

IX.—Homer's Originality: Oral Dictated Texts

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In his impressive book, *Heroic Poetry* (London 1952), Sir Cecil M. Bowra places Homer "in the middle of an important change produced by the introduction of writing." "Behind him (Homer) lie centuries of oral performance, largely improvised, with all its wealth of formulae adapted to an exacting metre; these he knows and uses fully. But if he also knows writing and is able to commit his poems to it, he is enabled to give a far greater precision and care to what he says than any improvising poet ever can. Since it is almost impossible to believe that the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* were ever improvised, and the richness of their poetry suggests some reliance on writing, we may see in them examples of what happens when writing comes to the help of the oral bard. He continues to compose in the same manner as before, but with far greater care and effectiveness."¹

These are the latest words in Homeric scholarship and they demand our attention. Bowra has ranged widely in the field of oral epic, realizing full well the importance of the comparative method in scholarship. He has focused our studies now on the period of transition from oral to written technique, and he is right. It was inevitable that a solution of whether or not Homer was an oral poet would be sought in a compromise which would make him both; that is to say, an oral poet who writes. The motivating force behind this solution is the reluctance to associate the greatness of Homer's poetry, the unity of his poems, his originality or individuality, with unlettered oral song.

The feeling seems to be growing that the work of Milman Parry twenty years ago was an attack on the citadel of Homer's creative greatness. This is far less apparent in Bowra than in Prof. H. T. Wade-Gery's recent book, *The Poet of the Iliad* (Cambridge 1952), which is more typical of this increasing sentiment.² He also accepts

¹ Bowra, *op. cit.* 240-41.

² Prof. L. A. Post in his Sather Classical Lectures, *From Homer to Menander* (Berkeley 1951), similarly misinterprets Parry's writings on oral technique and accuses Parry and myself of a *non sequitur* (*op. cit.* 274-75, note 13): "To conclude that, be-

the fact that Homer used the oral technique of composition, but he too stumbles on the stone of creative genius. For him Homer is an oral poet who has the ambition to make a poem which is beyond the limits of oral composition.³ "The *Iliad* is what it is because of the impact upon an oral technique of a brand-new literacy invented by the Greeks themselves."⁴ "It was the *Iliad* which for its scale and its organic structure demanded this new device."⁵ To him the *Iliad* "is not a traditional book, but a great poem by a great poet." It is distinguished "from the common run of heroic poetry" by "the tragic unity of its theme and the dramatic intensity of its characters."⁶ In other words, a traditional book cannot be "a great poem," cannot have "tragic unity" or "dramatic intensity" of character. If we can show that a poem is "great" and has "tragic unity" and "dramatic intensity" of character, we can prove that it is not a traditional book, according to Wade-Gery.

On the surface Bowra's and Wade-Gery's positions may appear to be the same. To both Homer is an oral poet who writes. Yet in Bowra the Homeric poems become what they are artistically with the help of writing; whereas in Wade-Gery the grand concept of the poems precedes their actual creation and demands the alphabet for their expression.

At this point three questions present themselves as tests of this compromise solution: Does the oral technique exclude originality, and if not, how can oral poets be "original" or "individual" or "great"? What do we know about the period of transition from oral to written technique? What occurs in the process of writing down an oral poem?

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Wade-Gery terms Parry "the Darwin of Homeric studies" and explains: "As Darwin seemed to many to have removed the finger

cause the technique of modern Yugoslav epic is comparable to that of the Homeric poems, therefore no Homeric poet existed who was very different in capacity and achievement from modern oral poets, is a *non sequitur*." Neither Parry nor I has ever denied the greatness of Homer, or ever made any statement which would imply that there are no grades of distinction among oral poets. We have nowhere said or written that there could have been no Homer because "most or even all modern oral poets are comparatively unoriginal." Our experiences on the contrary have shown us, as this present article indicates, that the capacities and achievements of oral poets, ancient or modern, have been unjustly minimized and misunderstood.

³ Wade-Gery, *op. cit.* 13-14.

⁴ *Ibid.* 39.

⁵ *Ibid.* 40.

⁶ *Ibid.* 37.

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 *Odyssey*.”⁷ He quotes part of a sentence of Parry’s, published in 1930, which has been fastened upon by his critics as denying originality to oral poets in general and to Homer in particular. Wade-Gery calls it “Parry’s paradox about the Epic poet, that” (and here he quotes Parry) “‘at no time is he seeking words for an idea which has never before found expression.’”⁸

Parry wrote this before he had had any experience of oral singers, at a time when he was arguing deductively from his analysis of style. In his second article on the same subject, published in 1932,⁹ still before his Yugoslav trips, he made use of evidence from other poetries and from the reports of collectors. It was because he was dissatisfied with both of these methods that he decided to conduct his own investigations of oral poetry. It is truly amazing that most of the conclusions at which he arrived in these early papers have proved to be completely accurate by field observation and experiment. If one places the controversial sentence quoted by Wade-Gery in the full context of the two articles, Parry’s meaning is put in perspective and not distorted. What he says in essence is, that the question of originality of style means nothing to the oral poet, because he has at his command ready-made phrases which have been built up by generations of poets to express all the ideas needed in the poetry. In order for the tradition to have come into being and to have continued to exist, one must suppose that singers made changes from time to time, but these changes would have been slight and new formulas would have been modelled on the old ones. “An oral style is thus highly conservative; yet the causes for change are there, and sooner or later must come into play. These causes for change have nothing to do with any wish on the part of the single poet for what is new or striking in style.”¹⁰

These statements have been checked by field experiments. They still hold true, but they should be elaborated in two directions. First, we have learned in Yugoslavia that there are differences between the text of a song as actually sung and the text of a song which

⁷ *Ibid.* 38–39.

⁸ *Ibid.* 41.

⁹ The two articles are “Studies in the Epic Technique of Oral Verse-Making. I. Homer and Homeric Style,” *HSCP* 41 (1930) 73–147 and II. “The Homeric Language as the Language of an Oral Poetry,” *HSCP* 43 (1932) 1–50.

¹⁰ Parry (above note 9, article II) 9.

was taken down from dictation. Previously evidence about oral technique had come from texts which had been taken down from the singers' dictation and then edited.¹¹ A certain amount of normalizing occurs during both the dictating and editing processes, so that the published song does not by any means exactly reproduce the formulaic style of the sung performance. A study of actual sung texts, however, indicates considerable formula deviation. We know now that creation and re-creation occur on the formula level much more actively than Parry had at first thought. Each singer has a group of formulas which forms the basis of his style. These change but seldom; on them he patterns others. They represent, of course, the most common narrative or descriptive ideas of his poems. All other formulas vary greatly in their susceptibility to change at the hands of a single singer. As Parry noted, the changes follow the patterns of the stable formulas, because the singer thinks in those patterns. Nevertheless, he has freedom to create new phrases and he does so.

Thus the singer has scope for his creative powers on the formula level. And because the basic core of formulas is not necessarily the same even for singers from the same district or who have learned from the same man, these experiments provide us with a means of distinguishing individual styles among singers. We should eventually by this means be able to come to some reasonable answer to the question of whether the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* are by the same poet.

The second direction in which Parry's statements should be elaborated leads to a field about which he had actually written but little, that which I choose to call "the epic technique of oral song-making." I spoke about this two years ago at these meetings in a paper entitled "Composition by Theme in Homer and Southslavic Epos."¹² The themes of oral poetry are the repeated narrative or descriptive elements, and they function in building songs in much the same way in which the formulas function in building lines. The formula content of a theme is variable depending on the wishes of the singer to lengthen or shorten his song. Some themes in turn are purely ornamental, and they may be included or eliminated according to the wishes of the singer. Moreover, the themes vary in stability, both as to formula content and as to place in any given song, in accordance with the frequency of their use. Themes which

¹¹ E.g. Vuk S. Karadžić, *Srpske narodne pjesme*, Volumes 1-9, 1932-1936.

¹² *TAPA* 82 (1951) 71-80.

are basic to many songs and which are hence used very often tend to be fairly stable, like the basic core of formulas.

Since songs are, therefore, only relatively stable in their content, they readily combine. They may be added to one another without difficulty, one being sung as a continuation of another. They may be easily intertwined. In Yugoslav tradition there are songs which tell of a son setting out to find a lost father, and there are songs recounting the return of a hero from captivity after many years to find his wife about to marry again. These two stories are combined in the *Odyssey*. By studying the combination and separation and recombination of themes and songs in the Yugoslav tradition we are learning the principles which these processes follow; we know that the processes are not merely haphazard. But what we need to point out for the present purpose is that the oral poet has a great degree of freedom in the construction of his song, if he wishes to be creative and to make use of that freedom. How else could new songs enter the tradition? Homer has obviously used that freedom of combination in the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*.

On both the formulaic and the thematic level, then, the oral technique not only allows freedom for change and creation but aids in providing the means by which the singer may exercise his creative imagination if he so desires. His medium is not so restrictive that he is stifled by his tradition. An oral poet can be creative to whatever degree his inspiration moves him and his mastery of technique permits. He will show his originality both in new phrases and in new combinations of themes, perhaps even in new themes. Even lesser oral poets than a Homer are original, particularly at that point when they first sing a song which they learned from another singer. Unwittingly perhaps they recombine themes, add and eliminate themes, using their own individual formulaic technique.

In the Yugoslav laboratory we can determine, after working long with a single singer and with other singers in his district, in exactly what points any given singer is original. For Homer we simply do not have anywhere nearly sufficient material, and we must heed F. M. Combellack's sage words in his excellent article on "Contemporary Unitarians and Homeric Originality" warning us not to be too specific in claiming originality for any given passage.¹³ Yet even here I believe that with time we can arrive at an appreci-

¹³ *AJP* 71 (1950) 337-64.

ation of the ways in which Homer shows his superiority to all other oral epic poets.

Homer, then, I am certain, did not need writing to be a creative poet in his tradition. But it must be true that he lived in an age when writing existed and was developed to such a point that the *Iliad* could be written down. It was probably the age of transition from oral to written technique in literature. Our second question is: What do we know about this transition?

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Wade-Gery presents us not with a transition but with a lightning-like metamorphosis. Bowra, however, is infinitely more realistic. He is aware that the transition from oral to written literature does not occur overnight. Indeed, in the passage from his recent book which I have quoted above, he has described the process very accurately, I believe. The oral artist comes to realize the possibilities which the leisure of the new medium permits for careful composition and for calculated changes different from the rapid changes forced by the speed of oral performance. To telescope the change from expert oral technique to a sophisticated use of literary technique into the lifetime of one individual, even granting he be a genius, is, I am sure, not consistent with the facts.

There are in Yugoslavia a number of oral poets who can write. Their first attempts at writing were mere recordings of the songs which they knew. When they go beyond this and begin to break the formula patterns in which they have thought poetically all their lives, the results are not felicitous. They abandon such imaginative introductions as "Once in the days of old, when Sulejman held empire," for prosaic beginnings like, "In the bloody year of 1914, on the sixth day of the month of August, Austria and all Germany were greatly worried." They become wordy and stilted to the point of being unconsciously mock heroic. The natural dignity of the traditional expressions is lost and what remains is a caricature. The literary technique takes several generations to mature. I cannot conceive of the author of the *Iliad* as semi-literate. The poem is too great, is done with far too much assurance, to be the first hesitating steps in a new technique. It seems to me rather that it is the product of a great oral poet in a rich oral tradition. The poems of a semi-literate oral poet are awkward in construction because

they mix two techniques, one of which has not yet had time to develop, and the other of which the poet already disdains.

There is a further difficulty in the compromise solution of a literate oral poet which needs to be answered. Why should an oral poet take to writing down his songs? Since the oral technique does not hamper in any way those who practice it well, since in Homer's period I do not believe that we can posit a highly developed literary technique which would make him dissatisfied with the older one, I cannot see why he should even think of turning to writing. The rich possibilities of the literary technique are not apparent at its inception, especially to those who already have a technique which is rich in known possibilities.

Someone may suggest that it would be a mnemonic device, but this too is unrealistic. The singer has no need of a mnemonic device in a manner of singing which was designed to fill his needs without such written aids. A mnemonic device implies a fixed text to be memorized, a concept unknown to the oral poet. A written text would be useful to the reciter or rhapsode of a later period who is no longer an oral poet, but simply a mouthpiece.

Another suggestion might be that the singer wishes to preserve his song for posterity. This too is invalid. His song will be handed down to younger generations, even as he received it and other songs from his elders. It would never occur to the singer that his song would be lost to mankind. That is why he sings: that the glories of the past might not disappear from the minds of men.

Perhaps the singer wanted to have his song preserved in the exact words and form in which he sang it. But we must reject this also; for one must remember that in the oral manner the singer has no idea of a fixed, word-for-word form of a song.

It would seem, then, that the idea to write down an oral song must come from an outside source, not from the singer himself. A question of prime importance for the dating of Homer must be when did the idea of writing down epic songs come and under what circumstances? Possibly there was an early period of collecting from which only these two songs have survived and about which we have no other reference or record. We know from other traditions that when writing has arrived at the moment when it is used for artistic purposes, the first things written are the songs of the people. It seems to me that this is the question to which we should be turning our attention, because when we can answer it, we shall know when

Homer lived and when the poems were composed. For they are unmistakably the product of the collecting of oral poetry. To this extent writing is indispensable to the composition of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*.

But this is not the only extent, I believe, that writing is indispensable to the Homeric poems as we have them. Bowra has stated that "it is almost impossible to believe that the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* were ever improvised, and the richness of their poetry suggests some reliance on writing." This statement is properly cautious. Allow me to rephrase it more precisely. It is impossible to believe that the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* as we have them represent exactly the songs as actually sung in normal performance by Homer; their length and consequent richness of content, the perfection of their lines, suggest some reliance on writing. We must now elaborate and explain this rephrasing.

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The Homeric poems belong to the period of transition from an oral to a literary technique, a transition which takes at least several generations before it is completed, yet they are oral poems as their style indicates. Homer, then, was an oral poet living in an age of writing. Oral songs can be collected either by phonograph apparatus, which is obviously out of the question here; or by dictation to a scribe; or by a literate oral poet who has been asked to write down his song for someone else who, for some reason, wants it in writing. The last of these possibilities is highly unlikely, because the oral poet, if he is at all literate, can have only a smattering of writing, if he is to remain an oral poet. Had he enough facility in writing to record 27,000 lines of text, his style could not be that of an oral technique, which Homer's demonstrably is. In my own mind there remains no doubt that Homer dictated the *Iliad* to someone else who wrote it down, because the Homeric poems have all the earmarks of dictated texts of oral epic songs. They are not the improvised text of normal oral performance; without recording apparatus it is impossible to obtain such texts. They are not texts produced by written technique of composition, because such a technique had not been developed, and they do not show signs of a break in the formulaic tradition. They are not semi-literate texts in the sense of texts which occur at the beginning of the development of written technique, because they are too good. But they are oral dictated

texts, a completely separate category, which represents, from the point of view of the oral singer, an "ideal" text. To understand this we must look very closely at the moment of their composition; we must examine what occurs when the singer dictates his song to a scribe.

This moment has hitherto been ignored by Homeric scholars because they have not thought it worth their while to undertake field collecting. Milman Parry realized that the experience of being in the field was necessary, that he could not simply read oral epics which had been collected by others and the accounts which those collectors had written. He had to relive the experience. Fortunately he collected songs from dictation as well as songs sung for the recording apparatus. I have myself written down songs from dictation, a process which I learned from a true master. To the best of my knowledge the only other Homerist to have the temerity to leave the comfort of his study and enter the field is Professor J. N. Notoopoulos, who has just returned from Greece.

An oral poet who is asked to dictate a song for someone to write finds himself in an unusual and abnormal position. He is accustomed to composing rapidly to the accompaniment of a musical instrument which sets the rhythm and tempo of his performance. For the first time he is without this rhythmic assistance, and at the beginning he finds it difficult to make his lines. He can easily learn to do this, however, and he sets up a certain rhythm in his mind. He is also somewhat annoyed by having to wait between lines for the scribe to write. His mind moves ahead more rapidly than does the writer's pen. This technique he can also learn, particularly if the scribe is alert and helpful. The singer is also accustomed to the stimulus of an audience, but again an intelligent scribe and a small group of onlookers can provide this stimulus. These are the disadvantages of the dictating technique, but they are not insurmountable. When they are surmounted, the singer discovers the advantages of the technique and proceeds to profit by them, as long as the scribe can mitigate the boredom of slow performance, and maintain the singer's interest.

The chief advantage to the singer of this manner of composition is that it affords him time to think of his lines and of his song. His small audience is stable. This is an opportunity for the singer to show his best, not as a performer, but as a storyteller and poet. He can ornament his song as fully as he wishes and is capable; he can

develop his tale with completeness, he can dwell lovingly on passages which in normal performance he would often be forced to shorten because of the pressure of time or because of the restlessness of the audience. The very length of the Homeric poems is the best proof that they are products of the moment of dictation rather than that of singing. The leisureliness of their tempo, the fullness of their telling, are also indications of this method. The poetic moments of the tradition, used perhaps sparingly in normal performance, accumulate to provide that richness of poetry which Bowra feels suggests writing. To the method of dictation one can also attribute the piling up of similes in Homer and the extended simile. It is not that he goes beyond the bounds of the oral technique, but that he uses it to the full. It is interesting that when Parry asked singers when they had finished dictating songs for him whether they thought that sung songs were better than dictated ones or vice versa, their answers invariably were: "Sung songs are truer, dictated songs are finer!" I would paraphrase this as: "Sung songs are closer to what we have heard from others, but we can be better poets in dictated song!"¹⁴ That dictated songs are indeed superior to sung texts can be seen in the first volume of the Parry Collection, which will appear in February, 1954.

There is a certain amount of originality in each performance of an oral epic. It has never been sung exactly the same way before, even by the same singer; it will never be sung exactly the same way again. It is unique. If each performance under normal conditions can be original, then the dictated performance allows for the greatest originality. It is, moreover, the kind of originality which still remains within the tradition, because the tradition is but the sum total of the singers and their songs. The oral poet constantly combines and recombines and adds and subtracts from what he has heard. And this combining and recombining, adding and subtracting, is the tradition. When a singer makes a new song, he is following the tradition.

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The Homeric poems are what they are because they are the products of an oral technique with its abundant opportunities for

¹⁴ Cf. *Serbo-croatian Heroic Songs*, collected by Milman Parry, edited by Albert Bates Lord, published by Harvard University Press and Serbian Academy of Sciences (Cambridge and Belgrade 1954) 1.263 and 416, note 1.

freedom of creation, recorded by a method and under circumstances which bring to the fore the very best which an inspired poet can instill into them. Even as the moment of singing is the normal moment of creation of oral epic, so the moment of dictating is the moment of creation of our texts from the past. The more we know about that moment, the greater will be our understanding of those texts.