

Some Formulary Illogicalities in Homer

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It has become a commonplace of contemporary Homeric criticism that the formulary style and the oral method of composition occasionally produce results which, to us at least, seem illogical or even absurd. The careful student reading Homer for the first time will, if he is doing the *Iliad*, at least wonder why the vindictive wanton Anteia is called *δῖα*, "divine," or "glorious," and, if he is reading the *Odyssey*, why the adulterous murderer Aegisthus is called *ἀμύμων*, "blameless." Many readers have found it absurd that the beggar of Ithaca should have a *πότνια μήτηρ*, "queenly mother," and find it almost insulting that the Penelope for whom Odysseus was ready to sacrifice immortal youth is said to have a fat hand.

There is no reason to imagine that this feature of oral composition should show itself only in the sphere of epithets, and there have been occasional efforts to explore it in other areas within the poems. My present purpose is to deal with some passages in which it seems that the poet has been led away from logic because he is involved in a common formulary situation, in the same way as in the examples just mentioned he has been led astray because he is using a convenient formulary phrase.

The first instances I shall discuss all involve illogical speed. One of the most striking features of Homer's style is the frequency with which he says that someone or something was swift, or moved swiftly, or that something was done quickly. Indeed, I have sometimes suspected that one reason why, as Arnold noted, Homer's narrative seems to move so rapidly is that Homer is constantly telling us that someone or something was swift.

Almost always this emphasis on speed is adequately in keeping with the situation, even if it does not always seem to us to call for explicit mention. But the limitations of the formulary, oral style appear when the poet happens to deal with a seemingly familiar phenomenon that actually differs from the ordinary. It would,

of course, be possible to look at many of the misapplied epithets in this way. Describing as he does a heroic society, Homer can almost always properly enough give his characters honorific epithets. The occasional difficulties arise when he now and then mentions scoundrels or representatives of the lower classes. Almost always, when he has occasion to speak of someone taking something in his hand, it will be a sturdy warrior taking up a weapon, and the stout hand is in perfect keeping with the situation. But when he happens to speak of Penelope taking in her hand the great key to the palace storeroom, the situation itself automatically brings the fatally convenient formula to his lips, and the luckless Penelope receives her unfortunate fat hand. So, too, most of the time we can amiably grant that his swift creatures or events really have an appropriate celerity. But once in a while the familiar pattern betrays him.

Especially clear, and especially interesting, perhaps, as forming a transition from these relatively simple passages in which a convenient epithet is out of place to somewhat more complicated instances, is the often-cited scene in the 23rd book of the *Iliad* in which Antilochus prepares his horses for the chariot race. Horses in Homer are, as we know, probably more likely to be called swift than anything else. So here, the horses that are to compete in this race are as a group described as *ταχέες*, and Menelaus' horses are described in the favorite line ending, *ὠκέας ἵππους*. Homer does not use this phrase of Antilochus' team, but instead emphasizes their beautiful manes, using the same line as he uses later of Meriones' horses, changing only the ordinal number. But he then goes on, and seems to go out of his way, to assure us that these horses not only had beautiful manes, but were also swift-footed: *ἵπποι ὠκύποδες*. So far all is well, and just what we should expect of the horses of the heroic age.

About five lines farther on, however, we come upon the characteristic illogicality that sometimes results from the formulary style. We hear Nestor telling Antilochus that, if he is to have any chance of winning this race, he must rely on skillful driving, because his horses are very slow: *ἀλλά τοι ἵπποι βάρδιστοι θείειν*.¹ The Homeric style, so useful and economical when dealing with normal

¹ Scholia A on 23.304 note the misuse of the epithet "swift-footed." Scholia BT make the pleasant suggestion that the epithet refers to the horses in their youth and compare the epithet "with good ashen spear" applied to Priam. In *Iliad* 8.104

swift horses, comes a cropper when it happens to deal with some unusual swift-footed horses that are very slow. The poet seems to be betrayed here partly by very familiar phrases, partly by a familiar situation. There are, I think, other examples in which the betrayal comes mainly from the familiarity of the situation, and the phrases, though they may be formulas, are much less common than the formulas for swift horses.

Let us look, for instance, at a pair of passages in the *Iliad* involving the goddess Thetis and the new armor made for Achilles. The poet has impressed upon us the deep sadness of Thetis because her son is doomed to an early death. Clearly enough, logic would require her to do what she can to delay his end. Some may even feel that her getting him to wait until she has new armor made for him is a device to put off for a bit her son's death. Yet, at the very moment when Thetis has every reason for slowness and none for speed, what we may call formulary situations bring in speed. The first instance is when Thetis takes the new armor made by Hephaestus and returns with it to earth. How does she move?

ἥ δ' ἔρηξ ὥς ἀλτο κατ' Οὐλύμπου νιφόεντος.

"She leapt down from Olympus like a hawk" (18.616).² The reason for her swiftness here is simply that this is the proper way for gods to move. Regularly they move quickly: αἶσσω, for instance, in the aorist participle is a favorite epithet for dashing goddesses. In the first book, Thetis leaps into the sea from Olympus after her talk with Zeus, just as she had come quickly from the sea in answer to her son's cry. (Since Homer often calls the night "swift," he may conceivably have had speed in mind when he said that Apollo came "like the night.") In Book 2, the dream sent by Zeus quickly reaches the ships of the Achaeans; Athena darts from Olympus to stop the rush for the ships, and so on. The normal pattern of this formulary situation is too much for the poet, and so Thetis, who has every reason to dawdle, leaps down with the speed of a falcon, a speed which, strictly speaking,

Diomedes tells Nestor that his horses are slow. Maybe Pylian horses were notoriously slow, or the slowness of Nestor's horses was a part of the tradition. If so, some moderns might assume ironic humor in the swift feet of line 304, but I should say this is most unlikely.

² The hawk, or at least the variety of hawk called the κίρκος, is for Homer the swiftest of birds: *Iliad* 22.139; *Odyssey* 13.87.

only speeds her son's death. (So, too, in Book 24, when she is told by Zeus to announce to Achilles the far from cheering news that he is to release the body of Hector for ransom, Thetis "darts" from Olympus, ἀΐξασα [121].)

More striking is the phrase at the beginning of Book 19, when Achilles is about to put on the new armor: αἶψα μάλ' . . . θωρήσσεο, says Thetis, "Arm yourself with all speed" (36). She has no logical reason to be eager for her son to return to battle, kill Hector, and thereby hasten his own death. But again the normal demands of the situation pull the poet into the use of words that do not fit the unusual case. Although the particular phrase used by Thetis seems not to recur in Homer, speed is often stressed in connection with men arming for battle and is an obviously natural idea in itself. It would seem that the formulaic situation has come to have certain formulaic ideas connected with it, whether or not the same formulaic phrases are employed. All this is wonderfully convenient and will usually work—but not always.

The same phenomenon meets us in the *Odyssey*. In Book 15, Telemachus and Pisistratus are nearing Pylos, on the second day of their drive home from Sparta. Athena's words to Telemachus at the beginning of this book have made a great impression upon him, and he is now as eager to get home as Odysseus is. Also, though he acted in Book 3 as though he enjoyed Nestor's talk, we can well imagine that even the most interesting of old men might not seem permanently fascinating to a young man of twenty-one. Whatever the reason, Telemachus prefers not to have any further sessions with Nestor just now and in the most courteous way asks Pisistratus to drive him directly to his ship, instead of going to the palace. Pisistratus is somewhat dubious, but carries out the request and then urges Telemachus to be off at once: "Get on board quickly and give orders to all your men, before I arrive home and report to my father. I know very well how proud his spirit is. He won't let you go, but he'll come down here himself to invite you, and I don't think he'll go away empty-handed. Because he'll be very angry anyway" (209-14).

Here is another situation where logic clearly requires slowness rather than speed. Pisistratus should drive slowly rather than fast from the harbor to the palace, so as to make sure that Telemachus has time to leave before Nestor can intercept him. What does Homer say he did?

Ὡς ἄρα φωνήσας ἔλασεν καλλίτριχας ἵππους
 ἄψ Πυλίων ἐς ἄστυ, θοῶς δ' ἄρα δώμαθ' ἵκανε.

"With these words, he drove his fair-maned horses back to the town of the Pylians, and *swiftly* he reached the palace" (215-16). Habit has again overcome the demands of logic. Chariots naturally and normally do move swiftly and reach their destination quickly, and Homer has mentioned speed a number of times in connection with this very team. In Book 3, Athena had suggested to Nestor that he provide the fastest horses for this journey (369-70). The next day Nestor's sons yoked swift horses (3.478). When Telemachus and Pisistratus actually started the trip, the horses flew into the plain from Pylos (484-85). We are told they flew from Pherae; they were swift horses (494 and 496). And more recently in Book 15, when they were leaving Sparta, "very quickly they darted through the city to the plain"; the next day they again flew from Pherae and quickly reached the vicinity of Pylos. Even though Pisistratus has much reason to loiter, such a consideration does not outweigh for Homer the fact that chariots are speedy. It is more surprising, perhaps, that he failed to say that the horses flew, than that he did have them reach the palace quickly.

There is an interesting textual variant in the line following Pisistratus' speech. The vulgate gives: Ὡς ἄρα φωνήσας ἔλασεν καλλίτριχας ἵππους, "with these words, he drove his horses." Some manuscripts have the variant for ἔλασεν, also mentioned in the scholia, ἵμασεν, "lashed his horses." I strongly suspect that this is the "Homeric" reading, and that the vulgate "drove his horses" is a correction by some logical critic who wanted to do what he could to cut down on Pisistratus' speed. It is possibly significant that the phrase ἵμασεν καλλίτριχας ἵππους, "lashed fair-maned horses," occurs three times in the *Iliad* and once in the *Odyssey*, always at the end of the line and always without manuscript variant, while the vulgate reading here seems unique in the poems.

Now I am well aware that those critics who have been active in the interesting and important work of pointing out how Homer has at times skillfully modified his formulas in order to obtain a fine, different, and sometimes subtle effect, might well feel that this is another example. They might like to argue that, so far

from nodding here, Homer deliberately and with sound artistic purpose changed the familiar formula and made Pisistratus merely drive instead of lash his horses, precisely because he was conscious that this was no time for speed. I could wish I found it easier to believe this sort of argument. An especial difficulty with accepting it here is that it seems odd for Homer to go to the trouble of consciously modifying a formula to tone down Pisistratus' speed in line 215 and then in line 216 to tell us that he got home quickly. It seems to me far more likely that someone ignorant of the habits of oral poets should have corrected the normal formula.

Rather different, and only in a sense an illogical use of speed, is the account in *Iliad* Book 24 of Priam's departure from Troy with the ransom for Hector. "The old man," we are told, "plies his whip and urges the horses speedily through the town" (326-27):

ἵπποι, τοὺς ὁ γέρων ἐφέπων μάστιγι κέλευε
καρπαλίμως κατὰ ἄστυ.

But the speed here can hardly have been very great, because Priam in his chariot is preceded by the aged Idæus driving the mule wagon loaded with treasure, and it appears unlikely that this was hurtling through the city streets. Moreover, we are further told that Priam was followed by all his friends, "in deep grief, as though he were going to his death" (327-28):

φίλοι δ' ἅμα πάντες ἔποντο
πόλλ' ὀλοφυρόμενοι ὡς εἰ θάνατόνδε κίοντα.

It is clear, I should think, that this melancholy procession is not running at full speed trying to keep up with a racing chariot. Once again, the speed attributed to the team and chariot is literally unsuited to the context.

But in this passage the speed has a sound artistic purpose: it emphasizes for us the eagerness of the old man to see his son (cf. 226-27, "Achilles may kill me forthwith, if once I get my son in my arms"). Homer has made much of speed in the episode. Priam commands his sons to hurry, *σπεύσατε*, 253, *τάχιστα*, 263, and he himself hurries to get into his chariot, *σπερχόμενος*, 322. So he naturally lashes his horses to speed them through the town, even if in fact their pace must have been relatively restrained. In a way, we might feel that this instance is the reverse of those

previously noted: in them the mention of the illogical speed was true to the letter, but false to the spirit; here the talk of speed is false to the letter, but true to the spirit.³

Possibly the most complicated and interesting example of betrayal by a formulary situation appears when Homer has a number of occasions to speak of the armor of Patroclus. A standard feature of Homeric warfare is the stripping of the armor from the body of an enemy whom one has just killed, the motive being presumably double: (1) you add to your enemy's disgrace and your own distinction, and (2) the military equipment has an important economic value. Homer refers to this practice repeatedly and has a generous assortment of expressions at his disposal. They are designed, of course, for the normal situation and are wonderfully convenient and thoroughly appropriate.

The armor of Patroclus, however, creates an abnormal situation. We are told at the end of Book 16 how the god Apollo dealt with Patroclus: he not only knocks him almost unconscious with a blow on the back, but also removes all his armor. "He struck the helmet from his head . . . the long spear was shattered in his hands . . . the shield with its baldric fell from his shoulders to the ground . . . and Apollo untied his breastplate" (16.793-804). Patroclus is, as Homer says in line 815, *γυμνός*, "stripped." After Patroclus in this helpless condition has been struck by Euphorbus, he then "withdraws into the crowd of his comrades" (817), presumably leaving the armor where it fell. A moment later he is given a fatal blow by Hector. *Δούπησεν δὲ πεσών*, "he fell with a thud," says Homer. But Homer is conscious that Patroclus is *γυμνός*, and so he does not end the line with the common *ἀράβησε δὲ τεύχε' ἐπ' αὐτῷ*, "and his armor clanged upon him." Instead we have, "and brought great pain to the host of the Achaeans." Up to this point all is well: the armor of Patroclus is removed in a unique fashion, and the poet has consistently presented it so.

In the sequel, however, the usual pressure of the general or normal moves the poet back into the old familiar paths, and again and again, in speaking of the removal of Patroclus' armor, he employs a phraseology that fits the normal situation and is wholly

³ The description in *Odyssey* 6.316-320 of how carefully Nausicaa drove her team of mules, so that her attendants and Odysseus could follow on foot, shows that Homer is quite capable of slowing down a vehicle when he wants to, and when he is thinking of what he is doing.

inconsistent with the unique one he has himself so impressively described.

After dealing Patroclus his fatal wound and briefly conversing with him, Hector rushes after Automedon, and Menelaus advances quickly to protect Patroclus' body. Hector is soon brought back by Apollo, however, and Menelaus retreats. We then read the following amazing line (125): "When Hector had taken the armor away from Patroclus . . ."

Ἐκτωρ μὲν Πάτροκλον ἐπεὶ κλυτὰ τεύχε' ἀπήυρα.⁴

I have, I think, in translating these words, gone as far as I can to leave a way out for any who want to defend Homer against inconsistency. Standard translations, presumably made without the present problem much in mind, are far more explicit: Murray: "Now Hector, when he had stripped from Patroclus his glorious armour . . ."; Mazon: "Hector, cependant, dès qu'il a dépouillé de ses armes illustres le corps de Patrocle . . ."; Lattimore: "But Hector, when he had stripped from Patroclus the glorious armour . . .". Even if this passage stood alone, there could be no doubt, I think, that Homer has shifted to the phraseology designed for the normal formulary situation, in spite of its unsuitability for this abnormal one. But the passage does not stand alone, and the group of references taken as a whole make a completely clear case.

This armor, divinely made for Peleus, is of special importance, and Homer returns to it a number of times. I shall arrange the relevant passages in something like ascending order of certainty. First, though I do not include them as evidence, it may be noticed that Menelaus' words in 17.91-92, "If I leave behind here the beautiful armor and Patroclus . . .", though they do not explicitly clothe Patroclus in the armor, seem to put it closer to him than we should have assumed it was from Homer's narrative at the end of the preceding book.

Less than a hundred lines after the mention of Hector's tugging at Patroclus' body, Zeus himself says, "You took the armor from his head and shoulders" (205). He adds to this, however, a phrase that I have left untranslated, οὐ κατὰ κόσμον. This usually means something like "not in an orderly way." Its significance

⁴ The inappropriateness was noted by Aristarchus. See Scholia A on 17.125, and M. Van der Valk, *Researches on the Text and Scholia of the Iliad*, Part One (Leiden 1963) 562.

here is by no means obvious, and this lack of clarity may be felt to lessen the certainty in the value of this passage as evidence, particularly since, as we shall see, the phrase has been interpreted in such a way as to fit Homer's earlier account of Patroclus' loss of armor. The remaining passages are fortunately free from ambiguity.

Hector, having changed his mind about sending the armor to Troy and having resolved to wear it himself, speaks of it in 186–87 as “the beautiful armor that I stripped from Patroclus after I had killed him,” *ἔντεα . . . / καλά, τὰ Πατρόκλοιο βίην ἐνέριξα κατακτάς*. Five books later, Homer himself, describing Achilles looking for a spot where the armor will not protect Hector from a fatal blow, repeats line 187 of this earlier speech of Hector: “beautiful [armor] that he stripped from mighty Patroclus after he had killed him” (22.323).

Finally, near the end of Book 19, the talking horse Xanthus says, “The Trojans took the armor from Patroclus' shoulders” (412), the clearest and most explicit, perhaps, of all these “inappropriate” passages. The Trojans are said to have done what is regularly done in this formulary situation, not what we know was actually done in this abnormal individual case. Patroclus' use of the armor of Achilles has long been regarded by Analysts as an important element in their disintegrative case, and these inconsistent passages have often been cited in support of the doctrine that “the change of armour is an interpolation into the original story.”⁵ Fortunately, this problem need not concern us here. We may say, however, that a number of the many difficulties raised by the Analysts are the result of the failure to appreciate that inconsistencies such as we have reviewed are thoroughly Homeric, in the sense that they illustrate again the validity of the “oral law”: the general takes precedence over the particular.

Just as misguided as the Analysts' attacks have been the efforts of van Leeuwen⁶ to make at least some of these passages consistent with Homer's description of how Patroclus lost his armor. In dealing with line 125 of Book 17,

Ἐκτωρ μὲν Πάτροκλον ἐπεὶ κλυτὰ τεύχε' ἀπηύρα,

⁵ W. Leaf, *The Iliad*, Vol. 2 (London 1902) 154.

⁶ *Ilias*, Leiden 1912–13.

regularly thought to mean, as we saw above, that Hector stripped Patroclus of his armor, van Leeuwen sets off by commas the phrase *ἐπεὶ κλυτὰ τεύχε' ἀπηύρα* and interprets it to mean, "postquam Hector arma Patrocli humi prolapsa abstulit (i.e. a suis colligi et auferri iussit)." Even with the best will in the world, I do not see how one could say more of this idea than that it might be just barely possible if this were the only seemingly inconsistent passage.

More ingenious is the way in which van Leeuwen interprets Zeus' remark in 17.205 in such a way as to absolve Zeus from the error of having Hector remove the armor from Patroclus' body. The key to his rendering is the admittedly troublesome phrase *οὐ κατὰ κόσμον*. He abstracts the negative from the words immediately following it and applies it to the rest of the sentence, translating, "Arma vero non ab eius capite et humeris rite abstulisti." Zeus' point, he argues, is that Hector collected the armor from the ground and did not take it from the dead body. Again, I should say, if Homer had repeatedly dealt in a "proper" way with Patroclus' armor, this idea might just possibly be considered as a way of avoiding an isolated inconsistency, especially since it does give real force to *οὐ κατὰ κόσμον*, otherwise so mysterious. But this is not an isolated inconsistency. And in any event, Homerists nowadays, I should think, would be less willing than they might have been in 1913 (the date of van Leeuwen's commentary) to break up a formula in this way. Apart from this instance, *οὐ κατὰ κόσμον* occurs elsewhere in the Homeric poems seven times, three in the *Iliad* (2.214, 5.759, 8.12) and four in the *Odyssey* (3.138, 8.179, 14.363, 20.181), and always the three words go together. There is also the neat antonym, *εἰ κατὰ κόσμον*, which occurs twice in the *Iliad* (10.472, 24.622). Finally, it should be noted that, disregarding this ambiguous passage, we have no evidence for believing that a Homeric Greek would have felt it was improper to pick valuable armor up from the ground instead of stripping it from the dead body.

Moreover, even van Leeuwen's cleverness and zeal do not avail to save Homer's reputation, since he has no comments to make on the other three passages that are inconsistent with the description of Patroclus' death. Even if van Leeuwen's ingenuity had been able to find forced interpretations of these other three passages, his case would still be thoroughly unconvincing in the light of what

we now know about Homer's technique and about oral poets and poetry. His desperate efforts rest, I should say, on a complete misunderstanding of these matters, a misunderstanding perfectly natural in his time, of course, and not peculiar to him. Also, quite apart from this consideration, I should say it is better to argue that in all five passages Homer is consistently inconsistent with his earlier account of the loss of Patroclus' armor than to force two passages into consistency and leave three unexplained.

Examples such as we have thus far considered have the advantage that they present situations, or phraseology, or both, that are common in the Homeric poems, so that we can see within Homer himself both the normal and the abnormal. There are occasional other passages in which I feel confident that we have an inappropriate application of the normal phraseology to an abnormal situation, but they involve situations whose normal manifestations happen not to occur in Homer and can be only inferred or guessed at. Near the end of Book 19 of the *Iliad*, for instance, Achilles says to Xanthus, after the horse has prophesied his death, "I too know this well myself, that I am fated to die here far from my dear father and mother" (421-22):

εὖ νυ τὸ οἶδα καὶ αὐτὸς ὃ μοι μῶρος ἐνθάδ' ὀλέσθαι,
νόσφι φίλου πατρὸς καὶ μητέρως.

This looks like a fine formulary way of dealing with a formulary situation: the young man doomed to die far away from home and parents. The passage is not very well suited, however, to the abnormal situation of Achilles. His mother is not at home, like an ordinary human mother. She is a goddess, and he cannot really be said to be "far from" her, since he has but to call, and she comes to him. But, although the phraseology is in a way inappropriate, we cannot be sure that it is the result of a misuse of a formula or idea since the appropriate use happens not to occur in the poems.⁷

⁷ Some may feel that another instance of betrayal by a formulary situation is to be found in Achilles' prayer to Zeus in *Iliad* 16.236-38: "Once before you heard the words of my prayer; you honored me and dealt a hard blow to the Greek army. Now grant this request for me." Lines of this sort seem designed for saying to a god, "You heard me when I prayed to you before, and you granted my request. Now please do this for me," and they are altogether appropriate when used by Chryses in

Similarly, in the beginning of Book 16 of the *Odyssey*, Telemachus tells Eumaeus he has come to his hut to find out "whether my mother still remains in the palace, or some other man has married her now, and Odysseus' bed, perhaps, stripped of its bedding, lies covered with vile spider webs" (33-35):

ἢ μοι ἔτ' ἐν μεγάροις μήτηρ μένει, ἢέ τις ἤδη
ἀνδρῶν ἄλλος ἔγημεν, Ὀδυσσεύς δέ που εὐνή
χήτει ἐνευναίων κάκ' ἀράχνια κεῖται ἔχουσα.

All this would be a fine picturesque way of speaking of a wife who did not wait for her husband's return but overhastily remarried. It happens, however, that Odysseus' bed is unique and has apparently been stripped of its bedding for years—though it may have been kept free of spider webs. Though faithful to her marriage, Penelope has abandoned her husband's bed, in a literal sense, and sleeps upstairs. Telemachus' fine phraseology, wholly suited, we may assume, to a wife who had been faithless to a normal marriage bed, is to a degree inappropriate to this abnormal bed of Odysseus and Penelope. But again the normal situation can only be hypothesized, since Homer has no normal "widowed" beds covered with spider webs because they have been abandoned by wives who were faithless. Actually, and oddly, Homer's only other spider webs are in Demodocus' story of how Hephaestus trapped his adulterous wife and her lover by spreading over the bed chains "like spider webs," invisible even to a god (*Odyssey*, 8.278-81). It is interesting that, although the situations and the details of the phrasing are different from those in Telemachus' speech, the spider webs appear again in connection with the bed of a faithless wife.

Instances of this sort unfortunately present us with only one side of the evidence. But in the light of what we have seen of Homer's practice, I should say that the very inappropriateness of the statements, and the fact that the situations are abnormal, if not unique,

1.453-55. Strictly speaking, Achilles had not prayed to Zeus, but to his mother, whose help with Zeus he requested. This is, like some other passages we have noted, an unusual case, and Homer's formulaic lines do not fit it precisely. The inappropriateness, however, if there is any, is so slight that it seems unkind to class this as an example of formulaic inaccuracy. See, too, Leaf *ad loc.*, and I. Trencsényi-Waldapfel, "Der Mäusegott bei Homer," *IEPAΣ: Studies Presented to George Thomson on the Occasion of his 60th Birthday* (Prague 1963) 218-22.

give us good ground for guessing that the poet is here using, or perhaps we should say misusing, phrases and ideas that were designed to fit normal situations.

There is a somewhat amusing example of the treacherous formulary situation in the *Odyssey's* picture of Tantalus. He stands in a pond, and whenever he stoops to drink, the water recedes before his eager lips. Over his head tall trees "pour" their fruit: pears, pomegranates, fine apples, sweet figs, and flourishing olives. Whenever Tantalus reaches for the fruit, the wind sweeps them to the clouds (11.582-92). The scholia reveal that in antiquity there was concern over the fact that these fruit trees were growing in a pond, and I should think there might well be, but I have not noticed any concern in antiquity or among modern commentators about another horticultural slip: the absurd olives. We can understand Tantalus' frustrated longing for the other fruit, but anyone who has ever tried to eat an olive freshly plucked from the tree would feel no regrets if, the next time he reached for one, it was snatched from his grasp. It seems unlikely that Homer was ignorant of this fact. But he also knows the kind of fruit trees there should be in a flourishing orchard, and he listed them for us when he described the orchard of Alcinoüs: pears, pomegranates, fine apples, sweet figs, and flourishing olives (7.115-16). It is not accidental that precisely these same lines recur when he describes the varieties of fruit trees that hung over Tantalus. The lines, indeed, list all the fruits mentioned by Homer except grapes. The difficulty, of course, is that these trees of Tantalus serve a unique purpose and must provide temptation in the raw state. As usual, the poet shows no concern to modify the phraseology designed for a normal situation so as to make it appropriate for the abnormal situation he happens to describe.

Parry and others have perhaps been excessively conscious of the limitations of the formulary style, and it was well for Cedric Whitman to state roundly, "Homer could say anything." In practice, however, I suspect that Homer often failed to rise to the level of his potentiality. The very excellence, convenience, and adaptability of the formulary oral style made him occasionally fumble in his ordinarily superlative use of his superlative literary instrument. It is clearly an instrument which encourages thoughtlessness and laziness, nodding, if you will. Possibly we

ought to feel that it is one of Homer's greatest merits that, in spite of this insidious encouragement, he nods so very seldom.

A persistent and irritating difficulty in dealing with Homer as I have here is that it puts one in the position of seeming to make insolent attacks on the unassailably great. As my friend Norman Austin once remarked, some of the efforts to "explain" Homeric difficulties by appealing to recent discoveries in the field of oral poetry appear to "presume neither ability on the part of the poet nor discrimination on the part of the audience." But I am afraid that the weakness in this well-put and seemingly sound criticism is that its criteria for evaluating both "ability" and "discrimination" are those of our own time, and they may well be wrong, or at least inadequate for Homer's time. In a somewhat different attack on the methods of the Parry school, D. S. Carne-Ross has persuasively argued thus in his "postscript" to Christopher Logue's *Patrocleia of Homer*:⁸

Parry did not sufficiently ask himself what happened to the Greek oral tradition when Homer took over—what dislocations occurred when a poet of the highest genius irrupted into this closed world of fine verse craftsmen. We may study formulaic poetry in the *guslars*, but with Homer what we should surely be doing is studying the way in which a great poet *uses* a formulaic tradition: we should be asking ourselves how he adapts himself to its limitations (for by the highest standards, the standards of Homer, they *are* limitations), how he forces the traditional elements to mean more than they ever meant before, how he enriches it with new formal and verbal possibilities.

This program seems to me at once absolutely splendid and absolutely impossible. Parry would surely have advanced much further in his work if he had had a normal span of life, but he would have been wasting his time to ask himself "what happened to the Greek oral tradition when Homer took over," since this is a question to which no one can now hope to find an answer. The only way we can ever discover what use a poet has made of tradition is to compare him with his predecessors and contemporaries. And this is precisely what we cannot do with Homer. What could any scholar know about the stylistic novelties and achievements of Milton if, except for *Paradise Lost*, all literature earlier

⁸ Ann Arbor 1963; the quotation is from p. 53, note 2.

than the seventeenth, and virtually all literature earlier than the nineteenth, century had disappeared? It is idle to undertake to discover how Homer "forces the traditional elements to mean more than they have ever meant before," because we do not know, and there is no possible way for us to find out, what they meant before. We are merely following a mirage, if we try to evaluate how Homer enriched the Greek oral tradition "with new formal and verbal possibilities," since we have no device whatever for finding out what *is* new. The new in literature can be discovered only by comparison with the old, and if the old is not in existence the comparison is impossible.⁹

Denys Page has with much justice referred to the work of Milman Parry as "the brightest light that has been shed on the Greek epic in our time."¹⁰ The influence of Parry's discoveries and theories seems to become more pervasive in Homeric studies every year. At the lowest possible level, if it has done nothing else, it has given Homerists (a notably, not to say fanatically, eristic lot) something new to argue about. The usefulness of Parry's work for those interested in understanding Homer better has been great and varied. Its supreme and peculiar merit is, I think, that it has been most useful in the very places where admirers of Homer most needed help: the numerous passages, long or short, where Homer presents us with some oddity, some defect, great or small, hard to reconcile with the normal conception of a great poet, a poet in the class with Shakespeare.

Most critics have long known that it was wrong to judge Homer by the standards of literary criticism of our own time, or even by those of Aristotle's. One great contribution of Parry and his successors is that they have given us a new kind of literary milieu, so that we are no longer reduced entirely to constructing a milieu out of Homer himself plus our own creative imaginations. We can now test Homeric phenomena by the real literary world that

⁹ A desire somewhat like that of Carne-Ross has recently been expressed by A. Lesky in the new edition of his *Geschichte der griechischen Literatur* (Bern and Munich 1963) 83: "Bei voller Würdigung dessen, was uns Parry und seine Schule gezeigt haben, meinen wir, dass es an der Zeit wäre, nach allem, was wir über die Bedeutung des Formelhaften im Homer gelernt haben, nunmehr gerade nach dem zu fragen, was ausserhalb dieses Bereiches steht." Again, fine, but how? If Parry is right, we are still free to believe that there is much in Homer that stands "ausserhalb dieses Bereiches," but there is no way for us to identify it with certainty.

¹⁰ *The Homeric Odyssey* (Oxford 1955) 139.

the workers on contemporary oral poetry have revealed. We can be certain that Homer's world was different from Avdo Mededović's. But the practices and standards of modern oral poets do seem to make sense out of a number of things in Homer that have previously been very difficult to explain convincingly.

We now have some basis for believing that the literary conventions of Homer's time, and presumably of the audiences of the time, did not require of a poet the degree of consistency and the kind of appropriateness that we expect of a good poet. Part of the result is a body of "difficulties" that first produced, and have since maintained, the Analytical school of Homeric scholarship. Only with our growing understanding of oral poetry has it become possible for a person doubtful about Analytical methods and conclusions to grant, for example, that the Analysts have in a sense been right in their belief that many things in the Homeric poems were originally designed for another setting, or in their belief that something in Homer has been more or less clumsily dealt with. One can now grant these and many other sorts of Analytical argument without in the least accepting the standard Analytical conclusions. The contemporary work on oral poetry seems to show that the Analysts have been completely wrong in the various ways in which they have explained the origins of these defective passages and completely wrong in the various ways in which they have described the creation of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. On the other hand, though the Unitarians have often been wrong in arguing that there was nothing amiss in a passage attacked by the Analysts, it now appears that they may have been right in attributing each poem to a single great creator.

It is not, of course, that the work on oral poetry has removed the defects that have been found in Homer, or even made them artistically less offensive than they were. Nothing can ever make them anything but defects for us. But the great change that Parry, Lord, Notopoulos, and others have produced is that they have made it possible for this generation of Homerists to believe the paradox: the matchless splendor of the whole and of many of the parts and the sometimes flagrant bungling in the details may both come from the same supreme genius.