

A Journey into Homer's World

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The classicist Milman Parry's quest for the sources of Homeric epic led him in the 1930s to the Yugoslavian bards who sang in coffeehouses and bars much as he imagined Homer did.

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Reviewed:

Hearing Homer's Song: The Brief Life and Big Idea of Milman Parry

by Robert Kanigel
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Like Tantalus, classical scholars are forever glimpsing things they cannot taste, or experience, themselves. Phalanx warfare was so common in ancient Greece that most freeborn males took part in it many times. But its very ubiquity meant that Greek authors did little to describe it, relying instead on their readers' familiarity. Their occasional offhand comments make us aware of how much is beyond our reach. Xenophon says of an infantry clash he witnessed, "There was no uproar, nor silence either, but that certain type of noise that results from anger and battle." He speaks to those who had heard that noise, but what did it sound like?

Another sound that was often in the ears of the Greeks but lost to subsequent ages is that of Homeric song, the bardic tradition that produced, perhaps in the eighth century BC, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. Accompanied by the *phorminx*, a kind of lyre, singers of epic tales performed at festivals and courts, narrating the feats of heroes who lived (if they lived) in the distant past. They used a distinctive verse form in which the lines consisted of six feet, each either a dactyl (DUM-di-dee) or a spondee (DUM–DUM), and relied on formulaic phrases—"fleet-footed Achilles"—that fit this metrical pattern. Someone the Greeks called Homer seems to have been the greatest of these bards, or at least his name was attached to the two masterworks emerging from the tradition. At some point, probably after Homer's own time, they were written down and preserved, but for centuries thereafter singers known as rhapsodes continued to recite to the sound of the phorminx portions of the poems they knew by heart, or perhaps innovated according to their own tastes or those of their hearers.

Homer himself provides some of our best evidence concerning this bardic tradition. He has no word corresponding to "poet" and no concept of written texts; his bards are always called "singers" (*aoidoi*) and their works "songs" (*aoidai*). They perform to the lyre at royal banquets and feasts, their themes selected from a repertoire of "the deeds of gods and men," as Penelope says in addressing Phemius, her

court



Milman Parry Collection of Oral Literature

Milman Parry (center) with singers Jovan Govederica and Mićo Savić, Yugoslavia, 1930s

minstrel, in the *Odyssey*. The best of them are said to be blessed with a special gift of storytelling, a mastery of narrative technique. Demodocus, the blind bard at the court of the *Odyssey*'s King Alcinous, has a god-given ability to delight with his song, "in whatever way his heart bids him sing." Both in his blindness and in his virtuosic skill, this master singer has often been seen as a self-portrait in miniature of Homer.

Homeric song was not only the means by which the heroic world was described. It also belonged to that world: bards were heroic and heroes were bards. When Achilles sits idle beside his tent, nursing his wrath, in the *Iliad*, he passes the time by singing of the glorious deeds of men to the sound of the lyre. When the disguised Odysseus, at the climax of the *Odyssey*, prepares to shoot down the intruders who are robbing him and courting his wife, he strings his great bow “just as a man skilled in the lyre and in song stretches a gut-string around a new peg” and plucks the weapon to produce a musical note. With that superb simile, Homer fuses the deeds of which he sings with the art of the singer. The song creates the hero, but the hero also creates song.

The life of the classicist Milman Parry, who died in 1935 at age thirty-three, is the story of one man’s inspired effort to recover Homeric song, not through books and research but lived experience. Parry’s time machine was a 1932 Ford sedan, in which he drove through the villages of what was then Yugoslavia, seeking the *guslars*, the Slavic singers of tales who practiced their art in coffeehouses and bars much as he imagined Homer did. In his tragically truncated career, cut short by a mysterious gunshot, Parry produced what the Hellenist C.A. Trypanis has called “the greatest [contribution] made by any American scholar to the field of classical studies.” In *Hearing Homer’s Song*, Robert Kanigel, a biographer of intellectual pioneers, has captured the excitement of this journey into the heroic world while noting the irony that the man who made it was hardly heroic himself. Emotionally remote, perhaps suffering from a “deficit of feeling,” cool even to the poems he made his life’s work, the Parry Kanigel describes is hardly the man we might have picked as our emissary to the Homeric age, but the records he brought back from that journey are nonetheless invaluable.

Homerists had understood, for centuries before Parry’s time, that the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* were formed differently from literary epics like Vergil’s *Aeneid* or Apollonius Rhodius’s *Argonautica*. The oral tradition, by which stories were passed along in preliterate Greece, was known to have played a part in the composition of the Homeric epics, but how great a part was a matter of debate. Their quality was so high that many critics believed a single genius must have shaped them, presumably with the aid of writing, for literacy and genius were conventionally thought to go hand in hand.

In the early eighteenth century Giambattista Vico opposed this “great poet” theory, ascribing the poems to a diffuse, anonymous, folkloric process that had come to be called “Homer” for the sake of convenience. “The Greek peoples were themselves Homer,” Vico wrote in *La Scienza Nuova*. Later that century, the Englishman Robert Wood reverted to the idea of Homer’s original genius but, noting that his poems described his world with great clarity yet never once

mentioned writing or reading, proposed that the Greeks were not yet a literate people at the time that he lived—an essential element of the thesis Parry would later develop.

Where the thinking of these early critics was largely speculative, Parry, beginning with his 1923 master's thesis at the University of California at Berkeley, applied the rigorous empirical methods of philology. In that thesis, he focused on the formulaic epithets in the Homeric poems, some of which illogically describe clothing as "shining" even when it's been soiled or ships as "swift" when they've been drawn up on dry land for years. Such phrases, Parry asserted, did not spring from a poet's mind but from a "racial artistic tradition" that had adopted them for the sake of their metrical utility. (The idea of a "race" as author has much in common with Vico's thinking, though it's not clear that Parry had ever encountered *La Scienza Nuova*; indeed his early writings seem oblivious to the many discussions of "the Homeric Question" that preceded his own.)

If Athena is often called "Pallas," he wrote, this is "because there was space which had to be filled in so that *Athenaiē* ["Athena" in Homeric Greek] could fall into its natural place and the hexameter flow smoothly on." In his 1928 doctoral dissertation at the Sorbonne, translated from the original French as "The Traditional Epithet in Homer," he cataloged dozens of formulae and documented their positions in the hexameter line, demonstrating that each one made a particular contribution to making the line work. The poet did not call ships "swift" to call attention to their speed; it was simply the phrasing used by the oral tradition when a certain metrical sequence was called for.

Though philology was his mode of argument, Parry's insistence on a "racial" Homer perhaps sprang from more personal, ideological sources. It's clear from his master's thesis that he was deeply disenchanted with the artistic trends of his own day, which in his view favored individual creativity and centered on the self. Kanigel, though in general disinclined to psychologize Parry, takes note of a scornful reference in the thesis to the "rampage of adolescent originality" besetting the literature of the Jazz Age, characterized by (in Kanigel's paraphrase) "thin and bogus creativity based on nothing more profound than the excesses of the night before." The quest for an unselfconscious Homer, and for masterworks that arose from a "non-creative" process (Parry's word), was partly an effort to escape, or counter, the egotism of the modern world. One senses often in Parry's writings a moral elevation of the preliterate Homeric age and a corresponding snippiness toward classicist colleagues who were still oblivious to its glories.

One colleague who shared Parry's embrace of the oral world was Marcel Jousse, a Jesuit priest and anthropologist who had grown up in a largely illiterate village in rural France. Parry took a strong interest in

a curious volume, *Le Style orale* (1925), in which Jousse drew on his own childhood experience and extolled the virtues of purely oral narration. “To anyone who had spent his youth and young adulthood buried in books (like Parry),” writes Kanigel, “to slip inside the sensibilities of the unlettered...was a heretical idea, and an exhilarating one.” Despite Jousse’s notable lack of academic rigor, Parry cited *Le Style orale* approvingly on several occasions, praising Jousse for showing that “the order of ideas in oral verse is more closely suited to the inborn workings of the mind than it is in written style.” The example of Jousse, Kanigel strongly implies, drove Parry to find an oral culture in which he could immerse himself. That search ultimately took him to rural parts of Yugoslavia on two occasions, a brief foray in 1933 and then a much longer stay the following year.

Backcountry Yugoslavia was at this time politically unstable, riven by factional strife between Christians and Muslims—the tensions that in the 1990s broke out in the Bosnian War—and haunted by memories of fierce battles, some centuries in the past. Warriors who had fought in those battles or had overcome bullies and foes in fantastical ways were central to a storytelling tradition that had been carried on there, in fairly fixed form, for generations. In certain regions, each village could boast of a talented *guslar*, a man who could sing the tales of Prince Marko Mrnjavčević or of Meho, son of Smail, to the raspy notes of the gusla, a single-stringed, lute-like instrument played with a bow. These singers worked with no written text, for few could read or write. Their tales came out differently each time as they expanded one episode or shrank or omitted another, always fitting their words to the ten-syllable line of their ancient verse form.

This oral epic tradition was little known outside its own region, and almost invisible as yet to classicists in the English-speaking world. By purest chance, though, a Slovenian scholar, Matija Murko, had a guest appointment at the Sorbonne in 1928, the year that Parry completed his doctorate there. Parry met Murko briefly at his dissertation defense and later read the published version of his Sorbonne lectures, *La Poésie populaire épique en Yougoslavie au Début du XX Siècle* (1929). As Parry began his teaching career, with an appointment in 1928 at Drake University in Iowa and then, the year after, at Harvard, the parallels between Greek and Serbo-Croatian epic song began to take shape in his mind, along with a plan to hear the *guslars* for himself.

The timing of Parry’s decision to embark on field research was fortunate, for it was only at this moment that the first portable electronic recording devices became widely available. “It is even more than likely that someone else would have done this before had it not been for the lack of mechanical means,” Parry later wrote in the few pages of a projected book he completed after his travels. (Homer might have said much the same, *mutatis mutandis*, for one theory holds that he lived at just the time alphabetic writing was introduced into Greece and so was able, perhaps in old age, to dictate his poems to a scribe.)

Parry eventually made his own modifications to a Bell Edison device that recorded sound on aluminum disks, each with a play time of only four minutes; his improved version used a toggle switch to transfer the signal from one disk to a second, making possible the recording of long, continuous tales. It was important not to interrupt the *guslar* by asking him to pause for a disk change or otherwise distract him from his craft. Eventually Parry and his assistants amassed thousands of double-sided disks and filled hundreds of notebooks with sung stories set down by dictation. The entire trove is housed today in Harvard's Milman Parry Collection of Oral Literature (a few recordings can be accessed online).

Hearing Homer's Song moves into high gear when these Yugoslav travels begin, nearly two thirds of the way into the book. Up to that point Kanigel has traced a remarkable intellectual development set against a rather humdrum, indeed often dismal, personal life. Parry was an opaque and aloof man, and not particularly kind, at least in his marriage. His Jewish wife, Marian, was excluded from his thoughts and most of his adventures, and she was often unhappy, especially when scorned by Parry's anti-Semitic colleagues or stifled by his jealous possessiveness. Kanigel was fortunate to have access to Marian's reminiscences, gathered in 1981 by Pamela Newhouse, who later became a translator of ancient Greek but at the time was contemplating her own Parry biography.^{*} The "conventional and distant" marriage Kanigel portrays makes for dreary reading, but it "inexorably looms large" in this book, as Kanigel claims, in part because it bears on the final mystery: the cause of Parry's death.

The results of Parry's first trip, in the summer of 1933, were promising enough to secure funding for a second, principally from the American Council of Learned Societies. Depositing his wife and two children in Dubrovnik, Parry headed inland into Bosnia and Montenegro, accompanied by both a local guide and a student, Albert Lord, whose name would become linked indissolubly to his. In the tiny Muslim town of Bijelo Polje, with money and time running out, the team found a singer of tales who far surpassed the many they'd already recorded.

Avdo Medđedović was a "short homely farmer, whose throat was disfigured by a large goiter," Lord would later write. He'd spent his early life as a butcher and had had one arm smashed by a bullet while fighting in the Balkan Wars of 1912–1913; he was in his mid-sixties when Parry arrived in his town. From late June to mid-August 1935, this gnarled little man sang his traditional but highly embellished tales into Parry's recording device—nine of them, including one that stretched to 13,000 lines, longer than the *Odyssey* and nearly as long as the *Iliad*. It took up over sixteen hours of recording time. Here was living proof that a bard working in an exclusively oral milieu—for Avdo (as Kanigel calls him) had never learned to read or write—could generate a long, complex tale, in meter, elaborating and embellishing

as he went, so that a scene related in 141 lines could expand elsewhere to more than a thousand. It was just what Parry had hypothesized about Homer's technique.

Parry would have had much to say in print about Avdo, had he gotten the chance. Soon after his return to Harvard in the autumn of 1935, his life became troubled and complex, in part because of Marian's mother's financial difficulties. She lived in Los Angeles, had fallen into debt, and was apparently being harassed in some way by shadowy characters. Without a word to his colleagues, Parry dropped his academic duties, left his children with a caretaker, packed a gun in his suitcase, and joined his wife on the West Coast. Apparently he had taken to carrying firearms while in Yugoslavia and either had not yet shaken the habit or expected that he might confront his mother-in-law's nemeses. On the afternoon of December 3, in a room he shared with Marian in an LA hotel, the gun went off, killing him with a single bullet to the heart.

This improbable sequence, examined in both the first and the penultimate chapter of *Hearing Homer's Song*, demonstrates the challenges Kanigel faced in dealing with his opaque biographical subject. He scrutinizes but cannot resolve the questions surrounding the death. Did the gun go off by accident? (But could such a random shot have gone straight to his chest?) Or did Parry take his own life? (But why, when his work held such promise?) Or did Marian kill him? (But was she really capable of murder and then of deceiving the police, who questioned her at length and exonerated her?)

Kanigel rules out suicide, a welcome corrective to the widespread but misguided notion that Parry felt rejected by Harvard and fell into despair. The likely alternative would seem to be that his death was an accident, but Kanigel gives the case for murder, not usually acknowledged in discussions of this episode, more credence than one might have expected. Here we learn, from Parry's daughter and grandchildren, that Marian flew into "insane" fits of rage in later life and was capable of cruel behavior. But Kanigel comes back to the police interrogation that cleared her and leaves the question open. Marian's 1981 interview with Newhouse throws no light on the subject.

Parry was more blessed in his choice of assistant. Albert Lord went on to become a professor of classics himself, taught at Harvard, and returned to Yugoslavia in the 1950s to record more sung tales, including others from Avdo, then past eighty. Building on Parry's work with refinements of his own, he published *The Singer of Tales* in 1961, a comprehensive account of the art of oral epic as practiced by Homer, by the *guslars*, and by troubadours and jongleurs of the Middle Ages. That book, recently reissued in its third edition (with a photo of Avdo on the cover), is certainly among the most important works of modern

classical scholarship. The hybrid signifier “Parry-Lord” has since become the standard rubric for comparative research on oral epic because of how it illuminates the study of Homeric verse.

Sudden death at an early age, after heroic achievements, is sure to take on the dimensions of myth, especially when a Homerist is involved. In the case of Parry this mythic element was doubled when in 1971 his son, Adam, by then a professor of classics at Yale and editor of his father’s papers, was killed in a motorcycle crash at age forty-three, along with his wife, Anne Amory. To his credit, Kanigel resists the impulse to evoke ancestral curses or to lionize the dead. Milman Parry remains, in his sober telling, a figure of very mixed parts, and a rather cold fish. “For biographer and reader alike, it troubles us not to know him better,” Kanigel writes at one point, after surveying a journal Parry made of his early Greek travels and finding it “tedious...missing a human face.” This man who did so much to explain the form of Greek epic had little interest in the content of the Homeric poems, in the wrath of Achilles and the homecoming of Odysseus; he spoke sometimes of their greatness but seldom of their meaning. “I wonder exactly what Papa thought of the Iliad as a whole,” Adam wrote to his mother in 1951, on his way to his own tragically short career in classical studies. “He is always too busy speaking [i.e., writing] of the epic technique to say.”

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* Full disclosure: Newhouse is a friend and collaborator of mine. ↵