

## HOMER AND WRITING

### Some Reflections on H. Erbse's 'Beiträge zum Verständnis der Odyssee'

It was inevitable that Professor Erbse's discussion of oral poetry in his excellent book should provoke a response from British or American scholars, and the present article is indeed a fulfilment of that certainty. This is unfortunate in one sense, for in the following pages I shall fasten on the only part of the book with which I am in serious disagreement. Erbse has contributed enormously to our understanding of the *Odyssey*, both in his close observation of detail and by providing a model of interpretive methodology. I wish that space permitted me a fair appraisal of all the book's contributions, thus balancing, and indeed far outweighing, the generally adversative position I shall take in respect to one brief section of it. Suffice it to say that the focus and direction of this article are in strong disproportion to what I consider the value and accomplishments of *Beiträge zum Verständnis der Odyssee*.

Within a long and fruitful essay on the end of the *Odyssey*, Professor Erbse takes up the question of oral poetry (pp. 178-188), and asserts that the Homeric poems were composed with the aid of writing. His contention rests on three lines of argument.

1. It is false to assert or imply that Homeric diction is composed entirely, or even mostly, of unchanging, fixed units, all inherited from the past, and always mechanically combined according to an unalterable prosody without variation or deeper reason. Examples are cited from Parry and Hainsworth to prove the point. It is, of course, true. Moreover, there are many formulae, claims Erbse, which, however oft-repeated, were probably minted by Homer himself (e.g. Penelope's characteristic *κακοῖλιον οὐκ ὀνομαστήν*). In fact, nothing short of linguistic evidence can prove the antiquity of a formula, and sure cases of this are notoriously rare. Further, the amount of formular variation is so great as to offend seriously against the rule of economy. A. Dihle's pronouncement on Hesiod is cited as applicable to Homer: "Der Anteil untraditioneller, lediglich nach dem Muster mündlicher Formeln gebildeter Ausdrücke und die Häufigkeit der metrischen Verschiebung ist so groß, daß man die Variationsbreite am besten mit schriftlicher Abfassung der Gedichte erklären kann. In mündlicher Dichtung wäre dieses Verfahren allzu unökonomisch."<sup>1</sup>

Finally, there are many indices of lateness in the epic language, such as quantitative metathesis and loss of digamma. In all of this Erbse sees a single determinant, namely the poet's own dominant influence in the invention and control of his diction. He enjoyed the freedom to manipulate, change, substitute

1. A. Dihle, *Homerprobleme*, Opladen 1970, 127; Erbse 188.

and compose as can only be found in literature of the written word. For Erbse, the natural conclusion is "daß der Autor des älteren Gedichtes (Homer) mit dem ererbten Schatz der Wortverbindungen sehr frei und eigenwillig umgegangen ist" (182).

2. Erbse challenges the claims of modern oral poetry to serve as a binding analogy to the Greek epic. For him, the differences in quality forbid the equation. The modern poets can spin out a tale of moderate competence and occasional great length by the process of improvisation, but the end product is a loose-jointed, paratactic story of no high artistic merit – the predictable result of the processes of its composition: extemporaneous delivery, play of analogy and association, ornamentation, repeated use of traditional themes. But while there are traces of all this in the Iliad and Odyssey, these poems belong to an entirely different order of merit. In fact, the surpassing excellence of Homer cannot be derived from the compositional techniques observed and recorded by Parry and Lord. The Homeric poems show complex structures, fine-spun, extensive and sustained thematic coordination, retardation, foreshadowing, and penetrating delineation of character. In short, oral composition produces one kind of poetry, but the Iliad and Odyssey are of a different (and superior) kind. The proper inference can only be that the latter were composed by a literate poet with the aid of writing.

A new question then forces itself: why so many similarities between Greek epic and the modern poems? And more crucially, why is Homer's diction so heavily formulaic (even admitting the amount of idiosyncratic variation claimed for it)? Erbse's answer is that Homer occupies a stage of transition. He used the only poetic language available to him. But he refined that inheritance to a level of mastery to be achieved only with the aid of writing, with the opportunities for reflection, pause, contemplation and revision which only that medium could afford. Erbse boldly concludes (187): "Wer seine (Homers) poetischen Formeln unter Verrechnung seiner bewußten künstlerischen Absicht als Zeugnis echter *Oral Poetry* auffaßt, ist das Opfer einer genialen Täuschung."

3. Erbse rejects the theory that the epics were orally composed and initially so transmitted. He finds it inconceivable that oral composition should so quickly turn into recitation. Hence, poems orally conveyed would quickly have been altered beyond recognition. But the unmistakable central conceptions and organized structures of the Iliad and Odyssey attest that they represent, on the whole, the more or less finished works of the composer(s), and that they were not subjected to the large-scale interference that verbal transmission would surely have exposed them to.

I will address myself in the main to Erbse's first two arguments. I want to emphasize at the outset that while I am in disagreement with him on several important matters, I nevertheless concur strongly with him on others, and that I am not convinced, nor shall I try to prove, that Homer was an oral poet.

To proceed to the first issue, the nature of Homeric diction. The following points are to be made.

The pressure toward economy coexists in constant tension with the generation of new expressions. Old formulae die out and are replaced by the new. Neither Parry nor Lord ever claimed that the Greek epic diction was in a state of

evolution toward total uniformity and thrift. It is true that duplicate formulae are forced by the rule of economy into immediate and intense competition, but invention never ceases. How much prodigality is compatible with the demands of oral composition? We do not know the answer to this question. Dihle's inference from Hesiod's "uneconomical procedure" is a guess and nothing more. *We must also distinguish where in the systems parsimony is at its most austere, and where it is relaxed.* I will return to this below.

In connection with the matter of thrift, Erbse emphasizes the variety and flexibility of Homeric formulae. But we must not minimize cases of the reverse. What are we to conclude from the large number of phrases that are fixed and unchanging, and from the severe economy of the epithet systems for certain nouns and proper names? It seems that the facts about these need to be restated. To quote Parry himself:

"It is the system of formulas, as we shall see, which is the only true means by which we can come to see just how the singer made his verses; but we are interested in it now solely as a means of measuring the schematization of the poet's style. There are in such a measuring two factors, that of length and that of thrift. The length of a system consists very obviously in the number of formulas which make it up. The thrift of a system lies in the degree in which it is free of phrases which, having the same metrical value and expressing the same idea, could replace one another. What the length and thrift of a system of formulas are can best be explained by describing one of the most striking cases in Homer, that of a system of noun-epithet formulas for gods and heroes, in the nominative. All the chief characters of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, if their names can be fitted into the last half of the verse along with an epithet, have a noun-epithet formula in the nominative, beginning with a simple consonant, which fills the verse between the trochaic caesura of the third foot and the verse-end: for instance, *πολύτλας δῖος Ὀδυσσεύς*. It is the number of different formulas of this type, well above fifty, which makes the length of this system. But besides that there are in only a very few cases more than one such formula for a single character, though many of them are used very often, as *πολύτλας δῖος Ὀδυσσεύς*, which is found 38 times, *θεὰ γλαυκῶπις Ἀθήνη* 50 times, *Ποσειδάων ἐνοσίχθων* 23 times. To be exact, in a list of 37 characters who have formulas of this type, which includes all those having any importance in the poems, there are only three names which have a second formula which could replace the first."<sup>2</sup>

Thus: when the poet is thrifty, he is so to an exceedingly high degree. Parry says again:

"...the repeated use of a phrase means not only that the poet is following a fixed pattern of words, it means equally that he is denying himself all other ways of expressing the idea. This may seem a very trivial point to make, if one has in mind only a few scattered formulas, none of them used more than a few times. But when one has even a single phrase used, for instance as is *τὸν (τήν) δ' ἡμείβετ' ἔπειτα*, 48 times in the *Iliad* and 24 times in the

2. The Making of Homeric Verse. The Collected Papers of Milman Parry, edited by Adam Parry, Oxford 1971, 276 ff.

*Odyssey*, it is as if Homer wished to tell us how little use he has for all other ways of expressing the idea, which we must suppose to be very numerous. Then, when one multiplies the case of the single formula by all those which are to be found in the two poems, and which require the 250 pages of C.E. Schmidt's *Parallel-Homer*<sup>2</sup> for their listing, one has the statement of a thrift of expression which it is rather hard, perhaps, for us to understand."<sup>3</sup>

If, as Erbse urges, large-scale variation was an important and conscious ingredient of Homer's poetic activity, why did he leave such systems untouched? The argument that his diction was in the process of transition to a written idiom will not save the day, for the solidified phraseology is too extensive to be so easily dismissed. And even where we cannot establish a high degree of thrift, the conclusions drawn by Erbse are not necessarily justified. In fact, thrift and lack of it need to be more closely defined. Again, Parry suggests the proper caution and correct methodology:

"In the case of this system, as in that of other formulas, such as those of the types *πολύμητις Ὀδυσσεύς* and *διὸς Ὀδυσσεύς*, the length and the thrift of the system are striking enough to be sure proof that only the very smallest part of it could be the work of one poet. But for the greater number of systems which are found in the diction of the Homeric poems we cannot make such sure conclusions, since their length is rarely so great and their thrift never so striking. This does not mean that the proof by means of the length and thrift of the system is possible only in the case of the noun-epithet formulas. It is clear without need of further search that the greater part of the system quoted above must be traditional, and that the type of the formula and the words *ἀτὰρ ἐπεὶ* at the beginning of the verse are surely so. But one can see that an attempt made in this fashion to see just how much of Homer's diction had been handed down to him could give only very partial results, even if the task were not of an impossible length, as it is. What we must look for is, more simply, the degree to which the diction of poetry outside the epos can become schematized. If, having gauged the systematization of Homer's verse and of that which we know to have been written in the individual style of single poets, we find a difference which forbids any comparison, we shall know that Homer's poetry was not made in the same way as was that of later poets."<sup>4</sup>

Therefore: the notion of Homer consciously loosening and enriching formulaic structures will perhaps account for cases where variation and lack of economy can be established, but even here we must not give ourselves over immediately to inferences based on impression and without the control of method. Lack of thrift is a delicate criterion. Parry was obviously aware, and indeed emphasized, that Homer's diction is neither uniformly formulaic nor consistently economical. But he correctly emphasized (and demonstrated) that even the looser repetition is of an extent and consistency that cannot be paralleled in any literature known to have been composed with the aid of writing.

3. Ibid. 279.

4. Ibid. 277 f.

Something else: the more fixed the system, and the more unvarying the repetition, the less sensitive it is to the subtle demands of context, emphasis and shading. Cases of the sort are too numerous to mention. Worse yet, Homeric formulae are not infrequently inappropriate and sometimes plain wrong. The Iliad and Odyssey have no small number of formula mistakes<sup>5</sup>. Eumaios chops firewood with an axe described as *νηλέϊ χαλκῷ* (ξ 418)<sup>6</sup>. A repeated line in the Cyclops episode reverses the position of the ship's rudder (ι 483)<sup>7</sup>. Examples could be multiplied almost indefinitely. These errors respond best to the explanation that they are caused by the pressure of oral recitation. The poet had neither the time nor the inclination to invent a new expression on the spot, or to think of a new epithet. He made do with the phraseology already stamped out, and neither he nor his audience was inclined to examine the offending words more closely. If the poet, in Erbse's own words, "mit dem ererbten Schatz der Wortverbindungen sehr frei und eigenwillig umgegangen ist," why did he accept these unbending systems, especially when they resisted finer nuance or even led to outright error? In a word, *why is the poet's procedure so inconsistent?*

I repeat: none of this invalidates Erbse's claim of much conscious and precise manipulation of formulae in the Iliad and Odyssey. On the other hand, there are fantastically extensive and economical (i.e. unvarying) systems, and also striking instances, neither few nor isolated, of bad composition where the imperfections look like the sort endemic to oral poetry. There is no getting around it, we are faced with an enigma: on the one hand, elasticity and *callida iunctura*; on the other, rigidity and imprecision, and each extreme representing the inherent potential of formulaic usage for better or worse. For Erbse, Homer's excellence can derive only from the use of writing; the highly refined systems and formula inadequacies point to oral performance. What theory will resolve the paradox?

Erbse believes the number of formulae invented by Homer to be quite large. He writes (179-80): "Es ist heute unbestritten, daß die vorhomerische *Oral poetry* einen großen Schatz formelhafter Wendungen ausgebildet hat. Diese allgemeine Feststellung darf aber nicht zu dem Schluß führen, eine Formel der homerischen Sprache ... müsse ererbt sein, nur weil sie häufig in unseren Epen belegt ist." This is correct. He also suggests that Homer would be inclined to repeat formula of his own stamp just as he did those learned from others. A sure distinction (in the absence of linguistic criteria) between traditional and personal formulae is therefore impossible. This, too, is right, although both truths are admitted, indeed emphasized, by students of oral poetry themselves. Of this, more below.

But Erbse is encouraged by these considerations to estimate the number of Homeric innovations as very high. Three arguments confirm his impression: his sensible restrictions on the definition of the formula<sup>8</sup>, the observation of striking and unusual expressions (e.g. *οἶόν τε κρομόιοι λοπὸν κάτα ἰσχαλείοι*, τ 233), and the claim that a great poet would find room to express his own powers of invention.

5. Cf. F. Combellack, Some Formulaic Illogicalities in Homer, TAPA 96, 1965, 41-65.

6. It might be argued that *νηλέϊ χαλκῷ* carries at least a marginal appropriateness here because a pig is about to be sacrificed. But 'pitiless bronze', used with an implication of the sort, would be sentimental and melodramatic, quite contrary to the poet's usual attitude.

7. For discussion, see Fenik, *Studies in the Odyssey*, Wiesbaden 1974, 124 ff.

8. 180 ff.

But even granting all this, I have the impression that Erbse estimates the number of Homer's personal formulations above the reasonable limits of probability (he suggests no percentages). The diction reveals such a high degree of organization that it seems more realistic to presume a strong plurality of inherited formulae in the repertoire of any single poet, whatever his powers of creation. Here again we turn to Parry. One assertion was already quoted above. Referring to the noun-epithet formulae πολύμητις Ὀδυσσεύς and δῖος Ὀδυσσεύς, he says: "The length and the thrift of the system is striking enough to be sure proof that only the very smallest part of it could be the work of one poet."<sup>9</sup> He states the case more fully at another place:

"Finally, how could one man even have made a beginning of the technique of the diction as a whole in which the various types of formulas accord with one another so well? Indeed, the more one studies the formulas in Homer and the artifices of their use, the more one sees what efforts have gone into their making. One may well say that the single series of formulas *πάθεν ἄλγεα, ἄλγεα πάσχει*, and so on, is by itself far beyond the power of any one man. *For the formulas are not only too ingenious to be the work of the one poet of the Iliad and Odyssey; they are also too good* (italics mine). The epithets, the metaphorical expressions, the phrases for the binding of clauses, the formulas for running the sentence over from one verse into another, the groupings of words and phrases within the clause and within the verse, all this is many times beyond whatever supreme creative genius for words one could imagine for the poet Homer."<sup>10</sup>

Here, then, is a deduction from the same evidence, but absolutely contrary to Erbse's opinion. For Parry, both the systematization *and the quality* of Homeric formulae forbid assigning much of the credit to any single poet. How a bard *used* the system is of course another matter. Parry's evidence and reasoning compel me to weigh the probabilities strongly in his favor. At the very least, caution is in order, especially when either theory is brought to bear on the interpretation of a specific text.

More important is this: a high percentage of new coinage in Homer's language is no evidence against the poems' oral quality. In the poetry studied by Parry and Lord, the diction of each singer is apparently both heavily formulaic and unmistakably distinct<sup>11</sup>: Parry wrote:

"All my observations of the poetry so far have, without exception, pointed to the conclusion that a singer who learns a song from another singer makes his own version more or less from the same themes ... *but almost altogether out of his own verses* (italics mine)<sup>12</sup>.

I take it this means a high percentage of personal formulae or combinations of the same. Lord provides more information:

9. Making of Homeric Verse, 277.

10. Ibid. 314. Cf. D. Page, History and the Homeric Iliad, Berkeley—Los Angeles 1959, 225: "Common sense insists that the time required for the development of this vast, intricate and highly economical phraseology is to be reckoned in generations, perhaps in hundreds of years."

11. See Lord's strictures against the notion that Yugoslav poetry is less formulaic than Homer: "Homer as Oral Poet", HSCP 72, 1967, 16 ff.

12. From Parry's unpublished field notes, dated December 3, 1934, and quoted by Lord, Homer as Oral Poet 14, footnote 35; also printed in 'Making of Homeric Verse' 442.

"I have tried to distinguish two levels of formula. One is that of the individual singer. *Here, it seems to me, the formula is at its purest* (italics mine). It serves a need for a particular singer, and we are able to see that need being fulfilled in our analysis. A phrase which that singer uses may be a formula for him, but not for another singer, who may not use it at all, even though he may be aware of it ... The second level is that of the regional formula. It is one that is used by a majority of singers in a region."<sup>13</sup>

The reader will have noticed what seems to be a contradiction between Parry's theory about Homer and his own observation in the field: an apparently high degree of individuality in the diction of modern singers, but a conjectured low degree of the same for the Iliad and Odyssey. It is hard to know what to make of this without first-hand acquaintance with the Yugoslav material. One's first guess would be that the Yugoslav diction is less formulaic than Homer's, but Lord denies that this is so (above, footnote 11). I leave it at that, except to point out that even if Parry guessed wrong about Homer, and Erbse is right, the case for writing is still far from proved. Indeed, the modern evidence suggests the opposite. Therefore, a high percentage of original expressions in Homer would be in itself no index of literacy at all.

Finally, Erbse's generous estimate of the number of new fabrications in the Iliad and Odyssey gets no real support from indices of lateness in the language. This is a criterion that was abused badly by the analysts, has been resurrected in connection with the similes<sup>14</sup>, and has received strong and appropriate censure from Kirk<sup>15</sup>. What does 'late' mean? Can we seriously claim to date linguistic development in this period within a range of twenty five years? Of course we cannot. Morphological change and metrical variation can be 'late' and still have been introduced into the epic language a generation before our epics were composed. How many poems came into being within even this limited stretch of time? How many recitations and borrowings occurred? To turn Erbse's own mode of argument against him, how can we possibly distinguish between innovations introduced by Homer and those brought into usage ten years before he began his serious work? Much can be granted: it is possible that the life-expectancy of single formulae was considerably less than we conventionally estimate; perhaps the epic diction, for all its intricacy and heavy stylization, was always in a state of more intense flux than we imagine. Still, linguistics delivers no reliable criterion for measuring, or even guessing at, the number of formulae created by the poet of the Iliad or Odyssey.

In sum, Erbse's observations on the language and style of Homer do not accomplish their purpose. One can admit them all and still believe legitimately in an oral Homer. Indeed, the evidence he adduces is all incorporated in the sophisticated scholarship on oral poetry that prevails today. He is certainly right in calling attention to the variety, flexibility and inventiveness of Homeric diction, and in chastizing facile generalizations about relentless formular constraints. But these last are conceptions and termini introduced only by the more careless students

13. "Homer as Oral Poet" 29-30.

14. Most notably by G. Shipp, *Studies in the Language of Homer*, Cambridge 1972. For a different (and I think better) analysis of the implications of late language in the similes, see C. Moulton, *Similes in the Iliad*, *Hermes* 102, 1974, 381-85.

15. "Objective Dating Criteria in Homer", *MusHelv.* 17, 1960, 189-205.

of the subject. The above quotations will show how finely differentiated Parry's own thinking was. And there is always the other side of the coin: cases aplenty of systematic regulation and inaccuracy that belie the notion of a poet always more or less in full control of what he could put down. If the theory of oral composition is to be attacked, the assault must take place against the theory of the formula itself: what it is, what constitutes proof of its existence, and what degree of formula density demonstrates oral quality. Erbse raises some justifiable objections along these lines (180-81), but many pitfalls await the unwary, and there is a formidable mass of observation and theory amassed by Lord and his school that must be assimilated before one is equal to the task<sup>16</sup>.

Erbse's second major argument for a literate Homer is the sheer excellence of the Iliad and Odyssey in comparison with the modern productions. I share his discomfort at making esthetic judgments on the basis of translations and no deep familiarity with the Yugoslav traditions. Still, most of us have no choice if we are to hazard an opinion at all, and I think Erbse's evaluation is accurate. Reference was made above to what he finds sets Homer apart: finely conceived large structures, sophisticated play of theme and motif, coordination of the monumental narrative by a powerful central conception, penetrating delineation of character. For Erbse, these are qualities to be associated only with literacy and the reflective modes of composition associated with it. It is these, too, that make Homer responsive to traditional categories of analysis<sup>17</sup>.

This is basically the same argument advanced by A. Lesky in his important article 'Mündlichkeit und Schriftlichkeit im homerischen Epos'<sup>18</sup>, where he attempted, with his characteristic broad vision, to account for all of Homer, the surpassing greatness of the poems as well as their evidence of oral quality. Lesky shares with Erbse the major premise that high poetic achievement is coincident only with literate craftsmanship. There is indeed a strong *prima facie* case for the equation, for all the modern oral poetry made available to us by Parry, Lord and Bowra<sup>19</sup> falls roughly within the same range. Some is better and some worse, but none seems to approach, even remotely, the greatness of the Iliad and Odyssey. Here is an impressive and unequivocal testimony that cannot be ignored. I believe it puts proponents of an oral Homer on the defensive.

And yet — I cannot help but wonder if even the extensive corpus of oral literature made known to us in the last fifty years exhaustively defines the range of that genre's possible accomplishments. I launch myself into this sea of speculation with considerable misgiving, for I shall be propounding hypotheses for which I have neither solid evidence nor firm commitment. Still, let it be said.

Two things give me pause: (1) the abundance of 'oral' characteristics in

16. See Lord's important article, "Homer as Oral Poet" (above, footnote 11), most especially pages 15-34. Particularly relevant to Erbse's arguments are Lord's remarks on the difficulty for literate poets to imitate successfully genuine oral verse (15-16), and his suggestions on methodology and quantitative analysis (17-34).

17. Cf. Hainsworth, *The Criticism of an Oral Homer* JHS 90, 1970, 98: "The art of the episode certainly resembles that of oral epic in other lands, and we should be prudent at this level to consider carefully the assumptions of our criticism. But the greater architecture of the poems appears to be unlike typical oral poetry. It is more like drama, and therefore more amenable to the canons of orthodox criticism. For all the proliferation of comparative studies, Homer remains a very special case."

18. *Festschrift Kralik* (1954) 1-9, reprinted in A. Lesky, *Gesammelte Schriften* (1966) 63-71.

19. "Heroic Poetry", London 1961.



Homer, including those that seem to be associated with oral delivery — improprieties, typological mistakes, certain complicated, unvarying, and prodigiously economical noun-epithet systems. Could a literate poet have reproduced these? Lord's experience suggests that he could not<sup>20</sup>. Would a literate poet have wanted to? For here not even the first step is taken toward that variation which Erbse considers so characteristic of Homeric style. (2) Paradoxically, Homer's excellence suggests to me a conclusion opposite that of Lesky and Erbse. I start with an observation of Friedrich August Wolf:

"Non commemorabo, quam apte sint in artibus Graecorum omnes gradus et successus nexi inter se et alii aliis praemuniti, ut, cur quisque sequatur deinceps, ex superiore via et antecessione causarum intelligi possit."<sup>21</sup>

What I am getting at is this: is it possible that there existed in early Greece an epic tradition of greater vitality, wider extension, closer organization and more rigorous professional control than any we know today? Was the training of singers, and the custodianship of the tradition and trade under the critical and jealous eye of a professional guild?<sup>22</sup> And did all this create standards of the highest order, so that Homer was equipped from the start not only with genius, but with learned tools of his craft far superior to those of his modern counterparts? To reduce the question to an over-pointed formulation: could Homer, reborn in Hercegovina, produce an Iliad? Almost assuredly not, because the tradition, training and models would be lacking.

This is not to assume that eighth century Ionia was full of Iliads and Odysseys. Our epics are most likely the best that were ever produced. It does, however, seem reasonable to guess that Homer started with the advantages of learned techniques, and models for emulation, that are denied his less fortunate epigoni. Surely the Iliad and Odyssey represent a leap of genius, and there is no denying that the leap might have been so mighty as to reach a dimension of accomplishment undreamed of before. And if this was so, then Erbse and Lesky could well be right. But if, as seems more likely, that quantum jump was made possible by inherited advantages, then the other theory is better. It helps account for the totality of the Greek epos, both its artistic supremacy and the deeply ingrained oral features. But of course, the weak link in this speculation (a fragile one indeed) is the absence of any known parallel to prove that oral literature can really attain such a level.

But we are in a no-man's land of guessing and without the control of evidence. Perhaps the real value of such conjecture is to remind ourselves of how little we know about the historical and cultural genesis of the Homeric epics.

Or to put it another way, and to risk a radical question: might the comparison of modern oral literatures already have reached the limits of its usefulness? They do not provide us with a duplicate of the circumstances under which the Homeric poems were composed and/or written down. We do not know

20. Again I call attention to Lord's remarks on the difficulty of imitating genuine oral style — above, footnote 16.

21. "Prolegomena ad Homerum" repr. Hildesheim 1963, 85.

22. The suggestion is Parry's, *Making of Homeric Verse* 445. It is notorious that at Odyssey  $\rho$  383-85 the bards are included among the  $\delta\eta\mu\omega\epsilon\rho\gamma\omega\iota$ .

what happened in early Greece, and modern Yugoslavia cannot tell us. Lord himself assures us that the relation between literacy and the demise of the South-Slavic oral tradition has been over-simplified, and indeed the causes of that decline remain obscure<sup>23</sup>. In any case, it seems better to guess that the two situations are more different than alike.

The modern songs themselves are also so different that they cannot furnish interpretive categories that account adequately for what the Greek epic presents. This is not to deny that they are wonderfully helpful. There is much in Homer that responds better to concepts derived from oral poetry than to anything else known. The school of Milman Parry has given us instruments of inestimable value, and classical scholars will ignore them to their certain peril. But the point seems to have been reached where we understand the so called parallels better than we do the Iliad and Odyssey, and here lurks another danger. We are falling into the trap of allowing the similarities between ancient and modern heroic poetry to blur the differences that set them apart. This is occurring at the expense of Homer himself, and Professor Erbse is right to call us back from the brink. It is on this point that I wish to close.

Erbse's strictures are salutary (184): "Wer möchte auch glauben, daß sich das Schaffen Homers mit der Routine eines Kartenspielers vergleichen lasse, an die A. van Gennepe erinnert, um die Technik eines Gusslars verständlich zu machen?" Who indeed, but one so totally immersed in a theory as to ignore the realities of the Homeric text? Yet Van Gennepe is not alone. There is a disquieting tendency in oral poetry studies to reduce Homer to the level of the comparanda, to allow him only those accomplishments discernable in the modern analogues. J. Tate summarized Van Groningen's description like this: "Homer's aim is the perfection of the parts rather than the integrity of the whole; he thinks more of variety and abundance than of qualitative selection and the orderly disposition of the parts. To attack the unity of either poem because of the paratactic features, or to defend their unity on the ground that each is an organic and well-planned structure, betrays a concern for literary canons which are irrelevant in the field of early Greek literature."<sup>24</sup> This was written in 1937. Shall we claim the same after Schadewaldt's *Iliasstudien*?

Of the creator of Achilles, Hector, Odysseus and a host of others, J. Notopoulos asserted that Homer knows no individuals, because his style is rooted in his way of thinking: "... he interprets the world of men through generic typology."<sup>25</sup> Even Lord seems willing to recognize little more in Homer than what we might expect from one of his own competent singers: "An oral poet spins out a tale; he likes to ornament, if he has the ability to do so, as Homer, of course, did. ... The Story is there and Homer tells it to the end. He tells it fully and with a leisurely tempo."<sup>26</sup>

23. Lord, *Homer as Oral Poet*, 1 ff.

24. CR 51, 1937, 175, summarizing B.A. Van Groningen, *Paratactische Compositie in de oudste Grieksche Literatuur*.

25. "The Generic and Oral Composition in Homer", TAPA 81, 1950, 33. Sensibly, Notopoulos drew back from this extreme position in later writings, e.g. "Homer and Geometric Art" *Athena* 61, 1957, 73.

26. "The Singer of Tales" 148, quoted by Erbse (184). But note Lord's careful words on the use of ornamentation by oral poets: "Homer as Oral Poet" 45. That same article also shows a laudable reserve in arguing what *not* to attribute to Homer: 34 ff.

These quotations speak for themselves and there is no need to belabor them further. They are not adequate descriptions of Homeric epic. But neither should we allow ourselves the luxury of assuming that we have observed or defined the artistic limitations of oral poetry. It still seems possible to me (on the grounds given above) that Homer drew on an oral tradition which was, for whatever reasons, one of richness and accomplishment matched by none of those now accessible to us. If that was the case, *then the dividing line between Mündlichkeit and Schriftlichkeit remains one that we still cannot accurately draw.*

I am not optimistic that the issue can ever be resolved. The solution will come, if at all, only from deeper study of Homer himself and the judicious use of all other evidence available to us. But most of all, we need to know Homer better. Professor Erbse's book is an excellent example of what needs to be done. It teaches us much about the workings of Homeric poetry, and lays out firm and reasonable interpretive methods. It would be frivolous to deny that interpretation of the poems would benefit enormously from sure knowledge of their origins, but we do not have that knowledge, and the guessing to which we have recourse is no useful substitute.

The problem of when and how the Iliad and Odyssey were reduced to writing, and what role writing played in their composition, thus remains desperate. None of the theories propounded so far convinces: dictation (Lord), oral transmission of a fixed text (Kirk), or the use of writing in imitation of oral style (Erbse). None is entirely believable, none grows naturally out of the evidence available to us, and none accounts for it all. I have nothing better to suggest. I can only insist, pessimistically, that we are still far from an answer. The deep mystery surrounding the event, and our inability to construct even a plausible theory on the basis of ancient and modern evidence, suggest to me that decisive factors in the writing down, and in the composition, have not yet even been guessed at.