's dictum that, "the Homeric art-

⁴ The modest statistical density of formulas in the fragments of Panyassis, as well as in Hesiod and the Homeric Hymns, could mean either that these works are in a transitional style or that their poets had some "unhomeric" formulas of their own, as is known to be the case among contemporary South-Slavic singers. Cf. Wallace E. McLeod, "Studies on Panyassis, an Heroic Poet of the Fifth Century," *Phoenix* 20 (1966) 95-110. I agree with G. P. Edwards's view that it is something about the use rather than the number of formulaic templates which makes Hesiod look like an oral poet; see *Language of Hesiod*, but compare Dihle, *Homer-Probleme* 123f. For other oral poetries cf. esp. Larry D. Benson, "The Literary Character of Anglo-Saxon Formulaic Poetry," *PMLA* 81 (1966) 334-341 (Benson's point is well taken, though there may be a statistical error in his calculations).

⁵ One tends to think of extemporaneous composition only in what C. S. Lewis called "primary epic" in his *Preface to Paradise Lost* (New York 1961), but it has also been found, complete with formulaic diction, in many lyric traditions; cf. M. B. Emeneau, *Toda Songs* (Oxford 1971); Robert C. Culley, *Oral-Formulaic Language in the Biblical Psalms* (Toronto 1967); Ching-Hsien Wang, *Shih Ching: Formulaic Language and Mode of Creation* (Diss., University of California, Berkeley 1971). This complicates the question of transitional styles and the question of premeditation versus spontaneity. For a glimpse of premeditated and completely extempore composition side by side in the same oral tradition, cf. Lee M. Hollander, *The Skalds* (Ann Arbor 1968), pages 63-65 and 211.

language composes for the poet." Absurd as it may sound, this hapless conclusion has been reached not only in Homeric studies but in virtually every area of oral poetry.⁶ The trouble, as one can now begin to see, came from regarding the oral poet's tradition as a finished product, a repertoire of unalterable conventions already completed, with an existence of its own, separate from the minds of its bearers. This view may be illustrated by an extreme example from a sophisticated writer, one to whom such a concept might more properly be applied. In the first part of *Don Quixote*, Chapters XI–XIII, the demented hero and his squire fall in with a group of simple goatherds in a rustic spot in the Pyrenees. These entertain the Don with some local color concerning the recent death of a certain pseudo-peasant named Chrysostom who has succumbed to unrequited love. The object of his affections was the equally factitious shepherdess Marcella, because of whose great beauty and cold heart the entire forest is resounding with the groans and sighs of disappointed lovers-turned-rustics:⁷ "Not far from here is a place where there are about two dozen great beeches, and every one of them has Marcella's name cut on its smooth bark. . . . Here one shepherd sighs, there another moans; from the distance you can hear songs of love; from near at hand dirges of despair." Cervantes' ironic thrust here depends upon both the distance and the recognizability of the two clearly defined sets of literary conventions he has drawn into the context of his work, namely Gothic romance (the world of Don Quixote's private delusions) and Latin and Italian pastoral (that of his equally lunatic environment).

Now for Cervantes, these conventions were assuredly complete in themselves, something handed down to him from the literary past (in fact, largely from areas outside his own language), something he had learned from a relatively small number of finished examples and perhaps from secondary sources as well, something outside himself which he could treat

⁶ Meister's view can be traced back to the romantic notions about unlettered poetry which arose in the eighteenth century, as can be seen from Lewis's quotation from Goethe (*op. cit.* 25). It is taken up by Robert P. Creed, "The Making of an Anglo-Saxon Poem," *English Literary History* 26 (1959) 445f, and K. Kailasapathy, *Tamil Heroic Poetry* (Oxford 1968) 138f, among others. Although oral verse-making is special (cf. *MHV* 328), whether meter forms diction or diction meter is actually something of a chicken-and-egg problem. A very useful formulation, on the other hand, is that of Hainsworth: "In ἀοιδή the singing tradition there are necessarily already planted the seeds of ποιησις poetic creativity" (*Flexibility* 128).

⁷ Tr. of J. M. Cohen (Baltimore 1950) 94. Note that I am not here comparing Homer to Cervantes, which would require a study of the latter's relationship to his own tradition, the picaresque novel.

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with ironic distance and yet could not manipulate very much without risking loss of intelligibility. But the "tradition" in which Homer composed was not like that: for him it was a still-living stream which operated at a deeper level of consciousness. Despite appearances (as I shall argue below), it was essentially an inheritance of habits, tendencies, and techniques rather than of completed entities. Thus, once a singer learned to compose in his tradition it could not have occurred to him to step outside it, any more than it occurs to us in the ordinary course of events to speak something other than English. Thus also, the tradition itself composed no poetry—that was, as always, the work of poets.

There is a world of difference, then, between the *Kunstsprache* of Karl Meister and the "art language" of Cedric Whitman—a concept more appropriate to oral-traditional poetics, which I shall discuss at greater length in the following chapter and indeed throughout this book. What of the concept of spontaneity?

It is his unfamiliarity with the workings of an oral singing tradition that has made the idea of spontaneous composition so uncomfortable to the literary scholar of today. Of course, it is impossible to extemporize poetry of any value on a regular basis without a well-developed oral tradition; what the writing poet does in premeditating or revising his work has already been done by the oral poet in the long years of training he has undergone before he opens his mouth to sing (as Lord has rightfully stressed, cf. especially *ST* 24). What the writing poet does relatively consciously (perhaps) and relatively alone, the oral poet has already done at a deeper level of awareness and in more intimate cooperation with his teachers, his peers, and finally his audience. Incidentally, therefore, the much vaunted originality of the sophisticated writer, even if it were not illusory for the reasons to be considered below, has been purchased at the terrible cost of alienation—as can be seen today in art and in society at large.

At the present stage of our knowledge, we have no real reason to think that the oral poet's tradition confined him to a relatively narrow range of dictional or thematic choices compared to a writing poet or to the speaker of a natural language generally (if "choice" is, in fact, a concept applicable to linguistic creativity); or to think, on the other hand, that his spontaneity, his ability to compose in performance, was a kind of mantic creativity *ex nihilo* (which, in fact, the singers themselves like to think it is).

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Now spontaneity, however defined, operates from some rather obscure region of the mind; and the same is true, as I shall illustrate below, of the traditional component of the bard's creative process. Not only is it true, as Milman Parry pointed out, that to study Homer's language fully would be to study the full complexity of his mind (see *MHV* 307); but to study his language in any depth must involve a study of subconscious factors. What, then, can the literary scholar hope to achieve? The answer lies, I think, in what Professor Lord means by the "training of the ear," the patient but imaginative work whereby one can gradually come to understand Homer's bygone "art language" in much the same way that one learned to read his Greek. At a level between the denotations of his words and phrases, which can be learned quite well after some habituation, and the preverbal impulses from which they sprang, which are irrecoverable by nature, lies what a school of modern linguists would call the "multi-layered semiotic system" of his total language, and this system should yield some of its secrets to careful and sympathetic study. That, at any rate, is the attempt I shall be making in the following pages.

Beginning with phrases and moving along the spectrum of increasingly larger segments of the composition, I shall try to discern the patterns that underlie them. The question of meaning, and therefore the immediate and general context of the linguistic units under study, will enter the picture almost from the outset. In this regard, among others, I hope to try a somewhat different tack than that of most previous investigators: Bernard Fenik, for example, writes in his thorough and perceptive study of the "typical battle scene," "It seems that the pressure exerted by a familiar pattern could be so strong that it forced the inclusion of one of its standard elements into a particular scene where it is either inappropriate or could not be further developed" (Fenik 53). While this has unquestionably occurred many times in both poems, my provisional *credo*, and the work of certain modern anthropologists, encourage me to look at such an occurrence rather differently: The pattern, be it syntactic-phonological (for the "formula") or narrative-structural (for the "type scene"), need not be considered quite so autonomous, a view which is after all an extension of Meister's dictum. A pattern is an expression of the poet's conscious or unconscious purpose; it is part of his "semiotic system" and one can learn to read it. This part of his system lies below the surface of the narrative, which itself is often inconsistent and illogical; superficial illogicality was a natural by-product of the oral compositional situation

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and certainly did not cause Homer's audience any grief, although it dropped out of fashion with the introduction of composition by writing, to re-emerge only in our own century (where it seems to be cultivated for its own sake). Once one has grasped these underlying patterns one finds that minor inconsistencies in the speeches and actions of the poet's characters are not so much resolved as ignored in an awakened understanding of the real tale that he is singing. One then responds to the story in somewhat the way that Homer's audience did; both his original aural audience and his Greek listeners and readers for several centuries after the breakdown of the oral-composing tradition.

I shall be leaning heavily for this investigation upon the work of many fellow Homeric scholars, for the current state of the field is a "mosaic of contributions," as Hainsworth says. However, in order to resolve the individual *tessarae* into a complete picture, one must also try to gain a wider perspective. The scope of this study is the totality of Homer's art, which is partly unfamiliar and partly the same as great poetry of any kind; there are insights to be gleaned from the special field of oral poetry, from literary criticism in general, and from disciplines at various removes from Homeric studies which cannot be left untapped. The first step is a re-investigation of the phenomena of recurrent diction which have led to the concept of the "oral formula."

