

THE HOMERIC POEMS AS ORAL DICTATED TEXTS

In memory of Albert Lord

The more I understand the Southslavic poetry and the nature of the unity of the oral poem, the clearer it seems to me that the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* are very exactly, as we have them, each one of them the rounded and finished work of a single singer. . . . I even figure to myself, just now, the moment when the author of the *Odyssey* sat and dictated his song, while another, with writing materials, wrote it down verse by verse, even in the way that our singers sit in the immobility of their thought, watching the motion of Nikola's hand across the empty page, when it will tell them it is the instant for them to speak the next verse.

So wrote Milman Parry late in his life.¹ His hypothesis about the origins of the Homeric text has influenced almost every line I have written about Homer. Writing a commentary on 3,000 verses of the *Iliad* only strengthened my view that the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* are texts orally composed in performance, written down by dictation from that same performance. What kind of text we are dealing with matters far more, for editing and interpreting Homer, than other questions, like whether the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* are the creations of one single poet (they are, in my view), or whether the poems were created in eighth-century Ionia. To digress for a moment on the latter point, the linguistic evidence offered by G. P. Edwards² and myself that these epics antedate Hesiod's three poems (including his *Catalogue of Women*) seems to me of paramount importance; I already disproved years ago³ the claim, recently repeated,⁴ that the choice of genre has any profound effect on the stage of linguistic evolution observable in any given text of the early epic tradition. I remain unconvinced by arguments for dating Homer to the seventh or sixth centuries.⁵ On the contrary, the new arguments of C. J. Ruijgh⁶ incline me to date the epics somewhat earlier than I used to, to c. 775–750 B.C. for the *Iliad* and slightly later for the *Odyssey*.

Whether the Homeric texts are orally dictated compositions⁷ is also an essential

¹ M. Parry, *The Making of Homeric Verse*, ed. A. Parry (Oxford, 1971), p. 451 (written in January 1934).

² *The Language of Hesiod* (Oxford, 1972).

³ *Homer, Hesiod and the Hymns: Diachronic Development in Epic Diction* (Cambridge, 1982), pp. 15–16, 192, 220–1.

⁴ See M. L. West, 'The date of the *Iliad*', *MH* 52 (1995), 203–19, esp. pp. 204f.

⁵ For a survey see B. B. Powell, *Homer and the Origin of the Greek Alphabet* (Cambridge, 1991), pp. 186–220. I agree with West (n. 4), p. 207, that representations of the *Iliad* do not antedate c. 625; but those of the *Odyssey* go back to at least c. 660 (Powell, op. cit., p. 211). The arguments of H. van Wees (*G&R* 41 [1994], 1–18, 131–55) neglect the likelihood that vase-painters are representing heroic battles, with a mixture of weaponry characteristic of different dates, and are therefore poor evidence for contemporary warfare. West's recent claim (pp. 211–19) that the destruction by flood of the Achaeans wall at *Il.* 12.17–33 is inspired by the destruction of Babylon by Sennacherib in 689 B.C. rests on an archaeological misconception: eighth-century Greeks were perfectly familiar with construction in mud-brick, often on a stone socle; this was normal and need not suggest borrowing from the Near East (p. 213). The effects of torrential rains on unprotected walls of mud-brick are apparent from most excavations of Bronze- and Iron-Age sites in Greece (at Ayios Stephanos in Laconia in my own experience), and would have been easily observable in the eighth century.

⁶ 'D'Homère aux origines proto-mycéniennes de la tradition épique', pp. 1–96 in J. P. Crielaard (ed.), *Homeric Questions* (Amsterdam, 1995), esp. pp. 21–6. For similar datings see A. C. Cassio, 'ΚΕΙΝΟΣ, ΚΑΛΛΙΣΤΕΦΑΝΟΣ e la circolazione dell'epica in area euboica', *Annali di Archeologia e Storia Antica* 1 (1994), 55–67, esp. p. 64, n. 66.

⁷ The theory was developed by A. B. Lord, 'Homer's originality: oral dictated texts', *TAPA* 84

question because of widespread and persistent misunderstandings about the nature of orally composed epics. The approach of Milman Parry and Albert Lord has explained so much about the Homeric poems that it has all the simplicity and power of some masterly demonstration in physics, and to neglect it is to revert to the world of Newton from that of Einstein. Yet Parry's work, like Einstein's, raises the famous question of whether God plays dice: of what role there is for a creator, for the 'divine Homer' of the ancients, in the systematized and statistical cosmos of Parry's research. For over sixty years Homerists have been endeavouring to relate this new Homer to the Homer we knew before, that presence behind the text whose guiding intelligence is so apparent to any student reader. It is a testimony to the cogency of this approach that scholars have continued to work with it, vindicate it, expand it, and refine it in its own technical fields; but it is a measure of failure that there is still no agreed position on where it belongs in that wider spectrum of Homeric scholarship, without displacing certain other well-tried approaches.

Many Homerists have been unaware that, in criticizing the oralist approach, they have been aiming at a moving target. Lord's work was far from over with *The Singer of Tales*. He next saw to the publication of the text and English translation of Avdo Mededović's greatest epic, *The Wedding of Smailagić Meho*.⁸ There is now no excuse to say that this poem is 'cited' as being of unusually high quality, or to refer only to very inferior poems from the South Slavic tradition.⁹ I had the privilege of knowing him well for the last decade of his life. Just before he died in 1991, he published *Epic Singers and Oral Tradition*,¹⁰ selected essays on Homer, the *Kalevala*, and South Slavic, Anglo-Saxon, Bulgarian, Central Asiatic and Medieval Greek epic poetry. Lord's last book, lightly edited by his widow, has recently appeared. In *The Singer Resumes the Tale*¹¹ he at last responds to the misunderstandings of his critics, an action which his friends had long urged him to do. His modest and gentle character prevented him from publishing any rebuttals during his lifetime. I can at last cite Lord's own words to show how some aspects of the work of Parry and Lord have since been modified, and others have been misunderstood. First, four modifications.

First, oral composition is not the same as the composition of an oral epic. In *The Singer of Tales* the impression is given that oral epic is typical of oral poetry as a whole. Lord denies this explicitly in his later books. These include studies of English ballads and Latvian short songs as well as of the Serbo-Croatian *ženske pesme* or 'women's songs', which constitute a genre distinct from the *junačke pesme* or 'heroic songs'; the former are analogous to some genres of Greek lyric poetry, which share a similar origin.¹² Inevitably, a short poem admits a greater element of fixity in its

(1953), 124–34. I have argued other aspects of this case in 'The *Iliad* and its editors: dictation and redaction', *CA* 9 (1990), 326–34 (published in Italian translation as 'L'*Iliade* fra dettatura e redazione', *SIFC* 10 [1992], 833–43), and in a review of H. van Thiel, *Homeri Odyssea, Gnomon* 66 (1994), 289–95, as well as in *The Iliad: A Commentary. IV: Books 13–16* (Cambridge, 1992), pp. 37–8 (necessarily with extreme brevity there). Cf. similarly M. L. West, 'Archaische Heldendichtung: Singen und Schreiben', in W. Kullmann and M. Reichel (edd.), *Der Übergang von der Mündlichkeit zur Literatur bei den Griechen* (Tübingen, 1990), pp. 33–50; Powell (n. 5), pp. 229–30; Ruijgh (n. 6), p. 26.

⁸ D. Bynum (ed.), with A. B. Lord, *Ženidba hadji-Smailagina Sina, Kazivao je Avdo Mededović* (Cambridge, MA, 1974); A. B. Lord (trans.), *The Wedding of Smailagić Meho, by Avdo Mededović* (Cambridge, MA, 1974).

⁹ So H. Lloyd-Jones, 'Becoming Homer', *New York Review of Books* (5 March 1992); cf. Rosalind Thomas, *Literacy and Orality in Ancient Greece* (Cambridge, 1992), p. 49.

¹⁰ *Epic Singers and Oral Tradition* (Ithaca, NY, 1991).

¹¹ A. B. Lord, ed. M. L. Lord, *The Singer Resumes the Tale* (Ithaca, NY, 1995).

¹² See M. L. Lord in Lord (n. 11), pp. 62–8.

wording; but in fact even brief pieces exhibit far greater variation in wording and structure than one might expect.

Secondly, Parry had originally hypothesized that all oral poetry consists of formulae, but *The Singer of Tales* showed that this does not apply to South Slavic epic, which consists largely of formulaic expressions. Although Homeric poetry contains a higher proportion of formulae than many other traditions, because of the fixity of the hexameter, if everything consisted of formulae, there would be no room for the kind of innovation, both within formulae and outside them, documented by the work of Hoekstra, Hainsworth, G. P. Edwards and myself in the Homeric poems and the post-Homeric tradition.

Thirdly, Lord is often understood as having said that an oral tradition is killed off at once by the introduction of writing. He has recently offered a much more careful formulation:

literacy carries the seeds of the eventual demise of oral traditional composition. . . . It is not, however, writing per se that brings about the change; traditional oral epic flourished in the Slavic Balkans for centuries in communities where significant portions of the population were literate. But gradually the epic came to be written down, and the concept of a *fixed text*, and of *the text*, of a song came to be current. With that concept arose the need for memorization rather than recomposition as a means of transmission.¹³

I now think that full oral composition in hexameters was still practised in Greece down to the middle of the sixth century, and indeed that it continued in remote rural areas even later, ultimately to inspire magical texts in hexameters and Theocritean pastoral.

Fourthly, Lord has also modified his early view that a text transitional between full oral composition and literary composition is impossible.¹⁴ In one sense, even a composition of proven oral origin like Avdo Mededović's huge poem *The Wedding of Smailagić Meho* could be called a transitional text, because it was inspired by a written text.¹⁵ Avdo, completely illiterate, had heard a version of this song, about 2,000 lines long, read to him from a published collection of songs; it had been taken down by dictation and published in 1886. When he sang it he maintained essentially the same plot, but so adorned the tale that his version was 12,000 lines in length, as well as much better. But his manner of composition is wholly oral-traditional. And there are other types of case. Lord has pointed to Petar Petrović Njegoš II, a Montenegrin prince of the 1830s who was originally a traditional singer, then learned to write. At first he, as it were, dictated oral-traditional songs to himself, but as he became more educated he became more innovative, introducing rhyme and other non-traditional features into the poetry he wrote.¹⁶ He was producing, in fact, written literature, just as Italo Calvino does by modifying Italian dictated folk-tales.¹⁷ But there is no reason to think that the Homeric poems are of this nature.

Let me turn to five misunderstandings which have dogged Homeric studies as scholars have sought to digest the evidence, unwelcome to many, that Homer's magnificent compositions are the work of someone, as they might put it, so ignorant that he had not learned to use writing to compose them. On the contrary, I can only admire the intelligence and skill of a poet who *could* exploit his oral-traditional inheritance as well as Homer does.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 102.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 212–37.

¹⁵ A. B. Lord (n. 10), pp. 62, 68–71.

¹⁶ A. B. Lord (n. 11), pp. 235–6.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 213–20.

1. First, everyone has used the term ‘Parry–Lord theory’ or ‘oral theory’. Lord has now protested against this:

[T]he phrase ‘oral theory’ with regard to the investigations into South Slavic oral epic by Parry and me is a misnomer. These findings do not constitute a ‘theory’; rather, they provide demonstrated facts concerning oral traditional poetry. . . . Where else but to a tradition continuing into modern times could a scholar go to look for clues to the nature of epics such as the Homeric poems and *Beowulf*, the method of whose composition is not documented and is subject to controversy?¹⁸

This is correct; it is a hypothesis that the *Iliad* is an oral dictated text, quite a different thing to say this of the dictated texts in the Parry Collection, the genesis of which is meticulously recorded and documented (as anyone who goes to Harvard can verify).

2. The second misunderstanding is that oral poetry is ‘improvised’.¹⁹ This is true only in part: everything depends on what connotations we bring to the word ‘improvise’. It is improvised in the sense that jazz is improvised—by using pre-existing blocks of material and skilfully putting them together or modifying them in new ways. Sometimes the effort shows: the poet makes a minor slip in the consistency of the plot, or he creates a line that is metrically faulty. Often, indeed, the best poets will be those who need to resort to prefabricated material with the least regularity. This must have been the difference noted by Callimachus²⁰ between Homer and the Cyclic poets, *τοὺς ‘αὐτὰρ ἔπειτα’ λέγοντας*. J. Griffin²¹ has pointed out a remarkable difference between speech and narrative in Homer; speeches are much less prone to use set formulae, and much more likely to use words not found elsewhere in Homer, especially terms for sophisticated moral concepts. I wish to connect this with Aristotle’s observation²² that a far greater proportion of the Homeric epics is made up of speeches than was the case in the Cyclic poems. The best poet is best able to improvise, e.g. in speeches, where the tradition does not offer him blocks of material in fairly stable form, like arming-scenes. However, the basis of oral composition is not improvisation *ex nihilo*—quite the contrary. To be able to improvise, the poet must first master the oral-traditional poetic language, with enough of the traditional scenes and story-patterns to enable him to hold his tale together.

Nor does oral composition preclude careful rehearsals.²³ Oral epic poets can rehearse their pieces: Lord records²⁴ that a Bosnian singer claimed to practise his songs while tending his sheep. Indeed, for a poet composing as he sings, every performance is a rehearsal for the next time. Songs can have a relatively stable existence in the mind of a particular singer: thus one of them sang the ‘same song’ twice, with an interval of seventeen years between the two performances, but with striking similarities between them, even to the extent of the singer making the same mistake in plot-construction.²⁵

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 191. Cf. G. Nagy, ‘Homeric questions’, *TAPA* 122 (1992), 17–60, esp. p. 28.

¹⁹ For this misunderstanding, see e.g. Thomas (n. 9), pp. 37, 40, and O. Taplin, *Homeric Soundings* (Oxford, 1992), p. 35; but cf. Lord (n. 10), pp. 76–7, and (n. 11), pp. 11, 102–3.

²⁰ *Ep.* 28 Pfeiffer.

²¹ ‘Words and Speakers in Homer’, *JHS* 106 (1986), 36–57. I do not of course accept his conclusion that this supports a written origin for the epics.

²² *Poet.* 1460a5–10.

²³ For this misunderstanding, see e.g. Taplin (n. 19), p. 36.

²⁴ A. B. Lord, *The Singer of Tales* (Cambridge, MA, 1960), p. 21.

²⁵ Ibid., p. 28; thus Thomas (n. 9), pp. 36–8, is wrong to imply that this is not Lord’s view.

3. A third, more serious misunderstanding is that memorization plays much part in the composition of oral epic poetry.²⁶ Oral literature is only *memorized* when there exists an idea of a fixed text; once the texts of the Homeric and Hesiodic poems had been fixed in writing, the way was open to memorize them, which is what the rhapsodes did. But the idea of a fixed text could not exist without writing, at least until the invention of the phonograph. Poets *remember* how to compose oral poetry, which is quite a different thing.²⁷ Oral bards also *remember* a huge stock of traditional expressions, verses, blocks of verses, typical scenes, and story-patterns. A good bard will have an excellent memory, far better than literate people may have; but he does not remember the *text* of what he performs. Formulae are not, as has been thought, an aid to memorization—quite the reverse. Formulae exist as an aid to composition, *not* to memorization.²⁸ They are memorable phrases, but they are not memorized in the same way as we memorize telephone numbers.

4. A worse misunderstanding was caused by Lord's equation of the 'oral formulaic style' with 'oral style' *tout court*. This arose merely as a shorthand expression: as we saw, Lord was an expert on orally composed lyrics and other short pieces in a number of languages. However, his sweeping use of the term allowed R. Finnegan to claim²⁹ that anything *orally disseminated* is an oral text—a claim that is self-evidently true, but only in a totally trivial sense. Yet this claim has widely been seen as an answer to their doubts by those unable, or unwilling, to grasp how illiterate singers can compose and perform coherent narratives thousands of lines in length. Oral performance is not to be confused with oral composition-in-performance. Finnegan's book, now a standard point of reference for those who wish to set aside the work of Parry and Lord, has performed a disservice to Homeric studies by planting this confusion in many minds.³⁰ Her book, based as it is on a comparative study of the practice of composition and performance of both oral and orally performed poetry, both long and short, rejected within the category of works orally performed the existence of a highly significant sub-category of longer works *composed during performance*. Parry and Lord have shown that oral poets use the language and structures of their respective traditions to facilitate composition-in-performance; they will use them more in creating very long poems, less in creating short ones ('lyrics'). To deny that this category of long compositions can be distinguished from other types, where short compositions can be remembered more exactly, is to confuse genres which traditional societies in the modern Balkans and in ancient Greece well knew how to keep apart.

5. The last and worst misconception is that oral literature of high quality is an impossibility. Literature existed long before there were symbols to write it down.³¹ The indisputable proof of this, in the case of early Greece, comes from a combination of archaeological and linguistic arguments, of which the latter are irrefutable. Nilsson's argument,³² that heroic myths are centred around the palaces

²⁶ For this error, see Thomas (n. 9), pp. 36–8.

²⁷ See Lord (n. 11), pp. 11, 20, 197–200.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 181.

²⁹ *Oral Poetry* (Cambridge, 1977), pp. 18–22.

³⁰ So Lord (n. 10), p. 3. Its influence is evident in, for example, Thomas (n. 9), pp. 43–4.

³¹ Lord (n. 11), p. 1.

³² M. P. Nilsson, *The Mycenaean Origins of Greek Mythology* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1932).

which lay at the heart of every Mycenaean state, does not prove that the myths originated there or at that period. But we can demonstrate that many traditional formulae and phrases used by Homer and other poets go back to Dark Age times and earlier. To cite only one example, the phrase ἀσπίδος ὄμφαλοέσσης refers to the Early Iron Age shield with its prominent central boss,³³ whereas ἀσπίδος ἀμφιβρότης refers to the tower-shield seen on the dagger from Shaft Grave IV at Mycenae, and still reflects Proto-Indo-European syllabic *r*.³⁴ Moreover, such fossilized phrases as the Aeolic forms in *"Ιλιον ἵρν* and adjectives like *'Εκτόρεος* (with *-ρε-* for Ionic *-ρι-*) show that the tale of Troy was already being told a couple of centuries before Homer,³⁵ and self-styled Aeneadae were certainly among the tale's early patrons.³⁶ In the texts themselves, Shipp plotted the incidence of relatively 'late' linguistic forms and found them clustered in, notably, the extended similes; these have long been conjectured to be one of the greatest glories of the 'monumental poet'.³⁷

But all this proves nothing about the quality of the poetry composed by Homer's predecessors: as it was oral and not written down, we do not have it. Since we have no texts earlier than the epics themselves (and certainly not the poems of Hesiod), we cannot directly examine the growth of the stories, as we can in certain other traditions, notably that of the *Nibelungenlied*.³⁸ But we can do so indirectly, through the approach called Neo-Analysis, if that approach is properly conceived: for I believe that the undoubtedly post-Homeric Epic Cycle preserves unchanged many story-patterns which Homer already knew and adapted in his epics.³⁹ The Homeric epics completely transcend the melodramatic soap-operas, replete with miracles and fantasy, which made up the Trojan and Theban Cycles, as well as their poverty of style. The purity of Homer's imaginative vision, no less than his compositional artistry, far outshone the quality of these works. As J. Griffin⁴⁰ has suggested, they were typical of the oral tradition from which the Homeric epics arose. But how can we say for certain that they were the best it could produce?

From study of the diction, we can be sure that invention and innovation were possible—and widespread—in the prehistory of the tradition; and from Neo-Analysis we can be sure that Homer did change his tradition, not to say transcend it. Against the mass of evidence on which the researches of Parry and Lord rest, fine scholars in the Unitarian tradition, like Reinhardt and Griffin, have counterpoised the subtle and elaborate construction of the Homeric epics, their excellence in the depiction of character, and their 'literary' qualities, as clear evidence that Homer must have composed with the aid of writing. And there the matter stands, with no clear path of reconciliation between the two sides. The paradox of such great *literature*—for we cannot call it anything else—in an oral formulaic style has inevitably provoked the compromise, accepted by many, that, although Homer came at the end of a long oral tradition, his poems are so good that they must have been composed with the aid of

³³ R. Janko, *The Iliad: A Commentary. IV: Books 13–16*, p. 13.

³⁴ P. Wathelet in Y. Lebrun (ed.), *Linguistic Research in Belgium* (Wetteren, 1966), pp. 145–73. For further examples see Janko (n. 33), pp. 9–14; Ruijgh (n. 6), pp. 63–92.

³⁵ Cf. Janko (n. 33), pp. 15–19; Ruijgh (n. 6), pp. 53–63.

³⁶ So Janko (n. 33), p. 19; cf. West (n. 4), p. 217, although there is no reason to think that the *Iliad* was so named because of its place of composition rather than its content.

³⁷ G. P. Shipp, *Studies in the Language of Homer*, 2nd edn (Cambridge, 1972). He was obviously wrong to suppose that they are interpolated.

³⁸ See A. T. Hatto, *The Nibelungenlied* (London, 1965), pp. 370–95.

³⁹ I will argue this case in my paper 'Homer and Neo-Analysis', to appear.

⁴⁰ 'The epic cycle and the uniqueness of Homer', *JHS* 97 (1977), 39–53. The superiority of Homeric epic to much of the tradition is vainly questioned by Nagy (n. 18), p. 29.

writing; they are ‘oral-derived’. In fact this is not a reasonable and moderate compromise, but rests on an unexamined assumption, commonly made by literate and illiterate people alike, that written literature must be superior to oral literature. This is false: there is good and bad oral literature, just as there is good and bad written literature. As we will see, oral and written literature differ in certain respects, but we cannot assume that oral poets are incapable of managing large structures like the story-patterns of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, nor that they are incapable of achieving powerful effects in detail.⁴¹ Other traditional poetries face the same problem. The *Song of Roland* is greatly superior in ‘literary’ qualities to the other *chansons de geste*, yet displays all the marks of oral composition and is *older* than the other *chansons*.⁴² How do we explain Homer’s superb quality, which is why all these questions matter? Is it owed to Tradition with a capital T, to the spirit of the Hellenic *Volk*, to an Editorial Board chaired by Pisistratus, to a poet’s inspired pen, or to the genius of a single illiterate composer?

Even if one believes, as I do, that the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* must be oral dictated texts, there is much to be said in favour of premeditation and writing as aids to Homeric composition. Lord showed that, once a poet is accustomed to the slower pace of dictation, he can take advantage of it to improve the quality of his performance, not only in terms of avoiding defective lines, but also in more careful premeditation of the story itself.⁴³ But poets composing orally cannot go back and alter what they have composed. As Horace said in another context, *nescit vox missa reverti*.⁴⁴ If the Homeric poems were in fact composed with the help of writing, we would expect them to exhibit a much smoother surface and a much more self-conscious style than they have. But can we move from probable hypothesis to observing the process of dictation at work in the texts? I believe that we can, frequently.

We can be certain that Homer did not use writing to improve his texts. A poet using writing or an editor altering his work would have done something about such incurably unmetrical verses as

τοῦνεκ' ἄρ' ἀλλοειδέα φαινέσκετο πάντα ἄνακτι. ⁴⁵

On the morning when Odysseus is to slay the suitors, Zeus thunders ‘from the clouds’ as an omen to the hero, who is suitably gladdened (*Od.* 20.103–6):

αὐτίκα δ' ἐβρόντησεν ἀπ' αἰγλήντος 'Ολύμπου,
νῦνθεν ἐκ νεφέων γήθησε δὲ δῖος 'Οδυσσεύς.
φήμην δ' ἔξ οἴκου γυνὴ προέκεν ἀλετρίς
πληγίον, ἐνθ' ἄρα οἱ μύλαι εἶατο ποιμένι λαῶν.

Next, an old servant hears the thunder and exclaims to Zeus that ‘there is no cloud anywhere’ (*Od.* 20.113–14):

ἢ ῥά μύλην στήσασα ἔπος φάτο, σῆμα ἄνακτι·
'Ζεῦ πάτερ, ὃς τε θεοῖς καὶ ἀνθρώποισιν ἀνάσσεις,
ἢ μεγάλ' ἐβρόντησας ἀπ' οὐρανοῦ ἀστερόεντος,
οὐδέ ποθι νέφος ἔστι· τέρας νυ τέω τόδε φαίνεις.'

⁴¹ So Taplin (n. 19), p. 36.

⁴² J. J. Duggan, *The Song of Roland: Formulaic Style and Poetic Craft* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1973), pp. 1, 213–18.

⁴³ Lord (n. 24), p. 128.

⁴⁴ *Ars Poetica* 390.

⁴⁵ *Od.* 13.194.

Odysseus rejoices at her lucky utterance and at Zeus' thunder (*Od.* 20.120–1):

ἄς ἄρ' ἔφη, χαίρεν δὲ κλεψόν διος Ὀδυσσεὺς
Ζηνός τε βροντῇ φάτο γὰρ τείσασθαι ἀλείτας.

Attempts to remove the contradiction by deleting line 104⁴⁶ are unconvincing, as they do not explain how it arose; this is a case where the poet anticipates himself—the fault most often found in the songs of Avdo Mededović, as Lord noted.⁴⁷ In admitting this contradiction, neither Homer nor his putative editor makes any use of the technology of writing to correct it. How remarkable that it is still in our text!

To cite another example, the Embassy to Achilles in *Iliad* 9, it is clear to me⁴⁸ that we have a blend of two versions of the story. In the first, Phoenix never left the hut of Achilles, where he belongs; in the second, without explanation and against all likelihood, Achilles' guardian is found at the Achaean Elders' council of war, so that he can join the ambassadors, and be invited by Achilles to spend the night in his hut. The poet had sound poetic reasons for wanting to involve Phoenix in the Elders' meeting; Achilles could then invite him to stay in his hut—a motif later repeated with Priam in *Iliad* 24. But Homer never went back to erase the tell-tale duals, where the ambassadors were only Ajax and Odysseus. Without a faithful dictated text, I cannot explain the duals.

Vestiges of dictation can be discerned wherever one looks. At *Iliad* 14.170ff. Hera is adorning herself:

<p><u>ἀμβροσίη</u> μὲν πρῶτον ἀπὸ χροὸς ἵμερόντος λύματα πάντα κάθηρεν, ἀλεύφατο δὲ λίπ' ἐλαίω <u>ἀμβροσίᾳ</u> ἑανῷ, τὸ ρά οἱ τεθυώμενον ἦν· τοῦ καὶ κινυμένοι Διὸς ποτὶ χαλκοβατές δῶ ἔμπης ἐς γαῖαν τε καὶ οὐρανὸν ἵκετ' ἀντμή. τῷ δὲ τε χρόᾳ καλόν ἀλευφαμένῃ ἰδὲ χαίτας πεξάμενη χερὶ πλοκάμους ἐπλεξε φαεινοὺς καλοὺς <u>ἀμβροσίους</u> ἐκ κράτος ἀθανάτου. ἀμφὶ δ' ἄρ' <u>ἀμβρόσιον</u> ἑανὸν ἔσαθ', σον οἱ Αθήνη...</p>	173
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172 ἑανῷ test. antiquiores: ἑανῷ cett. 173 ποτὶ Ω: κατὰ Aristarch.

177 ἀμβροσίους Ω: καὶ μεγάλους Zen. Aristoph.

The repetition of *ἀμβρόσιος* four times in lines 170–8 is certainly not a feature favoured in ‘literary’ poetry, and the third instance of the word, *καλοὺς ἀμβροσίους* in line 177, was emended away by Zenodotus and Aristophanes, who read *καλοὺς καὶ μεγάλους*, although it was left alone by Aristarchus. Not one manuscript, by the way, has the reading of the earlier Alexandrians. A different problem arises in lines 173–4:

τοῦ καὶ κινυμένοι Διὸς ποτὶ χαλκοβατές δῶ
 ἔμπης ἐς γαῖαν τε καὶ οὐρανὸν ἵκετ' ἀντμή.

Aristarchus altered *ποτὶ* into *κατὰ*, which makes better sense; how can the poet say

⁴⁶ E.g. R. B. Rutherford, *Homer, Odyssey Books XIX and XX* (Cambridge, 1992), *ad loc.*

⁴⁷ Lord (n. 8), p. xii.

⁴⁸ Cf. Hainsworth *ad loc.*, who cites strong objections to the other possibilities.

'when Hera's dress was moved to Zeus' house, its perfume reached heaven and earth'? Aristarchus is quite right to want the text to say 'when Hera's dress was moved in Zeus' house, its perfume reached heaven and earth'. But that is not what the text says; the poet has anticipated the idea of the perfume reaching heaven (the same place as Zeus' house) and uttered the wrong preposition, since his thoughts again ran ahead of his tongue. Aristarchus, like any good editor of a written text, has corrected the error. But a scrupulous editor of an orally dictated text—which Aristarchus did not know that he had before him—would not alter this, but would remark it in a note. As usual, the orally dictated imperfection is still faithfully preserved by the manuscripts; in terms of textual criticism, it has the status of a *lectio difficilior*.

In fact the Alexandrians' procedure is paralleled among the texts in the Parry Collection. During one of my visits to it Lord showed me transcripts of Bosnian songs edited for publication by the collector Marjanović in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. Let me quote his description of what I saw for myself:

Marjanović made many changes in the manuscript. He left out lines and added lines; he left out blocks of five to ten lines. He changed all eleven-syllable lines to ten syllables, and sometimes he combined two lines. His edited texts do not represent the exact words of the singer who dictated them. Marjanović brought to the editing criteria different from those of the singer. Sometimes he omitted 'awkward' lines, such as 'Then you should see Beg Mustajbeg', lines the singer used frequently in performance and, interestingly enough, continued to use in dictating the text for a scribe.⁴⁹

The changes included the removal of verbal repetitions.⁵⁰ Marjanović's procedure reminds me especially of the practices of Zenodotus.⁵¹

But the difference between oral and literary composition does not consist only in the roughness of finish of the oral text, or in the use of 'fixed' traditional epithets. The oral poet can be surprisingly subtle in his use of the latter: in the Deception of Zeus by Hera, which ends with Zeus cocooned inside a cloud in ignorance of his wife's machinations, Zeus is wittily called 'cloud-gatherer', *νεφεληγερέτης*, throughout, when alternative phrasings were available.⁵² Conversely, the less frequent a repetition, the more I think we should notice it. Take for example the famous couplet on the flight of a warrior's soul from his body:

ψυχὴ δὲ ἐκ ρέθέων πταμένη Άιδοςδε βέβηκει,
ὅν πότμον γοώσα, λιπών ἀνδροτήτα καὶ ἥβην.

A common enough event in the *Iliad*, one might think; the distich ought to be rather frequent. Yet these ancient phrases are applied in the poem only to the two most important deaths, those of Patroclus and Hector.⁵³ This looks no less deliberate than Vergil's echo of these verses, which are likewise applied to the deaths of only two warriors—Camilla and Turnus.⁵⁴ These lines are used quite differently from the common descriptions of a warrior's demise, such as 'he fell with a crash, and his armour clattered about him'. In the latter case the context is not significant, beyond

⁴⁹ Lord (n. 11), p. 16. For other instances, see J. M. Foley, *Traditional Oral Epic* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1990), p. 28, n. 18. ⁵⁰ Ibid., pp. 17–18.

⁵¹ Cf. (n. 33), pp. 22–5. Another tendency in the MSS of Homer is the standardization of repeated verses against each other: see my article 'The *Iliad* and its editors' (n. 7), esp. pp. 332–3 (*SIFC* 10 [1992]), esp. pp. 840–2).

⁵² See my notes on *Iliad* 14.292–3, 310–12.

⁵³ Il. 16.856–7 = 22.362–3; see my note on 16.855–8, and cf. Taplin (n. 19), p. 246.

⁵⁴ *Aeneid* 11.831 = 12.952.

the fact that the warrior has been hit in the head or upper body. But in these verses on the deaths of Patroclus and Hector, I would advocate a mode of reading—the detection of long-range echoes—normally thought appropriate to Vergil, Dante, or other ‘literary’ texts. How can we reconcile these two ways of reading?⁵⁵ Can the new oral poetics—the approach of Parry and Lord—fit in with the old ‘literary’ poetics?

Before answering this question I wish to consider briefly the use of ‘themes’. W. Arend⁵⁶ discovered, independently of Parry, that many Homeric scenes are ‘typical’, i.e. consist of a set of standardized elements; thus scenes of sacrificing, feasting, or voyaging by ship are made up of standard motifs, and often contain standard lines. It is in the combination of such themes into songs that the Bosnian singer has the greatest scope for originality.⁵⁷ In the use of themes and story-patterns we can best see an interaction between oralist and ‘literary’ considerations. For example, consider the journey of Poseidon to intervene in the battle, at the opening of *Iliad* 13. Zeus has momentarily looked away; Poseidon, seizing his chance to save the panic-stricken Greeks from losing their ships to Hector’s onslaught, decides to intervene. He descends from the mountain-peak of Samothrace, whence he has been watching for his opportunity; the island quakes under his steps. But instead of going straight to Troy (as we might have expected), he proceeds to his house at Aigai. Wherever Aigai is, it is certainly out of his way. From Aigai he rides out in his chariot across the sea, which makes way for him, and all his sea-creatures gambol about as he crosses the Aegean. His progress is stately rather than swift; his chariot does not speed his arrival. When he is well off the Trojan coast, he goes to a submarine cave between Imbros and Tenedos, and parks his vehicle there. This cave is close to Samothrace, where he was to begin with. From there, by undisclosed means, he proceeds to the battlefield and appears to the Greeks, disguised as Calchas. Fortunately for the Greeks, who were losing, and showing due deference to Zieliński’s law of Homeric narrative technique, the poet has stopped the clock, and Poseidon finds the battle exactly as he left it.

Why does Poseidon travel to Troy by so roundabout a route, when the situation is so urgent? The usual reaction has been to excise either the whole passage, or at least the lines about Samothrace (so W. Leaf), so that Poseidon does not cross and recross the Aegean. But when we combine ‘literary’ considerations with thematic analysis, the explanation soon appears. The description of Poseidon’s journey stresses the importance of his arrival, gives us an impression of the god’s awesome determination, builds suspense as we wonder about the fate of the Greeks, and vividly expresses Poseidon’s three main characteristics, as earth-shaker, horse-god, and sea-god. To realize these aims Homer has combined two distinct themes. Theme 1 is that of a god intervening to counter the schemes of another. An unelaborated example of this is at *Iliad* 10.515–18:⁵⁸

οὐδὲ ἀλαοσκοπῆν εἶχ’ ἄργυρότοξος Απόλλων,
ώς δέ θεοί την μετὰ Τυδέος νιὸν ἔπουσαν·
τῇ κοτέων Τρώων κατέδυσετο πουλὺν ὄμιλον,
ῳρεν δὲ Θρηγῶν βουλοφόρον Ἰπποκόωντα . . .

⁵⁵ For a similar acceptance of the possibility of combining this approach with the belief in an oral Homer see Taplin (n. 19), pp. 8–9.

⁵⁶ *Die typischen Scenen bei Homer* (Berlin, 1933).

⁵⁷ Lord (n. 24), p. 173. Parry regarded the use of themes as the most important characteristic of the oral style (n. 1, p. 452).

⁵⁸ There are other examples of this theme at *Il.* 14.135, *Od.* 8.285.

Neither did Apollo of the silver bow keep blind watch,
 since he saw Athene attending the son of Tydeus. Angered
 with her he plunged into the great multitude of the Trojans
 and roused a man of council among the Thracians, Hippokoon . . .
 (trans. R. Lattimore)

Here too Poseidon does not ‘keep blind watch’, is angry at what he sees, flies down, and stirs up a Greek warrior—Ajax. But the poet has blended with this a second theme. Theme 2 is the divine chariot-journey from Mount Olympus to Troy, as seen for example at *Iliad* 8.41ff., where Zeus travels by chariot from Olympus to Ida so he can watch the battle.⁵⁹ There are numerous verbal parallels. Thus a block of four lines is identical;⁶⁰ the chariot of Poseidon *flies* across the sea as that of Zeus *flies* between heaven and earth;⁶¹ each leaves his chariot, releasing the horses from the yoke, and hides them.⁶² Other details are paralleled in other versions of the theme, e.g. feeding the horses or tying them up. The combination of these two themes has led to the minor peculiarity of Poseidon’s detour, which the brilliance of the passage amply conceals from all but the most obstinate critic. In this instance we can see that ‘literary’ considerations have determined the poet’s ends, but the means which he has used to attain those ends are comprehensible only in terms of oral composition-in-performance. Here is the answer to my question, as to how the traditional and the oralist methods of reading an Homer are fully compatible and indeed both indispensable.

It is a notable fact that Parry’s interests centred on what we might call the lower levels of Homeric style—diction, metre, epithets, at most minor inconsistencies of plot like the one I have just examined. Lord placed more stress on theme, an intermediate level in this hierarchy, and on the story. Now the insights of great scholars in the Unitarian and Neo-Analytic traditions illuminate characterization and plot-structure, that is the highest levels of abstraction from the words of the text. At these levels the success of such approaches belies the need for a ‘new oral poetics’. However, the reason why there is no need for such an oral poetics at this level inheres, not in the nature of the epics themselves as oral poems, but in their subsequent history as texts; it inheres in their archetypal significance for the whole of the classical, or classicizing, literature and literary theory. Written literature is an outgrowth of oral literature, and our concept of what is ‘literary’ in structure and style has been substantially shaped by the Homeric epics, that is by oral dictated texts. Nor do we need a new oral poetics to interpret Homeric plot-construction, characterization and standard conventions, because the poetics to which we are accustomed, based so much on epics like Vergil’s or Milton’s, tragedies like Sophocles’, or on theorists like Aristotle, Horace, and Longinus, take Homer as their starting-point, their model, and their guide. On the larger scale Homeric poetics are simply those of classical literature and ancient literary theory, which is why traditional approaches to the epics have worked so well; while those aspects of the poems that have seemed problematic, giving rise to such theories as ‘Homer nodding’ or multiple authorship, find their explanation in the work of Parry and Lord.

Without dictation, we would have no text of Homer. I must close by suggesting why we do have a text: dictation is a necessary, but not a sufficient condition to explain that fact. Any period of ‘memorial transmission’ before the text had first been written

⁵⁹ Other examples are at 5.364–9, 720, 8.381, 24.265ff.

⁶⁰ 8.41–4 = 13.23–6.

⁶¹ 13.29, cf. 8.45.

⁶² 13.34f., cf. 8.49f.

down and before the idea of a fixed text had arisen is not credible in the light of the comparative evidence; the poem would have been substantially altered by any such transmission,⁶³ or else would have developed variant recensions. But we have only one version of the epics, not several, as in the case, for instance, in the *Song of Roland* or *Digenis Akritas*. The Greek alphabet was used almost from the beginning to write down poetry, as the 'cup of Nestor' shows.⁶⁴ The question which will rightly be posed is why should the Homeric epics have been dictated at all.

As Lord rightly argued,⁶⁵ the impetus to recording in writing is unlikely to come from an oral-traditional singer, but rather from someone else, a collector or patron. There was a collector or patron: no long poem was ever taken down at a noisy public festival like that of Apollo on Delos, and Homer depicts his ideal audience in the court of Alcinous and Arete. One influence on the person responsible for the recording must have been knowledge of the existence of written literature, which means the written epics of the Levant.⁶⁶ That person also knew the alphabet as adapted from Phoenician to Greek.⁶⁷ Whoever it was who caused the poems to be written down possessed considerable time and resources. The dictation by Avdo Mededović of *The Wedding of Smailagić Meho* took two entire weeks.⁶⁸ In eighth-century Ionia, the number of leather rolls needed for a similar task must have represented a considerable expense. This limits us to the courts of wealthy princes and nobles. But all this still does not explain why the recording happened.

Only a cultural or ideological motivation can account for the desire to record these epics. No obvious threat to the cultural identity of eighth-century Greeks presents itself, so I suspect that ideology was the driving force. I cannot here enter fully into the lively debate on the ideological tendencies of Homer's poems, so the reader must be content with a brief argument for my own position. Obviously an oral singer has to please different constituencies in his audience, but the dependents of the king in the

⁶³ So the theory of G. Nagy, most clearly expressed in his article cited in n. 7, that the progressively wider and wider diffusion of the Homeric poems resulted in their gradually becoming more and more fixed. However, the reverse outcome would seem more likely, as is indeed supported by the plethora of early papyrus texts with inorganic additional lines; and one is entitled to ask why the resulting texts contain so many minor oddities, which would surely have been tidied up in any process of this kind. The theory faces the same problems as the memorial transmission posited by G. S. Kirk, cogently refuted by A. Parry ('Have we Homer's *Iliad*?', *YCS* 20 [1966], 175–216). Also, my linguistic researches (n. 2, and n. 33, p. 14 with n. 19, p. 17 with n. 28) have shown that the texts were fixed at different linguistic stages—a most unlikely outcome for any process other than either dictation or fixation in writing. Nagy's theory is followed by Foley (n. 49), pp. 21–31, who believes that the 'wild' papyri are different versions rather than merely replete with inorganic plus-verses (p. 26). He also misses the fact that other poems in the tradition survive (p. 25), and states that the Alexandrians knew 131 separate editions of Homer (pp. 24, 28). This rests on a misunderstanding of T. W. Allen's statistics for how often the editions *κατὰ πόλεις* and *κατ’ ἄνδρα* are cited.

⁶⁴ See Powell (n. 7). Again, I am not convinced by Nagy's argument (n. 6, pp. 35–6) that, since extant early hexameter inscriptions are designed to represent the object on which they are engraved as speaking ('I am the cup of Nestor'), writing was used *only* to record verse of that kind. Did no Greeks have any knowledge of the written literature of the Phoenicians from whom they adapted the alphabet and learned the letter-names?

⁶⁵ Lord (n. 9), esp. p. 44.

⁶⁶ On the probable influence of the latter on Homer, see W. Burkert, *The Orientalizing Revolution*, trans. M. E. Pinder and W. Burkert (Cambridge, MA, 1992), pp. 114–20.

⁶⁷ For the theory that the same person who adapted the alphabet did so in order to take down by dictation the Homeric poems, see Powell (n. 5).

⁶⁸ A. B. Lord, 'Homer, Parry and Huso', *American Journal of Archaeology* 52 (1948), 34–44, esp. p. 42 (reprinted in Parry [n. 1], p. 476; cf. Lord [n. 8], p. 12).

Odyssey are shown in a relation to their rulers idealized from the rulers' point of view. It is usually assumed⁶⁹ that the Homeric poems support an aristocratic ideology. I disagree; it is monarchy that appears most prominently in both epics. In the *Iliad* Agamemnon misuses his power, and in the *Odyssey* Odysseus regains his kingdom from a bunch of aristocratic usurpers. I suspect that a king or prince had two such epics recorded in writing because of the ideological support which the epics of this singer—Homer—could offer to traditional images of authority. This was precisely the time—the eighth century—when the weakly rooted Dark-Age monarchies, seeking legitimacy from oral-traditional memories of, and fictions about, Mycenaean dynasties, were being successfully challenged by new aristocratic élites.⁷⁰ The written transcripts were preserved on Chios among the Homeridae. Guilds of rhapsodes performed parts of them from memorization, but the Homeric epics enjoyed only a limited popularity until the time when, in the sixth century, monarchs like Pisistratus, seeking to buttress their own autocratic rule against the claims of the aristocracy, revived and popularized them. The Pisistratids procured a copy in order to regulate the sequence of rhapsodic performances at Athens. This Athenian set of rolls, probably written in the Ionic alphabet, was far from the only channel through which the poems were transmitted to Alexandria.⁷¹ Yet, despite all the complexities of transmission, we can still identify the text of an archetype, because Parry's words still hold true:⁷² 'the seeming vagaries of the manuscript tradition accord with the processes of oral poetry and thus bear witness of their faithfulness'.⁷³

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⁶⁹ E.g. I. Morris, 'The use and abuse of Homer', *CA* 5 (1986), 81–138.

⁷⁰ On early kingship, see P. Carlier, *La Royauté en Grèce avant Alexandre* (Paris, 1984), esp. pp. 195–214 on Homer; J. Lenz, *Kings and the Ideology of Kingship in Early Greece* (Diss. Columbia, 1993).

⁷¹ For a fuller account of my view of the transmission, see (n. 33), pp. 20–37.

⁷² Parry (n. 1), p. 353, n. 1.

⁷³ This paper began at a Symposium on Homer, organized by Peter Bing, in honour of A. B. Lord, which was held at the University of Pennsylvania in 1983. Successive larval stages appeared at UCLA in 1987, at the Conference on Oral Literature, Department of English, University of California, Berkeley, organized by J. D. Niles, in 1988, and at the congress of the Fédération Internationale des Etudes Classiques in Pisa, 1989. The butterfly emerged in 1996, translated into red, white, and green, at a conference (organized by F. Montanari) on Homeric commentaries at the University of Genoa, but in red, white, and blue at a panel on Homeric performance arranged by S. Reece at the APA Annual Meeting in New York (the manuscript was closed early in that year). To the organizers and audiences on those occasions, to all who have ever discussed these questions with me, and to *CQ*'s reader, I extend my thanks. But my greatest debt is of course to the late Albert Lord, whose experience, insights, and friendship I will always miss.