

THE CRITICISM OF AN ORAL HOMER

HOMER is universally praised for the clarity of his style.¹ Yet even to sympathetic or perceptive readers, if their critical remarks really express their judgments, his poetical intention has been singularly opaque: invited to leave town by Plato, as if he were a bad ethical philosopher; lauded by Aristotle for his dramatic unity, as if he were a pupil of Sophocles; criticised by Longinus for composing an *Odyssey* without Iliadic sublimity; abused in more recent times by Scaliger as indecorous, irrational, improper and undisciplined, as if he were seeking (like Virgil) to portray the perfect exemplar of a renaissance prince; defended by Dacier as a sublime primitive, innocent of taste and art, who achieved perfection 'par la seule force de son genie'.² Some of these judgments are no more than the stock responses of their age to epic poetry. The critic regards the poems from his own point of view; he discovers what he expects to find; and he passes a judgment that illuminates the workings of his own mind but sheds nothing but darkness upon Homer's. The announcement, therefore, of a new criticism by Notopoulos³ and Lord,⁴ a criticism based on the results of comparative study and free from the old prejudices of Analysts and Unitarians, is an event of importance. It may even be the case that the despised anachronistic 'singer', that unwashed, mendicant figure lurking in the coffee houses of the Balkans, has something to say. But whatever he says, it will be applicable to Homer only by analogy, and will require verification.

The primary distinction within the great field of epic poetry is that drawn by Bowra between the primitive, heroic or Homeric epic and the secondary or literary epic of Virgil and Tasso and Milton.⁵ The differences exist on the social and spiritual planes, but primarily the difference is between oral and written, which is a difference in the sort of basic craft used by the poets. The effect upon his work of the artist's tools and materials is profound, and therefore hard to elucidate. The nature of Homeric craftsmanship is also controversial, but in so far as the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* are in some sense oral two important and relatively simple points follow. First, the oral poem properly speaking is knowable only through its performances. There is no 'real' or 'original' form, any more than there is such a form of a folktale or a ballad tune: all that can ever be heard is the 'version' of a poem. Consequently, while the text of the *Aeneid* that we have is the *Aeneid*, the texts of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* (in so far as they are oral poems) are somehow the record merely of a performance of Homer's poems. There is every reason for supposing that every other performance by their author would be in some degree different. The critic of oral poetry is thus like a dramatic critic, not a film critic; he judges two things, the work itself and the performance. Second, the oral poem is very traditional. Perhaps, if we understood the singer's skill perfectly, we might wish to say that it was wholly traditional.⁶ As it is, the visible amount

¹ This paper is a version, slightly revised, of an address delivered to the Hellenic Society on March 19, 1970. My thanks are due to the editor for his prompt publication and for his indulgence towards the faults of what is essentially the record of an oral performance.

² August Fick's remark, that our *Odyssey* is an insult to the human intelligence, belongs to Higher, not Literary criticism. On Scaliger see S. Shepard, 'Scaliger on Homer and Virgil: a study in literary prejudice', *Emerita* xxix (1961) 313-40, and for Homer in criticism generally G. Finsler, *Homer in der Neuzeit von Dante bis Goethe* (1912), with D. M. Foerster, *Homer in English Criticism* (1947).

³ J. A. Notopoulos, 'Parataxis in Homer: a new

approach to Homeric literary criticism', *TAPA* lxxx (1949) 1-23 and 'Towards a poetics of early Greek oral poetry', *HSCP* lxxviii (1964) 45-65.

⁴ A. B. Lord, 'Homer as oral poet', *HSCP* lxxii (1968) 1-46 (castigating lip-service towards what is oral and traditional, which then 'forms merely a facade behind which scholarship can continue to apply the poetics of written literature'. Cf. n. 11 below).

⁵ C. M. Bowra, *From Virgil to Milton* (1945) 2.

⁶ Cf. M. N. Nagler, 'Towards a generative view of the oral formula', *TAPA* xcvi (1967) 269-311 (see pp. 290-1). The danger of Nagler's suggestive paper is that it may lead to the equation of 'traditional' with

of stock in trade, from small phrases to large episodes, is, at least in Homer, enormous. For the diction this was demonstrated by the early papers of Milman Parry;⁷ Fenik has recently shown that it is strikingly true also for much of the incident.⁸ As Parry said, 'The fame of a singer comes not from quitting the tradition but from putting it to the best use.'⁹

As it was described by Lord on the strength of his comparative studies, the oral poem is, behind its performances, a flexible plan of episodes and themes.¹⁰ It is this structure among other things that we must try to evaluate. Sometimes critics try to find a special niche for Homer, as one who combined the best of two worlds, a traditional poet who burst out of his tradition.¹¹ The manifest excellence of Homer and the mediocrity of much other oral poetry makes such a position attractive; but it would be bad method to assume it at the outset. In the work of critics who allow that Homer's poetry was traditional we soon notice an odd thing. They do not dilate upon the virtues of the poet. On the contrary they hasten to point out his defects, while urging us to ignore them. Bowra asserts that the *Iliad's* 'looseness of construction and of texture is the product of the circumstances in which it was composed:' Homer is 'careless about details' because he 'cannot give too much attention to small points'.¹² Combellack declares that the mere idea of the traditional poet is fatal to the old unitarian concept of the great poetical demiurge, but forbids us to lament his passing.¹³ This critic descends to details, objecting that the exactly appropriate word, the ironical allusion, the meaningful emphasis, are all impossible in a traditional oral style designed to cut out alternatives of expression. It is the 'oral law' that the general takes precedence over the particular.¹⁴ Notopoulos pronounces that the deeply ingrained Aristotelian ideas about the organic unity of a work of art (still praised in Homer by Kitto¹⁵ and Lattimore¹⁶) are inapplicable to the paratactic style of oral epic.¹⁷ Homer did not subordinate the parts to the whole, because he was obliged to concentrate his attention on each part as he came to it. He cannot be blamed for what he was compelled to do. Yet Notopoulos did not clearly explain what were the special non-Aristotelian virtues the traditional poem displayed, although a mere defence of lapses by the appeal to oral poetry is no more than to restate the faults in more portentous terms. Instead he described certain aspects of craftsmanship, such as foreshadowing, recapitulation and ring-composition.

However, we wish rather to know of Homer 'how he forces the traditional elements to mean more than they meant before, how he enriches [the formulaic tradition] with new formal and verbal possibilities'.¹⁸ Sometimes a red herring is drawn across the trail by the criticism, not of the poem, but of the performance. Both modern observation and inference from old poems indicates that the plain recitation of epic poetry is unusual. The verses are at least intoned and usually sung. Instrumental accompaniment by the singer or by an assistant is regular. A second singer may repeat each verse after the first. There is

'derivative' with a consequent hazard of vacuity, for there is a perfectly good sense in which all speech is derivative (from the structures of grammar and lexicon). I cannot think that a formula (the traditional phrase *par excellence*) used perhaps twenty times rises into the poet's mind in the same way as any phrase hapax legomenon. Parry's initial idea (*HSCP* xli [1930] 77-8) that Homer must be all pre-existent formulae is, of course, superseded.

⁷ *L'Épithète traditionnelle dans Homère* (1928) and 'Studies in the epic technique of oral verse-making', *HSCP* xli (1930) 73-147.

⁸ B. Fenik, *Typical Battle Scenes in the Iliad* (Hermes Einzelschriften, Heft 21, 1968).

⁹ *HSCP* xliii (1932) 14.

¹⁰ *Singer of Tales* (1960) 99.

¹¹ Bowra, *Tradition and Design in the Iliad* (1930) 66;

Rhys Carpenter, *Folktale, Fiction and Saga in the Homeric Epics* (1946) 165, 172; C. H. Whitman, *Homer and the Heroic Tradition* (1958) 13-14; A. Lesky, *History of Greek Literature* (trans. Willis and de Heer, 1966) 63-4; J. A. Russo, 'Homer against his tradition', *Arion* vii (1968) 275-95.

¹² *From Virgil to Milton* 3.

¹³ F. M. Combellack, 'Milman Parry and Homeric artistry', *Comparative Literature* xi (1959) 193-208.

¹⁴ 'Some formulary illogicalities in Homer', *TAPA* xcvi (1965) 41-56.

¹⁵ H. D. F. Kitto, *Poiesis* (1966) 148-52.

¹⁶ R. Lattimore, *The Iliad of Homer* (1951) 16-17.

¹⁷ See the papers cited above, n. 3.

¹⁸ D. S. Carne-Ross in Logue's *Patrocleia of Homer* (1963) 53 n. 2.

consequently wide scope for histrionics on the part of the performer. Notopoulos himself noted sourly, as a field worker in contemporary oral poetry, that a brilliant performance may conceal what the tape-recorder later exposes as a banal text.¹⁹ Obviously it is important to distinguish the merits and defects of performance from those of the poem. Literary criticism properly concerns itself with the latter, though it cannot ignore the effects of his manner of performance on the composer's modes of thought. His narrative will fall into sections proportionate to his endurance at singing; he responds to the applause of the audience at the successful completion of a catalogue; he elaborates their favourite passages. But the positive virtues of Homer's performance, whatever they may have been, we are obliged by ignorance to pass over, though one may conjecture his ideal from the accounts of Phemios and Demodokos in the *Odyssey*. His voice was doubtless *λύγυς* or *λυγυρός*, his words as copious as the snowflakes in winter.²⁰

It would be easy, and I think permissible, to extend the meaning of 'merits and defects of performance' beyond the field of histrionics. Those famous (and trivial) 'inconsistencies', such as a warrior's having his spear in his hand in spite of having just thrown it—are these not like a fumbled cue in acting, a false note or an open string in music? No performance can be perfect. Slips are bound to have occurred. In many cases, one may be sure, they would pass unnoticed, because the imagination of a spellbound audience fills in what the bard omits. Invisible though it is in the printed text, the audience is a partner and contributor to the performance.²¹ In fact, in comparison with most traditions known to comparative study, minor slips are very infrequent in Homer. He was a good performer. Among the felicities of performance we may reckon the perfect recall of a repeated passage, the copious catalogues, the unbroken linear narrative, the maintenance of what Bassett called the 'epic illusion'.²²

Another matter also must be disposed of. If the qualities of performance may be thought to lie below the level of literary criticism, above the level of a specifically oral criticism is the matter of the poet's intention, what it is that the maker of a poem thinks he is aiming at, unless traditional poetry is peculiar in this respect. For the Homerist, there are two means of approaching the problem. There is the comparative method, which has been used for this purpose, for example, by Lord,²³ and there is (as I shall call it) the method of internal assessment, used by Kirk.²⁴ The comparative method has the apparent advantage that the critic can put himself in the position of being able to interrogate contemporary traditional singers as to what they think they are doing. A sample of such conversations is published by Lord in *Serbo-Croatian Heroic Songs* (1954). Aesthetics, however, is a sophisticated subject, and the singer's replies are seldom informative. The usual answers to the question what makes a good or bad poem appear to be in terms of technique (a good singer 'ornaments' his song) or performance (a bad singer makes mistakes). So what is done in comparative study is to make an internal assessment of the comparative material and then compare the result with our internal assessment of Homer. By 'internal assessment' I mean the method of guessing what the poet was trying to do from what he actually did, or said he was doing. Now Homer seems to tell us clearly what he is about. He represents poets as entertainers at the feast. Ten times in connection with poetry he uses the word *τέρπειν*. Yet to say that one feels pleasure at something may mean very little—just that one has a positive response. Or it may mean something paradoxical, as when the devotee of tragedy finds pleasure in purgation. In the case of Homer the temptation is to think of the pleasure given by stirring tales of action. We are apt to consider primitive heroic epic as poetry of a

¹⁹ *HSCP* lxxviii (1964) 48.

²⁰ *μ* 44, 183, *ω* 63, *cf.* *A* 248, *Γ* 221 ff.

²¹ *Cf.* M. Lang, 'Homer and oral techniques', *Hesperia* xxxviii (1969) 159–68.

²² S. E. Bassett, *Poetry of Homer* (1938) 26 ff. The

illusion consists in the maintenance of narrative as if by one present without the intrusion of the poet's contemporary situation.

²³ *Singer* 150–7.

²⁴ G. S. Kirk, *Songs of Homer* (1962) 337 ff.

certain content (mighty deeds), a certain ethos (nobility and heroism), and a certain function (to produce admiration of achievement).²⁵ This is a very good standpoint from which to begin reading Homer. In both epics one will appreciate the increasing speed and tension as the plots move to the climax, the strength and will of the heroes, and (at least in the *Iliad*) the powerful movement of pity for the doomed but valiant enemy. This attitude seems in accord with the declared subject matter of Homeric epic, the κλέα ἀνδρῶν.²⁶ But there is a danger that this approach is no more than our contemporary stock response to epic in general. We look for admirable deeds, and we like a dash of the tragic. Lavish praise is given to the last fight of the trapped Niebelungs and to the sublime moment when the dying Roland sounds his horn. Yet from the epilogue and continuation of those epics it is arguable that mediaeval Europe had no sense of the tragic at all and saw those poems quite differently. So it may be with Homer. He knows very well that a man may be stirred to valour by words, but he never represents anyone as stirred up by ἀοιδή. Quite the reverse. The power of poetry is expressed by θέλγειν. Its effect on the hearer is narcotic: he sits entranced, in silence.²⁷ Lay this effect, at least in part, at the door of the performance rather than the poem. It was the bard's fluency, his music, his skill as a performer that gathered and kept his audience, just as in later days it was the histrionics of the rhapsode that produced the mass hypnotism, or hysteria, of which Ion in Plato's dialogue was so absurdly proud.²⁸ In this way the comments of Homer on poetry, like the comments of Parry's Montenegrin informants, refer to immediate effects rather than deep purposes. As for those purposes, we can dismiss the utilitarian assessments, the ideas that Homer primarily intended to preserve his people's saga, to maintain their national morale, to affirm the value of their code of ethics, or to celebrate their great men. Such duties could easily be, and probably were, discharged by the Homeric poems. They would constitute a sort of economic and social justification, if it were necessary to defend the poems on other than literary grounds. But in spite of what has been said by scholars of such repute as Jaeger²⁹ and Havelock,³⁰ it is not easy to see in Homer any prominence at all given to these non-artistic aspects. His social duties Homer discharges obliquely, without any conflict between them and his artistic purpose. Nor has Homer any great argument to advance, like Virgil or Milton, an element that is perhaps an essential part of the successful literary epic; nor, as Kitto has recently and ingeniously shown, does he aim at mere diversion.³¹ Instead there shines through his narrative his vision of the heroic world. The expression of the heroic temper, looking back as it does on a distant past, is inseparable from the traditional character of Homeric poetry, but it has nothing to do, *per se*, with the fact that the poems are representatives of an oral literature. Their oral origin is a point that enters criticism at a lower level, for it refers to the means available to the poet, not to his end.

The blemishes discovered by critics in the use Homer made of his poetry concern different parts of his achievement. Some refer to his genius as a storyteller, some to the conventions of his art, some to his skill as a composer. That Homer was an oral poet is a fact that affects our judgment of these matters in very different degrees. The conditions of oral composition require special skills in the poet and give rise to special conventions and tastes: they also prevent the development of other kinds of skill and taste. In general, the more detailed and specific the criticism, the more relevant is the theory of oral composition. Our judgment about the use of a given epithet for a hero at a given point is inseparable, in

²⁵ Professor R. Browning reminds me of the effect of their epics upon the Huns, οἱ μὲν ἤδοντο τοῖς ποιήμασιν, οἱ δὲ τῶν πολέμων ἀναμιμνησκόμενοι διηγείροντο τοῖς φρονήμασι, ἄλλοι δὲ ἐχώρουν ἐς δάκρυα, ὧν ὑπὸ τοῦ χρόνου ἠσθένει τὸ σῶμα καὶ ἠσυχάζειν ὁ θυμὸς ἠγαγκάζετο (Priscus, *FHG* iv, p. 92).

²⁶ *I* 189, θ 73, cf. *a* 338.

²⁷ *a* 325, 337. The effect holds in the world of the similes, ρ 518–20.

²⁸ *Ion* 535e.

²⁹ W. Jaeger, *Paideia*² (1939) 34 ff.

³⁰ E. A. Havelock, *Preface to Plato* (1963) 61 ff.

³¹ *Poiesis*, 116 ff. The argument is based on the narrative order.

my view, from our theory of the poem's mode of composition. But the conception of Achilles or Odysseus has very little to do with the question whether their creator composed by word of mouth or pen in hand.

Beginning to compose within his tradition Homer naturally used a traditional story and filled it with traditional incident. As literature, it does not matter in the least whether a story is original or inherited: what matters, is whether it is a good vehicle for the poet's purpose. So in saying that Homer was traditional we really pass no judgment at all. We simply say that his genius was expressed through one set of conventions, the inherited sagas, rather than another. Traditional stories, however, are not a neutral means of expression. They may easily be a substitute for thought and used simply because they are traditional, like the gods in Silius Italicus. It is presumably because this vice is inconspicuous in Homer that he was considered at one time (for example, by Alexander Pope) a great and meritorious inventor of stories. He was certainly nothing of the kind: to modern eyes his material is only too obviously traditional. His originality is in the conception of the monumental epic.

Though it is fairly easy to grasp, with the additional example of the Attic drama to assist us, how the use of conventional myth does not impair the force of the poet's vision, it is harder to understand the art of a traditional diction. To put the matter in its crudest form, can it be art at all that makes use of fixed structures of phrase and sentence, predetermined and almost meaningless epithets, arcane glosses, moribund metaphors and inappropriate similes? It is more like the skill of a juggler.³² But Homer does not give that kind of impression, at least if one thinks of a fine speech rather than a routine *aristeia* from the middle *Iliad*. Yet the statistical facts about formulae, established by a generation of Parryists, are irrefutable and plain. Parry himself spoke of the evocative quality of an archaic and special diction, but his successors have sensed more, however difficult it may be to define with our present models of the oral art and their associated terminologies. Some have tried to accept the strict Parryist thesis and take refuge in musical analogies: Whitman in the chamber music of the eighteenth century,³³ Havelock in jazz.³⁴ Only the elements on this view are formulaic, the total effect is not. Others have inclined to a modified Parryist position and hold that the formulaic diction is nothing like so rigid as it has been made out to be. Kirk points to the impressively fast and tense (but still cumulative and paratactic) battle scene of *Il. II* 306–50.³⁵ Edwards and Whallon have discovered appropriate and effective uses of traditional phrases.³⁶ This is an attractive piece of middle ground. Nagler, with his special view of the formula as created and recreated out of a pre-verbal concept, ingeniously denies that there is any problem not of our own making: the oral-formulaic diction, like more familiar linguistic skills, is entirely adequate for the expression of poetic nuances of any subtlety.³⁷

Equipped with this diction and having chosen his topic, the oral poet constructs a flexible plan of episodes and themes, some essential to his story, others not. This is not quite the same picture as that drawn by Aristotle when he described the Homeric poems as dramatic unities expanded by digressions.³⁸ Aristotle's distinction of *mythos* and *epeisodia* introduces an element of status, as if the digressions were less important than the indispensable elements. But the plan of episodes in most oral poems is paratactic, that is, the themes strung together are of equal status, interest, and importance: they stand or fall on their own merits and not by their relation to each other. However, Aristotle has an awkward knack of being right.

³² As was frankly admitted by earlier scholars, e.g. A. van Gennep, *La Question d'Homère* (1909) 52, 'Un bon guslar est celui qui joue de ces clichés comme nous avec des cartes', cf. Parry, *HSCP* xli (1930) 77–8.

³³ C. H. Whitman, *Homer and the Heroic Tradition* (1958) 112.

³⁴ *Preface to Plato*, 147.

³⁵ *YCS* xx (1966) 134–6.

³⁶ M. W. Edwards, 'Some stylistic notes on *Iliad* xviii', *AJP* lxxxix (1968) 257–83. W. Whallon, *Formula, Character, and Context* (1969) 1 ff.

³⁷ *TAPA* xcvi (1967) 310–11.

³⁸ *Poetics* 1459a30–7.

One of the most extraordinary things about the Homeric poems is that both of them combine brief and strong dramatic plots with broad expanses of paratactic narrative. In primitive epic I believe that this feature is unique. It certainly makes criticism very difficult, for we find ourselves applying organic criteria to the essential plot and paratactic criteria to the episodes. If it is true that a special niche must be found for Homer in criticism, it would be in virtue of this quality: the intuition that the compression of the time-scale and the selection of a single basic motif is more dramatically powerful than a prolonged linear narrative.

What criticism is appropriate to paratactic construction? If Parry's informants had had clear notions of what made a paratactic song good or bad, we should have something very exciting. In fact they disappoint us. Once we have a remark about the boldest and fiercest way of arranging a song, but usually the question what made a good song merely produced misleading comments about historical accuracy. So, generally, the evaluation of Homeric parataxis has had to rely on the method of internal assessment.

Almost any of the principal Iliadic battle episodes will serve to illustrate the characteristic features of parataxis. The renewed fighting in *Iliad A* may be analysed thus:

- 15-91 Arming and joining battle,
- 91-283 Agamemnon's *aristeia*,
 - 91-147 Three paired slayings,
 - 148-162 Agamemnon's charge, simile, Trojan rout,
 - 163-164 Zeus withdraws Hector,
 - 165-180 Agamemnon's charge, simile, Trojan rout,
 - 181-216 Zeus sends Iris to caution Hector,
 - 216-263 Two slayings (Agamemnon kills Iphidamas, his brother, Koon, wounds Agamemnon, Agamemnon kills Koon),
 - 263-283 Agamemnon's withdrawal,
- 284-309 Hector's *aristeia*,
- 310-335 Joint *aristeia* of Diomedes and Odysseus,
- 336-400 Diomedes fights singly, is wounded, and withdraws,
- 401-461 Fighting retreat of Odysseus,
 - 401-410 Odysseus ponders his position,
 - 411-425 Trojan charge and casualties,
 - 426-455 Odysseus kills Charops, his brother, Sokos, wounds Odysseus, Odysseus kills Sokos,
 - 456-461 Odysseus's withdrawal.³⁹

The overall structure, as in Book *E* 541-710, is a series of *aristeiai* and counter-*aristeiai*. That of Agamemnon falls into two parts and is linked by a rather long foreshadowing passage (a typical paratactic device) to the short counterattack of Hector. There appears to be no special reason why Agamemnon should begin the rampage on this occasion and not, for example, at the first Greek attack in Book *E*. There is no reason why Hector should lead the rally that would not equally apply to those occasions when Aeneas or Sarpedon stops the rout. In parataxis motivation and logical sequence are typically weak or naive. In the whole passage Homer is working up to a major Greek reverse, as required by the nature of the *Iliad*. But he is not proceeding by a logical and economical route. Sensing that particular incidents are more vivid than general descriptions, he is stringing incidents along his story-line, so as to convey the emotion that Homeric heroes call *χάρμη*, battle-lust. But the progression is not disorderly. Three controlling principles have been described, those of clarity, balance and proportion.

³⁹ The passage is appreciated, from the conventional standpoint, by E. T. Owen, *The Story of the Iliad* (1947) 110-15. Fenik, *Typical Battle Scenes*, 78-105, examines the repeated structures and motifs.

Clarity derives from the poet's firmness of grasp on his story-line. He is aided by the fact that the themes naturally group themselves into larger units, often in fixed order: councils lead to armings, armings to battles, battles to *aristeiai*, *aristeiai* to duels. More subtly there are also associations of themes that exist outside the linear order, and alternative ways of developing a sequence. Naturally these links exist in the minds of the audience also, so that by the mention of a character or an incident the poet makes known his goal and can linger on the way. These groupings of themes turn on some more general idea, in the way that the Telemachy is a Quest, or *Odyssey* ν-χ a Return of The Hero. Thus the story is kept straight. Homer himself makes Odysseus remark on this to Demodokos, θ 489-90:

λίην γὰρ κατὰ κόσμον Ἀχαιῶν οἶτον αἰεῖεις,
ὄσσο' ἔρξαν τ' ἔπαθόν τε καὶ ὄσσο' ἐμόγησαν Ἀχαιοί

—a statement parallel to those of Parry's Slav informants, who insisted on narration 'just as it happened' and sharply condemned *contaminatio* between songs.⁴⁰ Such conflation would be an easy route to muddle, but the Slavic insistence on the point looks like the prejudice of a certain phase of a certain tradition. It is the criticism that conflation distorts the saga—which is not aesthetic criticism. Contamination or transfer of plots might be a stroke of genius and imagination. A whole school of Homeric criticism has grown up around the assumption that Homer did combine the elements of various stories. Precedents are easily found. The Chadwicks tell the beguiling story, discovered by Gesemann, of the Serb Andželko Vuković, who murdered a retired and blameless Turkish officer. He turned his adventure from the safety of exile into an epic, transforming the Turk into a bandit who ruined the peace of the country (a stock theme). The Pasha appealed for his destruction (stock theme). So Andželko went forth and slew the Turk with spear, sword and pistol (stock theme).⁴¹ At *Beowulf* 867 ff. a 'king's thegn' composes an account of the hero's exploit immediately after its execution, using for illustration the story of Sigemund. Lord himself has observed that conflation and transference are implied and admitted by the frequent allusion in Homer to other songs, to Meleagros, to Pylos, to the death of Agamemnon and the other *nostoi*, to Orestes.⁴² They are the means whereby Homer has extended his poems to their monumental length, an important piece of artistry, for a poet who could not transcend his tradition in this way could only lengthen his poem by over-ornamentation of its original episodes. On a smaller scale conflation of motifs is the way in which Homer secures some of his finest effects. As an expression of the glory and brutality of Heroic Man the slaying of Lykaon (Φ 34-135) is unmatched. Yet it is a combination of typical details otherwise encountered separately: the ransom and return to the field of a prisoner; his second meeting with the foe; the implacable anger of the warrior; the plea for quarter; its rejection; the boast over the slain.⁴³

The method has its dangers for the oral poet. Although Homer is remarkably free from the trivial inconsistencies of performance, he has more than his share of what critics like to call 'structural anomalies'. In parataxis a structural anomaly arises when the poet passes from one fixed sequence of themes to another that has different implications, or when he becomes confused as to which sequence he is using and modulates, as it were, back and forth. (On the small scale, observe how in *Iliad* Α the joint *aristeia* of Diomedes and Odysseus, an uncommon theme, slips at 336 into the familiar slayings by one hero.)

The quality of balance in oral poetry is best known in the extreme and expanded form propounded by Whitman.⁴⁴ Formulations of this sort will almost certainly contain the word 'geometric'. The metaphor is archaeological not mathematical. For part of the

⁴⁰ E.g., *Serbo-Croatian Heroic Songs*, 242-3.

⁴³ Russo, *Arion* vii (1968) 286-94, analyses further examples, especially *Od. v init.*

⁴¹ H. M. and N. K. Chadwick, *The Growth of Literature*, ii 441.

⁴⁴ *Homer and the Heroic Tradition*, 249 ff.

⁴² *Singer* 159-60.

principle of balance is the idea, entirely reasonable in itself, that a similar outlook would be shared both by Homer and by the contemporary decorators of Geometric pottery. Literally, balance means that in good parataxis episodes are arranged in mirrored fashion around a central scene. Kirk and Lord have both adequately dealt with the excesses to which a good idea has been pushed.⁴⁵ It is, of course, in defiance of the dramatic aspect of the Homeric plots to attribute such importance to a *central* scene. But in a moderate form the idea that in good parataxis scenes are balanced, or constructed out of balanced elements, is one that is widespread throughout all primitive epic,⁴⁶ and is easily seen in *Iliad A*.

Finally, it appears to be characteristic of the oral poet that he has a certain *horror vacui*. Not for him the art that achieves its effect by economy, by the isolation of essential features. He is inclined to elaboration and duplication. A minor duel in Homer assigns one shot to each opponent: major warriors confronting each other are allowed (besides the interest of divinities) *two* ordinary shots, not special shots. This cumulation of detail derives from the paratactic mode of narration but it is very important artistically, so important that it was visible to Parry's informants.⁴⁷ Most oral styles with their formulae and archaisms are slightly pretentious and need to be matched by a full-bodied narrative. The lack of ornamentation results in a very jejune style indeed. Lord has quoted an excellent illustration of the difference. In 1935 Parry induced a Bosnian singer, one Mumin, to sing a poem in the presence of another singer, one Avdo. Mumin's song was of 2,294 lines and of average quality. When he had finished, Avdo was asked to sing the same song. He did so, but lengthened it as he sang to 6,313 lines. His elaboration contributed not only its own richness but brought out qualities of character and feeling also.⁴⁸ We are well accustomed to the sustained high standard of Homeric ornamentation, to the speeches and similes, but it is very likely unique to the two extant epics. The poems of the Cycle have all a much higher content of essential incident squeezed into a much smaller compass, with the dismal results visible in such a fragment as *Ilias Parva* 19 (Allen):

αὐτὰρ Ἀχιλλῆος μεγαθύμου φαίδιμος υἱός
Ἐκτορέην ἄλοχον κάταγεν κοίλας ἐπὶ νῆας.
παῖδα δ' ἔλων ἐκ κόλπου εὐπλοκάμοιο τιθήνης
ρίψε ποδὸς τεταγῶν ἀπὸ πύργου, τὸν δὲ πεσόντα
ἔλλαβε πορφύρεος θάνατος καὶ μοῖρα κραταιή.

Could not Neoptolemos speak, one wonders. Had Andromache no feelings? Had the poet no feelings?

The vice of this style would be over-ornamentation, a disproportion between one part of the narrative and another. Was it good to have *two* rescues of Aeneas in *Iliad E*?⁴⁹ And *five* formal *aristeiai*?⁵⁰ Has not too much space been devoted to the Chariot Race and the Cyclops in comparison with adjacent episodes? Happily, examples of good proportion are more easily discovered.

Ornamentation may be better in another way than that of mere extent. Because the subject matter is repetitive, traditional art is very allusive. *Iliad* and *Odyssey* are based on snippets of saga and presuppose a vast knowledge on the part of the audience. A few introductory words from the poet and we know whereabouts we are in the long story of the Heroic Age, but the rest of it is not banished from our minds. To an audience nourished

⁴⁵ See *Songs* 261-3 and *Singer* 168.

⁴⁶ Cf. *Singer* 92.

⁴⁷ Cf. *Serbo-Croatian Heroic Songs*, 239. The informant (Zogić, a great stickler for 'accuracy') accused bad singers of adding to a song to get the reputation of being better singers. 'That's what people like, the ornamenting of a song.'

⁴⁸ See *Singer* 78.

⁴⁹ *Il. E* 297-317 and 431-53.

⁵⁰ Aeneas, Menelaos with Antilochos, Hector I, Odysseus, Hector II, *Il. E* 541-710.

on countless heroic tales the analogy of Meleagros must have been apparent long before Phoenix made it explicit, in fact from the first word of the *Iliad*. Zeus's mention of Aigisthos at the beginning of the *Odyssey* cannot help being programmatic, because it evokes the themes of ἀτασθαλίαι and the return of the avenger. The same is true of the diction. Every use of a formula evokes its other uses,⁵¹ and it is up to the good poet to grasp and make use of these associations.

It has been said that the concept of oral poetry has rendered obsolete critical ideas that have served us well for many generations, that it has removed from cognizance many things that literary critics have long considered their province. There is truth in this, but it is not the whole truth. I separate the performance from the poem, and set the performance apart for its own special criticism. I should then wish to distinguish the episodes from the essential structure of plot which they clothe with life. The art of the episodes 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.

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⁵¹ *Singer* 148.