CHAPTER 1

Homer and Questions of Oral Poetry

Parry and Lord studied oral poetry, and their work provides the key to the primary Homeric question of *performance*, as we are about to see. It can even be said that their work on oral poetry permanently changed the very nature of any Homeric question.

The term *oral poetry* may not fully capture the concept behind it, in view of the semantic difficulties conjured up by both individual words, *oral* and *poetry*. Still, the composite term *oral poetry* has a historical validity in that both Parry and Lord had used it to designate the overall concept that they were developing. I propose to continue the use of this term, with the understanding that *oral* is not simply the opposite of *written* and that the *poetry* of *oral poetry* is here meant in the broadest possible sense of the word, in that *poetry* in the context of this expression is not necessarily to be distinguished from *singing* or *song*.[1] If indeed *oral* is not to be understood simply as the opposite of *written*, it is even possible to speak of *oral literature*, a term actually used and defended by Albert Lord.[2] Where I draw the line is at the usage of "write" instead of "compose" as applied to figures like Homer. There is more to be said about this usage presently.

Pertinent to this question is a work by Ruth Finnegan, entitled "What Is Oral Literature Anyway?"[3] We may note the contentious tone in this question, as it is framed and developed by Finnegan. It

1. Cf. N 1990a:17–51.

2. See Lord 1991:2–3, 16. On the disadvantages of the term, see Martin (1989:4), who also quotes Herzfeld 1985b:202: "Even the recognition of folk texts as 'oral literature' . . . merely projected an elegant oxymoron: by defining textuality in terms of 'literature,' a purely verbocentric conception, it left arbitration in the control of 'high culture.'"

3. Finnegan 1976.

has to do with her understandable intent, as an anthropologist who specializes in African traditions, to broaden the concept of oral poetry or oral "literature" as developed by Parry and Lord in order to apply it beyond the specific instances studied by them, certainly beyond Homer and beyond Greek civilization. We may also note a downright hostile tone toward the work of Parry and Lord when the same sort of question is invoked by some classicists who seek not a broader application of the term *oral poetry* but rather a discontinuation of any application at all in the case of Homer, let alone any later Greek literature. I write this in an era when scholarly works are produced with titles like *Homer: Beyond Oral Poetry*.[4]

The question of formulating the dichotomy of oral and written seems to me in any case irrelevant to another question, whether Homeric poetry can actually refer to writing. It seems to me self-evident that even an oral tradition can refer to a written tradition without necessarily being influenced by it. I should add in this regard my own conviction that Homeric poetry does indeed refer to the technology of writing, and that such references in no way require us to assume that writing was used for the creation of Homeric poetry. The most striking example is the mention of a diptych containing "baneful signs" (*sḗmata lugrá*) that Bellerophon is carrying to the king of Lycia (*Iliad* 6.168, 176, 178).[5] Another example, to be discussed later on, is a reference made by Homeric poetry to the wording of an imagined epigram commemorating a fallen warrior (*Iliad* 7.89–90).[6]

Having considered the implications of *oral poetry*, let us move to a more precise term, *oral traditional poetry*. I propose to use the concept of *tradition* or *traditional* in conjunction with *oral poetry* in such a way as to focus on the perception of tradition by the given society in which the given tradition operates, not on any perception by the outside observer who is looking in, as it were, on the given tradition. My approach to *tradition* is intended to avoid any situations where "the term is apparently also used (and manipulated?) in an emotive sense, not seldom linked with deeply felt and powerful academic, moral, or political values."[7] ceived in absolute terms wi relative terms by the outsid may seem ancient and imm in fact be contemporary ar empiricist observation.[8] Mo just an inherited system: as life in the here-and-now of larly compelling example o of orally transmitted geneal

> Early British administrators of the great importance att continually discussed in cou one man towards another w the trouble to write down th them for posterity, so that f them in giving judgement. carried out anthropologica were still using the same ge grees now gave rise to man that they were incorrect, wh ments of fact, as records of not agree that the unletter about the past than their o party realized was that in a place which require a cons they are to continue to carr social relationships.[10]

4. Bremer, de Jong, and Kalff 1987.

5. N 1990b: 207. For an archaeological attestation of a writing tablet in the format of a diptych made of boxwood, with ivory hinge, dated to the late fourteenth or early thirteenth century B.C.E., see Bass 1990.

6. See p. 36 below.

7. Finnegan 1991: 106.

8. It is from this perspective that I h e.g., N 1979: 3, and more explicit Peradotto 1990: 100 n. 2. I would own work just given, that there ca traditions, even in different phases tions where the empirical methods termine what aspects of a given tra

9. Cf. N 1990a: 17 n. 2, with biblio

10. Goody and Watt 1968: 32, follo Further discussion can be found in and 188 n. 85.

moral, or political values."[7] Whereas a given tradition may be perceived in absolute terms within a given society, it can be analyzed in relative terms by the outside observer using empirical criteria: what may seem ancient and immutable to members of a given society can in fact be contemporary and ever-changing from the standpoint of empiricist observation.[8] Moreover, I recognize that tradition is not just an inherited system: as with language itself, tradition comes to life in the here-and-now of real people in real situations.[9] A particularly compelling example of the changeability of tradition is the case of orally transmitted genealogies among the Tiv of Nigeria:

> Early British administrators among the Tiv of Nigeria were aware of the great importance attached to these genealogies, which were continually discussed in court cases where the rights and duties of one man towards another were in dispute. Consequently they took the trouble to write down the long lists of names and preserve them for posterity, so that future administrators might refer to them in giving judgement. Forty years later, when the Bohannans carried out anthropological field work in the area, their successors were still using the same genealogies. However, these written pedigrees now gave rise to many disagreements; the Tiv maintained that they were incorrect, while the officials regarded them as statements of fact, as records of what had actually happened, and could not agree that the unlettered indigenes could be better informed about the past than their own literate predecessors. What neither party realized was that in any society of this kind changes take place which require a constant readjustment in the genealogies if they are to continue to carry out their function as mnemonics of social relationships.[10]

7. Finnegan 1991:106.

8. It is from this perspective that I have used the word *tradition* in my previous work as well, e.g., N 1979:3, and more explicitly in N 1990a:57–61, 70–72 (cf. pp. 349, 411). *Pace* Peradotto 1990:100 n. 2. I would add the observation, derived from my reference to my own work just given, that there can be different levels of rigidity or flexibility in different traditions, even in different phases of the same given tradition. Also, that there are situations where the empirical methods of disciplines such as linguistics can be applied to determine what aspects of a given tradition are older or newer.

9. Cf. N 1990a:17 n. 2, with bibliography on the useful concepts of *parole* and *langue*.

10. Goody and Watt 1968:32, following the work of Bohannan 1952; cf. Morris 1986:87. Further discussion can be found in Jensen 1980:98–99 and Thomas 1989:178–179 n. 58 and 188 n. 85.

In sum, there is certainly no need to think of tradition as rigid and unchanging. Still, there is a need to develop empirical criteria for determining what is older and what is newer within tradition, and for the past twenty years or so I have been publishing works that apply historical linguistics as well as other approaches for the purpose of coming to terms with the archaeology, as it were, of tradition. This is just the opposite of romanticizing tradition as a concept.[11] The aim, rather, is to study tradition empirically, and thereby to determine objectively both what is being preserved and what is being changed.

I approach my Homeric Questions by applying the concept of oral traditional poetry to Homer. For this purpose, I find it essential to introduce an inventory of ten further concepts. Each of these ten concepts derives from the necessity of having to confront the reality of performance in oral poetry, either directly in living oral traditions or indirectly in texts that reveal clear traces of such traditions. The centrality of performance to the concept of oral poetry will become apparent as the discussion proceeds.

Some of the terms used in the inventory that follows will be new to those who have not worked with oral poetry. Most of these terms I have taken from the disciplines of linguistics and anthropology. Other concepts that I use may be traditional for classicists but still require some reassessment in terms of oral poetry.

1. FIELDWORK

The fundamental empirical given for the study of oral poetry is the procedure of collecting evidence about the *performance* of living oral traditions as recorded, observed, and described in their native setting. Let us call this procedure fieldwork.[12] "Although much talked about in negative criticism," Lord says in his introduction to *Epic Singers and Oral Tradition,* "living oral-traditional literature is still not very well known, and I try over and over again in the course of this book to acquaint the reader with some of the best of what I have had the privilege to experience and to demonstrate the details of its excellence."[13] Lord spoke from experience,

11. *Pace* Lloyd-Jones (1992:57), who claims that my approach romanticizes tradition; his arguments have been anticipated by the counterarguments in N 1990a:1.

12. For an enlightening introduction to the term, see Netil 1983:6–7, 9.

13. Lord 1991:2.

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and this background of experience is his fieldwork. It is this background that confers on him an authority that the vast majority of his critics who are classicists utterly lack. Paradoxically, Lord's modesty about his experience in fieldwork, which is a salient feature of his scholarship, is matched by the arrogance displayed by those of his critics who at times seem to take a grim sort of pride in their unfamiliarity with nonclassical forms of poetry like the South Slavic oral traditions. It is as if such marvels of the so-called Western world as the Homeric poems should be rescued from those who truly understand the workings of oral traditions. Lord's *Epic Singers and Oral Tradition* lays claim, once and for all, to the legitimacy and importance of exploring the heritage of "Western" literature in oral traditional literature.

2. Synchrony versus Diachrony

The terms *synchrony* and *diachrony* come from linguistics.[14] Fieldwork in the study of oral poetry as it is performed requires a synchronic perspective, for purposes of describing the actual system perpetuated by the tradition. When it comes to delving into the principles of organization underlying the tradition, that is, the reality of cultural continuity, the diachronic perspective is also needed. Techniques of linguistic reconstruction can help explain otherwise opaque aspects of the language as it is current in the tradition: that is to say, the diachronic approach is needed to supplement the synchronic, as well as vice versa.[15]

3. Composition-in-Performance

The synchronic analysis of living oral traditions reveals that composition and performance are in varying degrees aspects of one process. The Homeric text, of and by itself, could never have revealed such a reality. The fundamental statement is by Lord: "An oral poem is composed not *for* but *in* performance."[16]

14. For a useful summary, with bibliography, see Ducrot and Todorov 1979:137–144; cf. N 1990a:4.

15. N 1990b:20–21.

16. Lord 1960:28. My use of the term *performance* is not intended to convey any connotations of a stage presence, as it were, on the part of the performer. I have in mind rather the *performative* dimension of an utterance, as analyzed from an anthropological perspective. For a pragmatic application of the word *performative*, see, for example, Tambiah 1985: 123–166. Cf. Martin 1989:231: "authoritative self-presentation to an audience."

4. DIFFUSION

Both synchronic and diachronic perspectives reveal this aspect of oral tradition, interactive with the aspects of composition and performance. Patterns of diffusion can be either centrifugal or centripetal. (See the discussion in Chapter 2.)[17]

5. THEME

For purposes of this presentation, a working definition of *theme* is *a basic unit of content.*[18]

6. FORMULA

Another working definition, to be debated at length in the discussion that follows: the *formula* is *a fixed phrase conditioned by the traditional themes of oral poetry.*[19] The formula is to the form as the theme is to the content.[20] This formulation presupposes that form and content conceptually overlap. Parry's own definition is worded as follows: the formula is "a group of words which is regularly employed under the same metrical conditions to express a given essential idea."[21]

7. ECONOMY (THRIFT)

As Parry argues, Homeric language tends to be "free of phrases which, having the same metrical value *and expressing the same idea,* could replace one another."[22] This principle of *economy* or *thrift* is an observable reality on the level of performance.[23]

17. The word will not be used in the sense of a "diffusionist" approach, familiar to linguists and folklorists.

18. Cf. N 1990b:9 n. 10, following Lord 1960:68–98; for an altered working definition, see Lord 1991:26–27.

19. N 1990b:29.

20. Cf. Lord 1991:73–74.

21. Parry 1930 [1971:272].

22. Parry 1930 [1971:276] (italics mine).

23. N 1990b:24, following Lord 1960:53.

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8. Tradition versus Innovation

To repeat, oral tradition comes to life in performance, and the here-and-now of each new performance is an opportunity for innovation, whether or not any such innovation is explicitly acknowledged in the tradition.[24]

9. Unity and Organization

In terms of oral poetics, the unity and organization of the Homeric poems is a *result* of the *performance* tradition itself, not a *cause* effected by a *composer* who is above tradition.[25] (Related concepts are unitarians versus analysts, and neoanalysts.)

10. Author and Text

In terms of oral poetics, authorship is determined by the authority of performance and textuality, by the degree of a composition's invariability from performance to performance. The very concept of text can be derived metaphorically from the concept of composition-in-performance.[26]

In the wake of this inventory of ten concepts that I find essential for approaching my Homeric Questions, I also offer, before proceeding any further, a list of ten examples of usage that I find commonly being applied in misleading ways by some contemporary experts in Homeric poetry. My aim is not to quarrel with anyone in particular but rather to promote more precise usage concerning oral poetics in general. The sequence of the following ten examples of what strikes me as misleading usage corresponds roughly to the sequence of the preceding inventory of ten crucial concepts pertaining to oral poetics.

1. "Oral theory."

It is a major misunderstanding, I submit, to speak of "the oral theory" of Milman Parry or Albert Lord. Parry and Lord had investigated the

24. Cf. N 1990a:55–56.

25. N 1979:6–7.

26. N 1990a:53; see further discussion below. It is hazardous to retroject to the ancient world our contemporary notions of the "author"—notably the *individual* author. On the semantic problems of retrojecting our notions of the individual, see Held 1991.

empirical reality of oral poetry, as ascertained from the living traditions of South Slavic oral poetry as well as other living traditions. The existence of oral poetry is a fact, ascertained by way of fieldwork. The application of what we know inductively about oral poetry to the text of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, or to any other text, is not an attempt to prove a "theory" about oral poetry. If we are going to use the word *theory* at all in such a context, it would be more reasonable to say that Parry and Lord had various *theories* about the affinity of Homeric poetry with what we know about oral poetry.

2. "The world of Homer."

To say in Homeric criticism that the "world" or "worldview" that emerges from the structure of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* is the construct of one man at one time and place, or however many men from however many different times and places, risks the flattening out of the process of oral poetic creation, which requires analysis in the dimensions of both diachrony and synchrony.[27] This caveat is relevant to the question of whether the overall perspective of Homeric poetry is grounded in, say, an age dating back to before the middle of the thirteenth century B.C.E. or, alternatively, in the eighth century B.C.E.[28]

3. "Homer + [verb]."

To say in Homeric criticism that "Homer does this" or "the poet intends that" can lead to problems. Not necessarily, but it can.

27. A model for a combined synchronic and diachronic approach is Sherratt 1990. Reacting to Martin's application (1989:7–10), with regard to the problem of Homeric composition/performance, of a wide range of comparative evidence about different kinds of performer-audience interaction, Griffin (1991:5) invokes "the unambiguous evidence, on the subject of Homeric performance, of the Homeric poems," referring to the descriptions of performances like those of Phemios in *Odyssey* 1. One response is to ask this question: how exactly are such performances as those of Phemios "Homeric"? In other words, how does the Homeric representation of poetry correspond to the essence of Homeric poetry itself? Can we simply assume that there is no gap between the two kinds of "poetry"? The results of my own study of the question suggest that there is indeed a gap (see especially N 1990a:21, 14, where I develop the concept of "diachronic skewing").

28. On the world of Homeric poetry in the second millennium B.C.E., see Vermeule 1986, esp. p. 85 n. 28. For the perspective of the eighth century B.C.E., see Morris 1986. Commenting on Moses Finley's title, *The World of Odysseus* (1977), Catenacci (1993:21) suggests that a more apt title would be *The Possible World of Odysseus*, citing further bibliography on theories of "possible worlds."

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Granted, such usage corresponds to the spirit of conventional Greek references to the creation of epic poetry by Homer. For the ancient Greeks, however, Homer was not just the creator of epic par excellence: he was also the culture hero of epic itself.[29] Greek institutions tend to be traditionally retrojected, by the Greeks themselves, each to a protocreator, a culture hero who is credited with the sum total of a given cultural institution.[30] It was a common practice to attribute any major achievement of society, even if this achievement may have been realized only through a lengthy period of social evolution, to the episodic and personal accomplishment of a culture hero who is pictured as having made his monumental contribution in an earlier era of the given society.[31] Greek myths about lawgivers, for example, whether the lawgivers are historical figures or not, tend to reconstruct these figures as the originators of the sum total of customary law as it evolved through time.[32] So also with Homer: he is retrojected as the original genius of epic.[33]

Thus the usage of saying that "Homer does this" or "the poet intends that" may become risky for modern experts if they start thinking of "Homer" in overly personalized terms, without regard for the traditional dynamics of composition and performance, *and* without regard for synchrony and diachrony.[34] To say that "Homer wrote" is the ultimate risk.

Suffice it to note for now that the generic characterizations of Homer and other early poets seem to be a traditional function of the

29. N 1990a:78–81. On the meaning of *Hómeros*, see Chapter 3, pp. 89–90.

30. Cf. Kleingünther 1933.

31. For an illuminating discussion of culture heroes in Chinese traditions, see Raphals 1992:53: Yi invents the bow; Zhu, armor; Xi Zhong, the carriage, Qiao Chui, the boat.

32. N 1985:33, and N 1990a:170, 368.

33. Cf. N 1990a:55, especially with reference to Plato *Ion* 533d–536d. In the Homeric *Hymn to Apollo*, the dramatized first-person speaker claims the identity of Homer; see the detailed discussion in N 1990a:375–377 (expanding on N 1979:8–9) and N 1990b:54 (cf. Clay 1989:53 with n. 111 and p. 55 with n. 116).

34. Carey (1992:285) argues that, "in his approach to Greek literature in general, Nagy overemphasizes the tradition at the expense of the individual." I would counterargue that my approach gives due credit to tradition in contexts where many contemporary classicists overemphasize the individual poet at the expense of tradition; see especially N 1990a: 79–80.

poetry that represents them. This is not to say that the poetic tradition actually creates the poet; rather, the tradition has the capacity to transform even historical figures into generic characters who represent and are represented by the tradition.[35] We may recall the formulation of Paul Zumthor: "Le poète est situé dans son langage plutôt que son langage en lui."[36]

4. "Homer's poetry is artistically superior to all other poetry of his time."

The preeminence of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* as the definitive epics of the Greeks is a historical fact, at least by the fifth century. Or, as can be argued, it is a historical eventuality. The attribution of their preeminence, however, to artistic superiority over other epics is merely an assumption. What little evidence we have about other epics comes from the fragments and ancient plot-outlines of the so-called Cycle. If the poetry of the Cycle were fully attested, it is quite possible that we would conclude that the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* are indeed artistically superior. The question, however, might still remain: by whose standards? The more basic question is not *why* but *how* the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* became preeminent.[37] One available answer, explored further below, is based on the concept of greater *diffusion* for the epic traditions of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* in comparison to other epic traditions.

5. "The formula made the poet say it that way."

Such a requirement of oral poetry is often assumed, without justification, by both proponents and opponents of the idea that Homeric poetry is based on oral poetry. I disagree. To assume that whatever is being meant in Homeric poetry is determined by such formal considerations as formula or meter (as when experts say that the formula or meter made the poet say this or that) is to misunderstand the relationship of form and content in oral poetics. Diachronically,

35. N 1990a:79, in response to Griffith 1983:58 n. 82.

36. Zumthor 1972:68.

37. N 1990a:72 and n. 99, with bibliography.

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38. See a detailed discussion in N

39. N 1990b:18–35.

40. Finnegan 1977.

41. Ibid., 59.

42. Parry 1930 [1971:270].

43. Davidson 1994:62.

the content—let us call it *theme*—determines the form, even if the form affects the content synchronically.[38]

6. "The meter made the poet say it that way."

I suggest that this kind of reasoning stems from misunderstandings of Parry's definition of the formula as "a group of words which is regularly employed under the same metrical conditions to express a given essential idea," which I have already quoted above. I have written at length about the relationship of formula and meter, and I start here by repeating my central argument that formula shaped meter, from a diachronic point of view, rather than the other way around.[39]

A convenient way to examine any possible misunderstandings about the relationship between formula and meter is to consider the attempted refutation of Parry's concept of the formula in Ruth Finnegan's book on oral poetry.[40] Ironically, Finnegan's book seems to be misreading Parry's concept at the very point where it attempts to undermine its validity. In her description of Homeric epithets, Finnegan says that they "are often combined with other formulaic phrases—repeated word-groups—which have the right metrical qualities to fit the [given] part of the line."[41] She adduces the words of Parry himself: "In composing [the poet] will do no more than put together for his needs phrases which he has often heard or used himself, and which, grouping themselves *in accordance with a fixed pattern of thought* [italics mine], come naturally to make the sentence and the verse."[42]

As one critic has noticed, "We see here that Parry is saying much more than Finnegan."[43] The formula is "not just a phrase that the poet is free to choose according to his metrical needs, since the for-

38. See a detailed discussion in N 1990b: 18–35, explaining the results of N 1974.

39. N 1990b: 18–35.

40. Finnegan 1977.

41. Ibid., 59.

42. Parry 1930 [1971: 270].

43. Davidson 1994: 62.

mulas are regulated by the traditional themes of the poet's composition."[44] By contrast, as this critic has pointed out,[45] Finnegan assumes that formulas have a life independent of themes: "*As well as* formulaic phrases and sequences [italics mine], the bard has in his repertoire a number of set themes which he can draw on to form the structure of his poem."[46] The assumption here is that formulas are merely stock phrases repeated simply to fill metrical needs: the oral poet "can select what he wishes from the common stock of formulae, and can choose slightly different terms that fit his metre . . . and vary the details."[47] Such a definition overvalues traditional form and undervalues, in contrast to the views of Parry and Lord, the role of traditional content.[48] Using the premise that formulas are simply a matter of repeated phraseology that fits the meter, Finnegan faults the Parry-Lord approach to oral poetry: "Does it really add to our understanding of the style or process of composition in a given piece to name certain repeated patterns of words, sounds or meanings as 'formulae'? Or to suggest that the characteristic of oral style is that such formulae are 'all-pervasive' (as in Lord [1960]:47)?"[49] In light of what can be adduced from the writings of Parry and Lord, however, Finnegan's criticism seems unfounded.

If we may understand the formula as "the building-block of a system of traditional oral poetic expression,"[50] then it seems no longer reasonable to find fault v
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44. Ibid., in response to the claims of Finnegan 1977:62 about the metrical conditioning of formulas. On the relationship of formula and meter, see N 1990b:18–35; cf. Lord 1991:73–74. For further criticism of Finnegan's interpretation of Parry's understanding of the formula, see Miller 1982b:32.

45. Davidson 1994:62.

46. Finnegan 1977:64.

47. Ibid., 62.

48. See Davidson 1994:60–62 and N 1990b:18–35; cf. Lord 1991:73–74. For a wide-ranging critique of various definitions of the formula, with special reference to Austin 1975 (11–80), Finnegan 1977 (54–55, 73–86), Kiparsky 1976, and Nagler 1974 (23), see Miller 1982a:35–48. (I leave open, however, the question of whether or not there was a distinct Aeolic phase in the development of Homeric diction.)

49. Finnegan 1977:71.

50. Davidson 1994:62.

51. Martin (1989:92) observes
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reasonable to find fault with Lord's observation that formulas are "all-pervasive" in oral poetry.[51]

7. "The poet had only one way of saying it."

Once again, such a requirement of oral poetry is often assumed, without justification, by both proponents and opponents. But the principle of economy or thrift is a tendency, not a constant, as I have argued in earlier work.[52]

8. "Homer had a new way of saying it."

This is a specific instance of number 3 above. Granted, to the extent that the performer controls or "owns" the performance in conjunction with the audience, the opportunity for innovation is there. Such innovation, however, takes place within the tradition, not beyond it. Given that performance itself is a key aspect of oral tradition, and that tradition comes to life in the context of performance and in the person of the performer, I disagree with those who concentrate so much on the person that they forget about the tradition in which that person performs—a tradition that can be inductively observed from the rules inherent even in the context of performance.[53] As in

51. Martin (1989:92) observes: "Only a deracinated, print culture would view Homeric formulas as devices to aid the composition of poetry." Rather, formulas "belong to the 'composition', if you like, of personal identity in a traditional world" (ibid.). All this is not to say that we cannot find gaps in Parry's argumentation. For an attempt at pinpointing such gaps, I cite the subtle arguments of Lynn-George 1988:55–81. The issues raised by Lynn-George call for an Auseinandersetzung, the scope of which would surpass what is being attempted in this presentation.

52. N 1990b:24 (first written in 1976). See also Martin 1989:8 n. 30 disputing Shive 1987 on the questions of *economy* and *extension*. I notice that Janko (1982:24) uses the expression "the tendency to economy" in the following formulation: "The tendency to economy is only properly applied within the poetry of the same composer, and even there, as Edwards has shown [Janko (p. 241 n. 16) cites Edwards 1971: Ch. 5], it was less strict than has been thought." Actually, the more basic point is that the principle of economy is to be observed on the level of *individual performance*: Lord 1960:53–54; cf. Lord 1991:73–74. For a demonstration of the remarkable degrees of economy in Homeric composition, see also Visser 1987, who shows that each of twenty-five expressions for "he killed" in the *Iliad* occupies a distinct metrical slot.

53. Again, N 1990a:79. There are, of course, areas where rules do not apply, inviting free variation. I borrow the concept of *free variant* from the field of descriptive linguistics. This concept is particularly useful for describing those aspects of tradition where innovation is

the case of number 3, the risk is to make "Homer" overly personalized, without regard for the traditional dynamics of composition and performance, *and* without regard for synchrony and diachrony.

9. "The poem is so obviously unified and organized that the poet must have become somehow emancipated from the oral tradition."

Such a reaction stems from descriptions of oral poetry in terms of *improvisation* (or *extemporization*)—terms that can easily be misunderstood. To many, for example, such terms suggest that "anything goes." A most useful response, with vigorous criticism of a wide variety of misunderstandings, is the work of D. Gary Miller.[54] His key argument is this: "Mental operations 'generate' as little as possible; they search for stored expressions of varying degrees of suitability to the speaker's goal."[55] Also valuable is his refutation of the following three common assumptions about "improvising oral poets":

1. "Oral poets do not plan."

2. "Oral poetry is characterized by a 'loose,' unorganized structure."

3. "An oral poet could not see the whole epic sequence in the beginning."[56]

most likely to take place (thanks to Loukia Athanassaki, Dec. 30, 1990); see also Martin 1989:151 n. 16.

54. Miller 1982b:5–8.

55. Ibid., 7.

56. These three assumptions are restated and then refuted by Miller (1982b:90–91). I agree with Miller (p. 46) that "much paper has been wasted" on the "pseudo-issue" of "whether improvisation-composition involves memorization or not" (he provides bibliography), "partly out of misunderstanding Lord, and partly out of misconceptions about the nature of language in general and improvisation in particular." For more on the pitfalls of using the concept of memorization, see Lord 1991:236–237. I am sympathetic, however, to the idea of a dichotomy of improvisation versus memorization as discussed by Jensen 1980:13, provided that the two terms are used in a diachronic context, referring respectively to relatively more fluid versus more static phases of oral tradition. On the distinction of fluid versus static phases, see pp. 41, 111 below.

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Refusing to consider the possibility that there are principles of unity and organization at work in a living oral tradition is symptomatic of a lack of appreciation for oral tradition itself, with emphasis on the word *tradition*. There is a common pattern of thinking that serves to compensate for this lack: it is manifested in the assumption that the poet must have somehow broken free of oral tradition. This assumption entails an unquestioning elevation of a reconstructed single individual to the rank of a genius or at least a transcendent author, who can then be given all or most of the credit for any observable principles of unity and organization.[57] Unity and coherence may be the *effect* of something traditional, rather than the *cause* of something untraditional.[58]

10. "Homer wrote."

This is the most extreme version of the reaction described in number 9. This way of thinking, as I will argue below, does not stem solely from a lack of firsthand knowledge about oral poetry. Those who make this claim, or those who simply make this assumption, have conceptualized authorship without having first thought through the historical realities of the era that produced Homeric poetry.

Having come to the end of this list of ten examples of what I consider misleading usage concerning oral poetics, let us return to the primary question of my Homeric Questions, concerning *performance*. For me, the key element in the triad of composition, performance, and diffusion will throughout be the second. Without performance, oral tradition is not oral. Without performance, tradition is no longer the same. Without performance, the very idea of Homer loses its integrity. More than that, the very essence of the classics becomes incomplete.

57. The concepts of *unity* and *single author* are not necessarily the same thing. I can justify, at least in terms of my "evolutionary model," to be discussed below, the doubts expressed by Scaley (1957:330) about a "single author" of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*—as if he were a historical reality. Still, I have no doubts that the *notion* of such a single author was indeed a historical reality in the ancient world. Further, I will argue that this notion was connected with the notion of a unified and singular corpus of heroic poetry.

58. N 1979: 41, 78–79. On unity and coherence in the structure of evolving institutions like the Olympics, cf. ibid., 7.

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