

ORAL POETRY AND THE QUESTION  
OF CRITICAL PROCEDURE

James Holoka

Milman Parry's contributions to the understanding of the physiognomy of oral poetry have raised questions which much be faced by the student of (to name a few) Near Eastern (Enuma Elish, Gilgamesh), Old English (Beowulf), and Old French (Song of Roland) poetry, as well as by the student of Homer.<sup>1</sup> Parry has done nothing less than provide us with the means of establishing, with reasonable accuracy, the "orality" or "literacy"<sup>2</sup> of a given poem. But this process of identification entails an acute critical dilemma. Awareness of the oral character of a poem acts as a kind of censor, demanding that speculations about the techniques of artistic creation and the aesthetic impact of the work as a whole take account at all times of the special circumstances which surround the composition of a "primary" text.

The critical implications of oral theory can be best illustrated by giving a skeletal outline of the way in which it has altered the course of modern Homeric scholarship.

F. A. Wolf, in his Prolegomena ad Homerum (1795), argued, on the basis of the historical data available to him, that Homer could neither have been literate<sup>3</sup> nor, given what were then felt to be the limitations of human memory, capable of oral composition of the Iliad. The logical conclusion was that the poem could not have been produced by one man. For Wolf the answer lay in what came to be called the Pisistratean recension.<sup>4</sup> But the matter was far from settled. There followed a long period of scholarly sleuthing. Every critic became a Sherlock Holmes and every line became suspect. Any stylistic or narrative inconsistency--real or imagined--was quickly seized upon. The Analysts,<sup>5</sup> in their never-ending search for the ipsissima uerba, stratified and indeed disqualified so much of the Homeric poems as to leave very little room for Homer or any other single poet. One need only read the commentary of Leaf and Bayfield<sup>6</sup> to witness the state of disintegration which the poems had reached one hundred years after Wolf's Prolegomena.

In the 1920's a reactionary movement began. E. R. Dodds describes it as follows: "the unitarian reaction was ... to some extent a manifestation of the Zeitgeist. It was announced almost simultaneously by J. A. Scott in America, by Sheppard in England, and by Drerup in Germany .... A common feature to Scott, Drerup, and many later unitarians is their passionate insistence on Homer's 'originality.'<sup>7</sup> The Analysts would have to contend not only with internecine strife over the status of lines and passages, but with the

challenge of the Unitarians who felt that the poems as entities could be shown to be the work of Homer.

The discoveries of Milman Parry,<sup>8</sup> between 1928 and 1935, undercut the position of both schools and inaugurated another era in the Homeric Question. By a careful analysis of language, Parry was able to prove that the poet was working within a long tradition designed to facilitate improvisational composition of hexameter verse. He pointed out that inconsistency arises from the circumstances of oral composition and need not be construed as contamination by other, later poets.<sup>9</sup> His investigation shows that the traditional language is one of incredible serviceability. The doctrine of economy and scope<sup>10</sup> indicates that a single poet might have orally composed an epic of some 16,000 lines, but only because he had at his disposal a traditional Kunstsprache expressly geared to such composition. This puts the question of originality in an entirely new light. While the Analyst's argument from inconsistency has been undermined, the Unitarian must contend with the fact that "the technique of the use of the noun-epithet formulas is worked out to so fine a point that it could be only for the smallest part due to any one man."<sup>11</sup> Much of Homeric scholarship since Parry has concerned itself with the discrimination of those elements (if any) of the text which can be attributed to the original genius of Homer from those which are owed to the tradition. Parry felt that this distinction could best be achieved by the actual observation of a living oral tradition. To this end, he undertook extensive field study in Yugoslavia during the years 1933-35. While he did accumulate a large body of transcribed and mechanically recorded poetry, he was not able to fully set forth the results of his findings before his death in December, 1935.<sup>12</sup> Fortunately, an able successor--Albert Lord--has taken up this task and provided us with perceptive and fascinating descriptions of the experiments which were conducted in "the living laboratory of Yugoslav epic."<sup>13</sup> These experiments were calculated to solve the problem of the historical reconstruction of the ancient situation by the study of a parallel phenomenon in the modern world. Combining precise statistical analyses with careful scrutiny of Yugoslavian practices, the Parry-Lord theory has had profound repercussions for our understanding of Homeric artistry. It entails no less than the formulation of a new, non-literary poetics. Critical speculations about the use of writing in the creation of the Iliad and the Odyssey<sup>14</sup> have met with strong opposition in the form of reports from the "living laboratory."<sup>15</sup>

The theory of oral composition has not made interpretation of the poems an easier matter; it calls into question critical procedures as well as conclusions. The critic can no longer proceed with analysis of Homeric epic

as if it were of exactly the same species as Virgilian or Miltonic epic. This state of affairs has elicited diverse reactions. One of them is despair: "the difficulty is not that Parry's work has proved that there is no artistry in these features of Homer's style, but that he has removed all possibility of any certitude or even reasonable confidence in the criticism of such features of Homeric style.... The hard fact is that in this post-Parry era critics are no longer in a position to distinguish the passages in which Homer is merely using a convenient formula from those in which he has consciously and cunningly chosen le mot juste."<sup>16</sup> We also find violent rejection of the theory: "The most important assault made on Homer's creativeness in recent years is the work of Milman Parry, who may be called the Darwin of Homeric studies. As Darwin seemed to many to have removed the finger of God from the creation of the world and of man, so Milman Parry has seemed to some to remove the creative poet from the Iliad and the Odyssey."<sup>17</sup> The comparative methodology of the theory has been called into question: "it is false to assume that Homer could have done only what Yugoslav bards do. Since we have Homer alone to represent the Greek heroic oral tradition, the only thing we can be sure of is that whatever artistic merits are visible in Homer must have been within the powers of the poet (or poets) who composed the Iliad and the Odyssey. If we judge that such artistic effects are not within the scope of an ordinary oral tradition, then it is more sensible to conclude that Homer surpassed his tradition than to assert that the artistry that has made men admire and read Homer for hundreds of centuries [sic] cannot really be present in Homer because such artistry is unlikely to have been traditional."<sup>18</sup> Most frequently, at least among English-speaking scholars,<sup>19</sup> the theory has met with acceptance and critics have acted upon Parry's assertion that the poet's excellence consists in his ability to utilize fully the resources provided him by the tradition. Signs of conscious control have been sought primarily in the arrangement of language (however traditional) on all scales.

On the level of individual formulae, George M. Calhoun attempted some forty years ago to demonstrate a subtle poetic intention underlying the use of the expression "winged words."<sup>20</sup> Parry responded with a convincing explanation of the role of metrical serviceability as the overriding concern in the use of this formula, asserting further that Calhoun's paper raised "the whole issue of whether we should read Homer as we read written poetry, which is for us the natural form of poetry, or whether we should not rather try to gain for our reading the sense of the style which is proper to oral song."<sup>21</sup> The concept of formula, however defined, carries with it the necessary inference that metrical convenience is a more important

4

determinant than signification in the choice of words. Indeed, recent critics have so expanded the definition of formula as to give the impression of an almost im-malleable system of metrical-grammatical units.<sup>22</sup>

But G. M. Calhoun has had more cautious and more persuasive successors. William Whallon has recently argued for inventive control of epithets and for their significant deployment irrespective of metrical exigencies; epithet can carry both metrical and literary significance.<sup>23</sup>

On the level of individual passages, inventiveness has been claimed for narrative digressions. Critics have seen patterns of arrangement<sup>24</sup> as well as innovative adjustment<sup>25</sup> in traditional mythological stories.

Another structural constituent--the simile--has attracted attention because of its apparent linguistic lateness. Critics have held that the similes are likely to have received their original formulation from Homer himself: "they are not part of the traditional epic baggage. Nothing forbids our thinking that they were developed especially by the monumental poet."<sup>26</sup> It has also been shown that there is a high concentration of original noun-epithet formulas in the similes.<sup>27</sup> The search for *ipsisima uerba* continues.

On the level of grand design, much critical ingenuity has been spent in the explication of over-all structural patterns, from J. T. Sheppard's Pattern of the Iliad<sup>28</sup> through the excesses of J. L. Myres<sup>29</sup> to more recent (and more conservative) critics.<sup>30</sup> The analogy with Geometric art<sup>31</sup> has been used for various reasons,<sup>32</sup> but the most important implication of grand design is that the poem as a whole has been consciously orchestrated by a single mind. This theory is useful both to the Unitarians and to those who would define the range of Homeric artistry and invention.

As can be seen from this thumbnail sketch of the critical problems which have evolved from it, the Parry-Lord theory is something to be reckoned with in Homeric scholarship.<sup>33</sup> Parry saw the need for a new, oral poetics. He and his followers are right to insist upon a recognition of the ways in which the circumstances of composition shape and influence the work of art. There are peculiarities in Homeric verse which cannot be properly understood except in light of oral theory. To the extent that it sheds light upon obscurity or enigma in the poem, the theory is an invaluable aid to the critic. But the over-stringent enforcement of Parry's doctrines can lead to critical paralysis. Albert Lord has implied that we must renounce altogether the poetics of written literature when engaged in interpretation of an oral poem: "we must be willing to use the new tools for investigation of multiforms of themes and patterns, and we must be willing to learn from the experience of other oral traditional poetries. Otherwise

5

'oral' is simply an empty label and 'traditional' is devoid of sense. Together they form merely a façade behind which scholarship can continue to apply the poetics of written literature."<sup>34</sup> In effect, we are being asked to restrict ourselves to a perspective which is absolutely consonant with the situation of original performance (=composition); again, the reconstruction of history.

The Parry-Lord theory has shown that the Analysts were wrong in deducing multiple authorship from the presence of inconsistencies in the poems. Those inconsistencies are manifest only because we experience the poems under a false set of expectations--expectations inherent in a literary bias. Homer's audience would not have been able to double check or to juxtapose passages from widely separated parts of the poem; the inconsistencies would not have been apparent to the original audience, nor indeed would they have been to Homer himself. No one supposes that the contradictions or malapropisms occasioned by the exigencies of improvisational verse-making were in fact consciously included in the poems; Homer simply was not aware of them. Nonetheless, they are present and they cannot be eliminated, nor can we will ourselves oblivious to them. Our experience of the poem is of a different order from that of the original audience; it involves a fuller awareness of all aspects of composition (except of course for its musicality). What was for them a spoken word, fleeting (winged) and unreclaimable, is for us a written word, stationary and susceptible of careful scrutiny. Further, our familiarity with written literature has developed in us a different aesthetic sensibility which cannot--and should not--be easily renounced. It is good and just that we should be expected to temper our evaluation of Homeric artistry by a knowledge of the contingencies of the circumstances of composition. But we should not be asked to relinquish a critical acumen which enables us to discern the brilliant as well as the inconsistent in Homer. If the cohesion, balance, and symmetry of the Iliad may not have been apparent to an audience listening to some thirty hours<sup>35</sup> of oral recitation, that fact need not restrict our insight. Oral theorists have committed a sin of hubris in their willingness to prescribe the types of excellence which are within the capability of Homer. He may not have been permitted by his medium to include "nice balances and contrasts"<sup>36</sup> in the conscious and fully intentional manner of the literate artist, but that does not mean such artistry is not to be found in the poems; the theorists have involved themselves in the perilous question of the intention of the author.

An awareness of the fact of oral composition ought not in any given instance to interdict altogether the critical process, rather it should simply provide the means for a beneficial realignment. This should induce in the critic a salubrious (not paranoid) caution.

1. For discussion of oral composition in connection with the three non-Greek literatures I have mentioned, see: N. K. Sandars, The Epic of Gilgamesh (Baltimore, 1960; rpt. 1970), pp. 45-48; F. P. Magoun, Jr., "The Oral-Formulaic Character of Anglo-Saxon Narrative Poetry," Speculum, 28 (1953), 446-67, rpt. in L. E. Nicholson (ed.), An Anthology of Beowulf Criticism (Notre Dame, 1963), pp. 189-221; A. B. Lord, The Singer of Tales (Cambridge, Mass., 1960), chap. 10: "Some Notes on Medieval Epic." The aesthetic implications of oral theory together with baseless assumptions underlying its application to Old English poetry are judiciously handled in Ann C. Watts, The Lyre and the Harp: A Comparative Reconsideration of Oral Tradition in Homer and Old English Epic Poetry (New Haven, 1969).

2. For a succinct treatment of this distinction, see chapter 1 of C. M. Bowra's From Virgil to Milton (London, 1945).

3. In Wolf's day, there was a gap of some three centuries between the accepted floruit of Homer (11th or 10th Cent. BC) and the date of the earliest known inscriptions (7th cent. BC).

4. According to this theory, the tyrant Pisistratus, late in the 6th cent. BC, authorized the creation of a "standard" edition of the Homeric poems for recitation at the Panathenaea. The divergent, orally disseminated versions of the poems were thus precipitated into written form. A somewhat analogous phenomenon would be the creation of the Finnish national epic--the Kalevala--by the "editor" Elias Lonrot in the nineteenth century.

5. This word signifies those who believe in multiplicity of authorship.

6. London, 1895-98. The stratification of the poems is here given the aura of dogma.

7. "Homer," Fifty Years of Classical Scholarship, ed. M. Platnauer (Oxford, 1954), pp. 9-10.

8. Parry's writings, most of which have been long out of print, are now readily accessible in a single invaluable tome edited by his son: Adam Parry (ed.), The Making of Homeric Verse: The Collected Papers of Milman Parry (Oxford, 1971).

9. For a particular variety of inconsistency typical of oral composition (in this case Old English), see Charles Witke, "Beowulf 2069b-2199: A Variant?" Neuphilologische Mitteilungen, 67 (1966), 113-17.

10. Economy and scope refer to the fact that for each significant character in the epics, there is a system of epithets which will enable the poet to "fill up" various amounts of a verse (scope), while for any specific amount of a verse (2 feet, 3 1/2, 6, or whatever), there tends to be one and only one epithet which fills it (economy). In short the technique is extremely efficient.

11. "Studies in the Epic Technique of Oral Verse-Making. I. Homer and Homeric Style," Harvard Studies in Classical Philology, 41 (1930), 73 = Making of Homeric Verse (above, note 8), p. 266.

12. A few pages of his projected book--The Singer of Tales--are contained in A. B. Lord, "Homer, Parry, and Huso," American Journal of Archaeology, 52 (1948), 34-44 = Making of Homeric Verse (above, note 8), pp. 465-78.

13. Lord (above, note 1), p. 141.

14. See, e.g., C. M. Bowra, Heroic Poetry (London, 1952), pp. 240-41 and H. T. Wade-Gery, The Poet of the Iliad (Cambridge, 1952), pp. 38-41.

15. Lord emphasizes again and again that literacy is destructive of the ability to compose orally. He explains the existence of a written text of the poem by his theory of the oral dictated text, see "Homer's Originality: Oral Dictated Texts," Transactions and Proceedings of the American Philological Association, 84 (1953),

124-34 = The Language and Background of Homer: Some Recent Studies and Controversies, ed. G. S. Kirk (New York, 1964), pp. 68-78.

16. F. M. Combella, "Milman Parry and Homeric Artistry," Comparative Literature, 11 (1959), 208. Cf. "Contemporary Unitarians and Homeric Originality," American Journal of Philology, 71 (1950), 360-61.

17. Wade-Gery (above, note 14), pp. 38-39.

18. Anne Amory Parry, "Homer as Artist," Classical Quarterly, 31 (1971), 6; G. S. Kirk, "Homer and Modern Oral Poetry: Some Confusions," Classical Quarterly, 10 (1960), 271-81; also G. F. Else, "Homer and the Homeric Problem," Univ. of Cincinnati Classical Studies (Semple Lectures), 1 (1967), 338.

19. German-speaking scholars, with some exceptions (notably Albin Lesky), have ignored the theory as being inadequate to account for the structural magnitude and complexity of the poems.

20. "The Art of the Formula in Homer--EPEA PTERONTA," Classical Philology, 30 (1935), 215-27; cf. J. T. Sheppard's analyses of epithets: "Zeus-Loved Achilles: A Contribution to the Study of Stock Epithets in Homer's Iliad," Journal of Hellenic Studies, 55 (1935), 113-23 and "Great-Hearted Odysseus: A Contribution to the Study of Stock Epithets in Homer's Odyssey," ibid., 56 (1936), 36-47.

21. "About Winged Words," Classical Philology, 32 (1937), 63 = Making of Homeric Verse (above, note 8), p. 418.

22. See esp. J. A. Russo's discussion of structural formula in "A Closer Look at Homeric Formulas," Transactions and Proceedings of the American Philological Association, 94 (1963), 235-47, and "The Structural Formula in Homeric Verse," Yale Classical Studies, 20 (1966), 217-40.

23. "The Homeric Epithets," Yale Classical Studies, 17 (1961), 97-142; "The Shield of Ajax," ibid., 19(1966), 7-36; and most recently, Formula, Character, and Context: Studies in Homeric, Old English, and Old Testament Poetry (Washington, 1969).

24. E.g., Julia H. Gaisser, "A Structural Analysis of the Digressions of the Iliad and the Odyssey," Harvard Studies in Classical Philology, 73 (1968), 1-43; W. A. A. Van Otterlo, "Eine merkwürdige Kompositionsform der älteren griechischen Literatur," Mnemosyne, 12 (1945), 192-207.

25. See B. K. Braswell, "Mythological Innovation in the Iliad," Classical Quarterly, 31 (1971), 16-26; Julia H. Gaisser, "Adaptation of Traditional Material in the Glaucus-Diomedes Episode," Transactions and Proceedings of the American Philological Association, 100 (1969), 165-76; M. M. Willcock, "Mythological Paradiigma in the Iliad," Classical Quarterly, 14 (1964), 141-54.

26. Else (above, note 18), 355; cf. G. S. Kirk, "Objective Dating Criteria in Homer," Museum Helveticum, 17 (1960), 202-203 = Language and Background of Homer (above, note 15), pp. 187-88. The evidence for linguistic lateness is marshalled by G. P. Shipp, Studies in the Language of Homer (Cambridge, 1953; 2nd ed. 1972).

27. M. W. M. Pope, "The Parry-Lord Theory of Homeric Composition," Acta Classica, 6 (1963), 1-21.

28. London, 1922.

29. "The Last Book of the 'Iliad'," Journal of Hellenic Studies, 52 (1932), 264-96; "The Pattern of the Odyssey," ibid., 72 (1952), 1-19; "The Structure of the Iliad, Illustrated by the Speeches," ibid., 74 (1954), 122-41; "Homeric Art," Annual of the British School at Athens, 45 (1950), 229-60.

30. Chiefly, C. H. Whitman, Homer and the Heroic Tradition (Cambridge, Mass., 1958), and T. B. L. Webster, From Mycenae to Homer (London, 1958).

31. Principally the monumental amphorae and kraters from the Dipylon cemetery at Athens; see plates 21 and 22 in Webster (above, note 30).

32. See W. Schadewaldt's argument for an 8th cent. Homer in "Homer und sein Jahrhundert," in Von Homers Welt und Werk: Aufsätze und Auslegungen zur homerischen Frage (Stuttgart, 1944; 4th ed. 1966), esp. pp. 115-22; also Whitman (above, note 30), chap. 5.

33. By extension, oral theory is something to be reckoned with in the study of any "primary" (i.e., oral) poem.

34. "Homer as Oral Poet," Harvard Studies in Classical Philology, 72 (1968), 46.

35. For this figure, see J. A. Notopoulos, "Studies in Early Greek Oral Poetry," Harvard Studies in Classical Philology, 68 (1964), 6-12; cf. "Continuity and Interconnexion in Homeric Oral Composition," Transactions and Proceedings of the American Philological Association, 82 (1951), 81-101.

36. Parry's phrase, "The Distinctive Character of Enjambement in Homeric Verse," Transactions and Proceedings of the American Philological Association, 60 (1929), 215 = Making of Homeric Verse (above, note 8), p. 262.

## THE FAVOLA OF THE "PAPERE" IN BOCCACCIO: A STUDY OF TWO SOURCES AND AN ANALYSIS

Cassandra Moore

In an introduction to the fourth day of the Decameron, Boccaccio tells an amusing tale of a boy, sequestered for sixteen years by his saintly father, who yet, on seeing a bevy of beautiful women, desires one of these paperere. The anecdote revolves around the opposition between natura and nutritura and serves to defend the author against those critics who accuse him of directing too much attention to women while commending him to the oziose donne, his audience.<sup>1</sup> The story seems slight enough but it has a long and involved history. Prototypes are found in such diverse sources as the Anecdota graeca, the Speculum historiale of Vincent de Beauvais, and the Vitae patrum. The author of Gui de Cambrai treats a version of it in the Middle Ages yet another retelling is to be found in The Golden Legend of Jacques de Vitry.

Of particular interest are two accounts which are both related to each other and, at the same time, point to Boccaccio's handling of the tale. These are "Apologue X" of the late Greek novel, Barlaam and Ioasaph, attributed to St. John Damascene, and an extremely short novellino which probably dates from the late thirteenth century.

At first glance the novellino which begins, "A uno Re nacque uno figliuolo . . .," appears to be a straightforward retelling of "Apologue X" of Barlaam and Ioasaph.<sup>2</sup> The plot is basically the same: a king, at the behest of certain advisers, sequesters his son for fear that the boy will become blind should he see the sun before attaining a certain age. Once the specified number of years has elapsed, the child is brought forth into the light and is shown a number of pleasing objects, among them women. The latter are represented as being demons, but the boy at once prefers them to all else. Both fables then close with a philosophical reflection by the king on the beguiling power of women, which is indeed the theme of the tale.

The apologue is short; the novellino, even shorter: seven mimeographed lines suffice for the latter, while the apologue occupies a mere page and a half of printed text. In both the principal actors are anonymous: the apologue speaks of "a certain king" (βασιλεύς) and "a son" (υἱός) (451), while the novellino is concerned with "uno Re" and "uno figliuolo." Nor is there any mention of a specific country or a particular era. Such generalizations suggest that each author conceives the tale as