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The Poetic Tradition

The *Iliad* is read today as the earliest example of Western literature, the first work in a long tradition of heroic narrative. Yet to a modern reader the poem, while emotionally and intellectually affecting, can seem simple and naive in its repetitive style and difficult to appreciate. Actually, the *Iliad* is not a “first work”; rather it is an end product of a poetic tradition that may have been as much as a thousand years old by the time this epic was composed, probably in the final quarter of the eighth century B.C. Its style, mythological content, and heroic themes and values are traditional, but it generates its distinctive meanings as an ironic meditation on these traditional themes and values. Through parallels, contrasts, and juxtapositions of characters and actions, a dramatic structure is created that forces us to consider critically the traditional heroic world depicted in the poem and the contradictions inherent in this kind of heroism.¹ The overwhelming fact of life for the heroes of the *Iliad* is their mortality, which stands in contrast to the immortality of the gods. We see the central hero of the poem, Achilles, move toward disillusionment and death to reach a new clarity about human existence in the wider context of the eventual destruction of Troy and in an environment consisting almost entirely of war and death. This environment offers scope for various kinds and degrees of heroic achievement, but

only at the cost of self-destruction and the destruction of others who live in the same environment and share the same values.²

Homer generates the characteristic themes and ideas of his poem by fulfilling the traditional expectations of his audience at the same time that he innovatively plays against them. At every level—language, style, themes, portrayal of gods and humans—the *Iliad* expresses its distinctive vision of reality through a strictly traditional artistic medium. In the past half-century scholars have come to understand more accurately the formal organization and the mythological content of this medium. Today, readers of the poem, building on this understanding, can approach the poem on its own terms and appreciate both its distinctive vision and the poetic structure through which Homer expressed it.

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The traditional medium, we know today, was one of oral poetry. In it a poet created a poem anew each time he said (or, rather, sang) it, for there was no established, written text. At the same time, the poems he sang were *formulaic*: the language, meter, and style, as well as the kinds of events and even many of the specific events in the story, were traditional and common to all poets who learned to work with the basic building blocks of the genre—fixed formulas, consisting of words, phrases, and lines, and typical scenes, episodes, and sequences. These building blocks changed somewhat from poet to poet, usually through small innovations that may sometimes have been unconsciously introduced by the poets and that, to judge from studies of modern oral poets, they would sometimes have denied making. A poet in command of his medium could manipulate these building blocks to say whatever he wished: a poor, unimaginative poet would produce poor, unimaginative songs, as would such a poet writing, for example, in English iambic pentameters; a great, imaginative poet like Homer would produce correspondingly great, imaginative poetry, as would Shakespeare. In other words, the fact that the *Iliad* is composed in formulaic language and meter

and according to strict narrative conventions does not mean that it is therefore unoriginal or inartistic.

The preceding statement may seem unnecessary or ridiculous to any reader who has felt, even in translation, the poetic power of the *Iliad*. I make it because one result of the discovery that the Homeric poems are composed in a traditional style, which enabled illiterate singers to create and perform heroic poetry, has been the conviction among some Homeric scholars that it is impossible to speak of the artistry or originality of any particular poet, including Homer, who composed in this style, and that it is equally impossible to speak of the meaning of the *Iliad* as a whole or even of many of the individual words in the fixed formulaic phrases of which the poetry largely or entirely consists. In other words, these scholars argue, the traditional oral style and its concomitant heroic values and mood are what count; since these were uniform and belonged equally to all singers in the tradition, and since the innovations of any particular poet must have been relatively slight, Homer's "responsibility for [the] *Iliad* was incidental" and cannot be specified.³

In order to see how scholars, including some of those philologists who have studied the text of the *Iliad* most closely, can have come to such apparently strange conclusions about a poem that has universally been considered one of the creative masterpieces of the human imagination, it is necessary to understand just what is meant by a traditional oral, formulaic style. That the *Iliad*, like the *Odyssey*, is composed in such a style was the discovery of the great American classical scholar Milman Parry. Parry first demonstrated his discovery in a series of publications in French and in English in the late 1920s and early 1930s.⁴ Then he seemed to confirm it between 1933 and 1935 by his field studies of a still-living oral poetic tradition in Yugoslavia.

Parry began from two phenomena which are obvious to anyone who reads Homer in Greek: the metrical form of the dactylic hexameter, the meter in which the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* are composed, and the fact that certain words and phrases, often in combination with other specific words and phrases, recur frequently in the poems, usually in the same metrical positions in the line. Parry paid particular attention to repetitions of nouns, especially proper nouns, and of the adjectives that

modify them—a distinctive kind of repetition everywhere apparent to anyone reading a faithful translation such as Richmond Lattimore's.⁵

Like all Greek meters, the dactylic hexameter is based on the patterned occurrence of "heavy" and "light" syllables (more usually but less accurately called "long" and "short" syllables). The line, or hexameter, is the main metrical unit; there are from 12 to 17 syllables per line arranged according to the following pattern of heavy (—) and light (∪) syllables:

—∪—∪—∪—∪—∪—

Thus, the first, third, fifth, seventh, ninth, eleventh, and twelfth elements are always heavy, and the other elements consist either of one heavy or two light syllables. Each line is further delineated into (usually) four metrical subunits called *cola*; a *colon* is a sequence of syllables, often consisting of a distinct semantic unit—a word, word group, or phrase—that ends regularly at a particular position in the line. It is as if each individual hexameter were a small stanza consisting of four *cola*.

The numerous repeated words and phrases tend to recur at the same metrical positions in the line, that is, in the same *cola*, because in this way they were functionally useful to a performing singer composing a heroic song. Such a singer, for whom composition and performance were identical, would use these metrically fixed words and phrases as naturally as anyone might use ordinary language (though the mixture of dialects in the traditional poetic language indicates clearly that it never was anyone's ordinary language). As a performer he could not think over his next words or revise what he had just said at leisure in the manner of a literate poet. The highly complex system of repeated words and phrases made it possible for him to continue the flow of metrically correct verse without hesitation and to express any idea whatsoever that the subject matter of the traditional epic might make it necessary or desirable for him to express.

Parry called "a group of words which is regularly employed under the same metrical conditions to express a given essential idea" a "formula."⁶ An "essential idea" he defined as "that which remains after one has counted out everything in the expression which is purely for the sake of the style," that is, for

the sake of achieving a metrically correct hexameter verse by filling a specific sequence of heavy and light syllables in a particular place in the line.⁷ Parry cites as an example of a formula and its essential idea the formulaic phrase, "the goddess grey-eyed Athene." These words occur 19 times in the *Iliad* and 31 times in the *Odyssey*, filling the metrical sequence $\cup\text{---}\cup\text{---}\cup\text{---}$ at the end of the line; the words "grey-eyed Athene" alone occur another 9 times in the *Iliad* and 19 times in the *Odyssey*, also at the end of the line. Parry says that Homer uses these words to express in this metrical position the essential idea "Athene"; presumably neither the poet nor his audience would have been conscious of the separate, specific meanings of "goddess" and "grey-eyed." Parry similarly cites the recurrent line "But when the young Dawn showed again with her rosy fingers" (2 times in the *Iliad*, 20 times in the *Odyssey*) as expressing the essential idea "When it was morning."

If we look at one of the repeated combinations of proper names and epithets, which Parry studied in the fullest detail, we can begin to get some idea of how the traditional formulas worked. When the name Odysseus occurs in the nominative case, as the subject of a finite verb, it almost always (49 out of 53 times in the *Iliad*) is the final word in the line. In 38 of these 49 instances, the proper name is accompanied by an adjective or combination of adjectives or an adjectival appositional phrase: "brilliant," "resourceful," "sacker of cities," "long-suffering brilliant" Odysseus. What governs the choice of adjective or adjectives in each instance is not what Odysseus is saying or doing but rather what sequence of heavy and light syllables is required to complete the line with metrical correctness. The Greek word for "brilliant" is *dios*; combined with Odysseus, it gives a metrical sequence of $\text{---}\cup\text{---}$ (*dīōs Ōdūs-sēūs*). Both "resourceful" (*pōlūmētīs*, 13 times) and "sacker of cities" (*ptōlīpōrthōs*, 2 times) combined with Odysseus yield a sequence of $\cup\text{---}\cup\text{---}$. "Long-suffering brilliant Odysseus" (*pōlūtīās dīōs Ōdūs-sēūs*) fills $\cup\text{---}\cup\text{---}$. Whichever epithet is used, the same essential idea, "Odysseus," is expressed. In two of these three combinations of epithet and noun, there is only one adjective or combination of adjectives to fill a given metrical sequence. In the third instance, one of the adjectives is much more common than the other. This illustrates what

Parry called the "thrift" or the "economy" of the Homeric systems (groups) of formulas: "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."⁸ The system I have been describing is thrifty but does allow some variation. A clear indication of the degree of thrift in the traditional style generally is the fact, determined by Parry, that of the 37 characters in the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* who have noun-epithet formulas in the nominative case filling the metrical sequence ◡---◡--- at the end of the line there are only three names having a second formula that could replace the first!⁹ Obviously, without such thrift, the formulas would have been far less useful for a performing poet because he then would have had to take time to decide which of several possible, that is, metrically correct, words or phrases to use.

Parry emphasized that "when the element of usefulness is lacking, one does not have a formula but a repeated phrase which has been knowingly brought into the verse for some special effect."¹⁰ This, he argued, is a procedure of literate poets who write down their poems. An oral (by definition, illiterate) singer, on the other hand, follows a fixed pattern of words and does not consciously decide to repeat a phrase. He denies himself, and the traditional style denies him, any other way of expressing his essential idea. He thinks in terms of the formulas, so there is an unbroken flow; this is the utility of the formulaic style. And Parry claims that "because at no time is he seeking words for an idea which has never before found expression, . . . the question of originality in style means nothing to him."¹¹

The systems of formulas discovered by Parry, like the one I have described for Odysseus in the nominative case at the end of the line, exist not only for all the proper names and epithets in the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* in all their possible grammatical cases, but also for most, perhaps all, of the words and phrases in the poem in all their forms and relationships with one another. (If more material were extant, words and phrases that seem to us unique and nonformulaic might be recognizable as formulaic.) All these systems are characterized by the same extraordinary thrift. For example, "Homer uses for the five grammatical cases of Achilles, 46 different noun-epithet formulas representing

the same number of different metrical values."¹² In other words, no two grammatically synonymous noun-epithet formulas for Achilles fill the same sequence of heavy and light syllables in the same position in the line. As astonishing as the thrift of the traditional formulaic language is its complexity. "Each formula is . . . made in view of the other formulas with which it is to be joined; and the formulas taken all together make up a diction which is the material for a completely unified technique of verse-making."¹³

Since Parry set forth what might be called an ideal definition and description of the Homeric formula, students of the Homeric poems have modified and extended his findings in various ways. Resemblances in sound—especially important when one is considering oral performance and composition—and in grammatical and syntactical relationships between words or parts of speech recurring in the same metrical positions have been interpreted as criteria for "formulariness." M. N. Nagler has defined a formula not in terms of the actual words and phrases we find in our texts but as a "central Gestalt" existing "on a preverbal level in the poet's mind"; each phrase that actually does occur in the texts is considered an "allomorph" of this central Gestalt, "which is the real mental template underlying the production of all such phrases."¹⁴

Even more important than the suggested changes in Parry's definition of a formula has been the realization by some scholars that while Parry undoubtedly was correct in his demonstration and elucidation of the traditional nature and function of the formulaic style, he went too far in his reduction of formulas to essential ideas and his assumption that the epithets in noun-epithet formulas are metrically convenient but otherwise merely "ornamental"—meaningless, that is, apart from their evocation of traditional, general heroic qualities, moods, or values. It has been suggested, for instance, that many of the adjectives and adjectival phrases describing particular heroes in the *Iliad*, in addition to being metrically useful, are in some way associated with those heroes' chief functions or with especially memorable and significant scenes or activities in which they take part.¹⁵ For example, "lord of men" (*anax andrōn*) is particularly appropriate to Agamemnon; "of the shining helmet" (*koruthaiolos*), frequently used of Hektor, recalls the scene

with Hektor, Andromache, and Astyanax in Book 6 where Hektor's helmet plays such a significant role; "swift-footed" (*podas ôkus, podas tachus*), often used of Achilles, may suggest, among other scenes, his climactic pursuit of Hektor around the walls of Troy in Book 22. Obviously, not all epithets of heroes will have such relevance, and not every potentially relevant epithet will be felt as relevant each time it occurs; nevertheless, these and many other such epithets may have originated or may have persisted in the tradition because they were or could be especially distinctive and thus meaningful, not merely because they were useful.

Parry's theory has also been modified by the recognition that where thrift is not absolute, considerations of context or dramatic effect may govern the poet's choice of which of two possible epithets to use. Thus, Hektor in the genitive case at the end of the line can be either "tamer of horses" (*hippodamoio*) or "manslaughtering" (*androphonoio*), which are metrically equivalent. But by "tamer of horses," an epithet suggestive of the domination of nature by human culture, Hektor is associated with Troy as a *polis*, a social community, and with Apollo, who in the *Iliad* is a protecting deity of this particular community.¹⁶ But it is noteworthy that no Greek ever calls him "tamer of horses": that is not how they perceive him. Furthermore, Homer's narrative refers to him as "manslaughtering" at several poignant moments, such as at 6.498, when after the moving family scene at the Skaian gate Andromache returns to the "well-settled household of manslaughtering Hektor," or at 24.724, when she laments, "holding in her hands the head of manslaughtering Hektor." At these moments Homer's use of the adjective seems to call attention to the destructive and, in the end, self-destructive quality of Hektor's heroism. It has similarly been argued that the adjective *phaidimos*, "shining," used to describe Hektor in the nominative case in the metrical sequence - - - - at the end of the line (*phaidimôs Hêktôr*), is associated almost everywhere in the *Iliad* with defeat and accordingly points to Hektor's essential role in the poem as "loser" of his own life and (symbolically) of his city.¹⁷

There are other ways in which the traditional formulas are manipulated in the *Iliad* to produce meanings beyond what Parry, at least in his published work, seems to have considered

possible. Sometimes they are used at other metrical positions in the line than those at which they usually occur, playing against the normal expectancy in the minds of the audience or reader and thus calling attention to themselves and gaining in emphasis. Sometimes a word or phrase normally used only of a god or of a personified abstract noun such as Fate or Death is applied to a person, thus making him an impersonal force. For example, *oloös*, "destructive," is used of Achilles at 24.39, and *mēnis*, "anger," is used for his wrath throughout the poem.¹⁸ Sometimes certain formulas are used together with certain other formulas, or in specific narrative contexts, that momentarily actualize a latent poetic signification, as when the word *krēdemna*, denoting the "battlements" of a city whose destruction someone is envisioning, calls to mind another meaning of *krēdemna*, a woman's "veil," which is an emblem of her chastity.¹⁹ Thus the sack of the city is associated with sexual violation, an association made almost explicit at 22.466–72, when Andromache faints at the sight of Hektor's corpse being dragged away by Achilles' horses and, in the process, throws away the veil which Aphrodite had given her on her wedding day. This occurs shortly after we learn that the wailing and lamentation that arose in the city when Hektor was killed "was most like what would have happened if all / beetling Ilion had been burning top to bottom in fire" (22.410–11). The death of Hektor means both the destruction of Troy and the destruction of the married chastity of Andromache—in short, the destruction of the domestic, civilized life of which Hektor is the poem's main male exemplar and for which he falls fighting.

Few scholars have tried to consider the formula both as a useful tool of oral composition and as meaningful in its own right and contributing to the meaning of the entire poem.²⁰ Yet only such an attempt can do justice both to the uniformity of the formulaic style and to that individuality of the speeches, actions, and attitudes of the various characters in the *Iliad*, which any reader cannot help but recognize. Traditional heroic values are presented in a traditional heroic style, but these values are not all that is presented in the poem. Emphasis on what is traditional in the style common to all poets has led scholars to ignore what is distinctive, at times almost counter-traditional, in the *Iliad* of Homer. Yet any conception of a traditional

oral style is inadequate if it does not allow one to recognize and critically analyze both the particular dramatic, thematic, and ironic structures of the *Iliad* and the meanings it generates through the poet's unique organization of traditional material and individual use of the traditional style. Such a conception does not account for the emotional and intellectual impact the poem has always made and still makes on its readers: though this conception may help us to understand the history of the form in which the *Iliad* was created and to account for and appreciate many of its poetic techniques, it does not by itself contribute to literary criticism and an understanding of the poem.

There are, I think, two main reasons why the discoveries of Milman Parry and his successors led so many classical scholars, and through them a wider reading audience, to deny originality and distinctive artistry to Homer and to miss so much of the meaning in the *Iliad*. In the first place, these discoveries seemed to solve the so-called Homeric Question that had occupied scholars through the late eighteenth, nineteenth, and early twentieth centuries; secondly, the conclusions arrived at by Parry through detailed examination of the texts were apparently confirmed by his later study of Serbocroatian oral poetry, and much that was true of the Yugoslav poets was too simplistically projected back onto Homer and the *Iliad*.

In essence the Homeric Question may be stated as follows: is the *Iliad* (leaving aside the *Odyssey*, for the sake of convenience) that we read today the work of a single artist, or is it the result of a number of separate poems by different poets having been grouped together into a composite with no overall artistic design? Those scholars who held the first view were known as Unitarians, those who held the second as Analysts. By the 1920s the Analysts were in the vast majority among professional scholars, though probably not among the general reading public. The characteristic aims of their work were to distinguish various "early" and "late" layers and "short epics" in the poem and also to trace historically the process by which these layers and poems were combined to form our *Iliad*. Not the least indication of their futility was the number of highly arbitrary, mutually contradictory analyses and historical devel-

opments that various Analysts posited. Parry's demonstration of the uniformity of the traditional, formulaic style made the Homeric Question meaningless by showing that it was in fact impossible to distinguish, within this uniformity, either chronological layers or the work of particular poets, including Homer. The demonstration that all poets working in the tradition of oral composition relied totally on the traditional style that, as it were, sang through them seemed to make questions of originality or individuality unanswerable and irrelevant. And the same features of Parry's theory that resolved these questions seemed also to indicate the impossibility of genuine literary criticism of the *Iliad*.²¹

As I have said, Parry's field studies of Serbocroatian oral poetry seemed to him, and have seemed to many others, to confirm the conclusions to which the intensive study of the Homeric texts themselves had previously led him. In effect, Parry had analyzed the style of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* and decided that such a style could only have evolved because it was functional for a certain type of poet—an illiterate, oral poet for whom composition and performance were one—in a particular kind of society. When he learned that such poets still flourished in rural Yugoslavia, he went to study them. His premature death cut short his work, which Professor A. B. Lord has continued both in the field and in publications.

Parry and Lord argued that both Homer and the Slavic *guslars*, who sang oral heroic poetry in a formulaic style functionally like that of the *Iliad*, performed a similar role in similar societies and that their "primitive," "popular," "natural," "heroic" style actually depended on their being oral and illiterate (and therefore traditional) "singers of tales." Parry did not live long enough to develop fully or test the validity of his analogy between the Homeric and Yugoslav poems in regard to their quality. All he was able to do was to confirm in his own mind and "prove" to others the conclusions he had already drawn about the oral tradition that ultimately produced the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, and to stress the differences between this kind of tradition and traditions of literate, sophisticated poets. There still is no general agreement about the extent and validity