

The Myth of Milman Parry: Ajax or Elpenor?

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The Myth of Milman Parry

Oral traditions are creative: they romanticize and sensationalize otherwise mundane events. The memory of a historical but probably minor conflict between the Mycenaeans and Trojans over commercial interests—access to the straits of the Hellespont that connected the Black Sea to the Aegean—evolved over time into an extensive cycle of myth about a ten-year siege of Troy triggered by the abduction of the most beautiful woman in the world. Oral traditions are also fluid. The poet of one version of this mythic cycle, later called the *Iliad*, took full advantage of this fluidity to make dramatic changes in his inherited material both in small details and in larger themes. He brazenly substitutes the nymph Charis for Aphrodite as Hephaestus' wife; the crafter of the shield of Achilles could not be married to the matron goddess of Achilles' dire foes! He adds the motif of hunger to the paradigmatic tale of Niobe that Achilles relates to Priam; like Niobe, Achilles and Priam must remember to eat, even though they are both worn out with weeping. Contrary to the tradition, he gives the wife of Meleager the name Cleopatra. As a morphemic inversion of the name of one of the *Iliad's* central characters, Patrocles, this name-change buttresses the paradigmatic value of Phoenix's tale of Meleager: both Cleopatra and Patrocles succeed in bringing their sulking heroes back onto the battlefield. Homer refashioned his inherited material in order to have it better serve his particular narrative; this was his prerogative as an oral poet.

The Homeric scholar Milman Parry (1902-1935) appreciated the tension between inherited and innovative epic material better than most, having conducted a detailed investigation of the Greek epic tradition from its smallest to largest components (from formulae to type-scenes to larger themes), and having determined that their traditional nature betrayed their oral composition and transmission. But little could Parry anticipate that his own life and death would become the material of a creative and fluid oral—and eventually written—tradition, romanticized and sensationalized by both his admirers and critics.

Within a few years of Parry's sudden and unexpected death at the age of 33—the consequence of a fatal wound to the chest by a bullet from his own pistol—his life and death took on heroic proportions. In tributes Parry was compared to Lawrence of Arabia: an adventuresome spirit and love for the exotic had led both to journey abroad; both had discovered a nobility and heroism in a foreign culture that was lacking in their own worlds; both had met

untimely and tragic deaths just a few months apart in 1935.¹ Parry's contribution to Homeric studies was compared—albeit equivocally—to Charles Darwin's contributions to biology.² As time passed Parry's heroic persona grew to mythic proportions. Parry was said to remind those who became acquainted with him of Don Quixote.³ He was described by others as Alexander the Great *redivivus*: both had established a new order in the whole territory of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, Alexander in the field of battle, Parry in the field of academia; both had died tragically at the age of 33; after their deaths their successors had taken over their territories but could not match their masters' ingenuity.⁴ Parry's work began to be compared to that of artistic geniuses like the English poet John Keats, the French artist Paul Gauguin, and the Russian composer Igor Stravinsky, the works of all of whom were not fully appreciated until after their deaths.⁵ Parry himself had contributed to this mystique. He was known to don the traditional dress of Yugoslavian heroes during his fieldwork and to regale his friends and family with heroic tales.⁶ And, on the occasion of his departure from Yugoslavia, after his first expedition in 1933, he even

¹ H. Levin (1937:265): "The accident in Los Angeles on the third of December, 1935, was as trivial and pointless as that which killed his hero, Colonel Lawrence of Arabia, a few months before. Lawrence, like Parry, had been a scholar. Parry, like Lawrence, recognized in an alien people the dignity and magnanimity he had missed in his own world. To him, as to Lawrence, the heroic values were no less real than the unexpected explosion of a loaded pistol." Milman's son Adam too compares his father to T. E. Lawrence, as well as to Ernest Hemingway, because of his adventuresome spirit and love of the exotic (A. Parry 1971:xxvi, xxxvii).

² H. T. Wade-Gery (1952:38-39): "The most important assault made on Homer's creativeness in recent years is the work of Milman Parry, who may be called the Darwin of Homeric studies. As Darwin seemed to many to have removed the finger of God from the creation of the world and of man, so Milman Parry has seemed to some to remove the creative poet from the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*."

³ H. Levin (1937:260): "Against this cosmopolite background, his return to America contrasted unsatisfactorily. Parry was capable of meeting fully civilized or definitely uncivilized people on their own ground, but not of reaching his level on the faculty of a small middle-western college. The souvenirs of that year which he was happiest to take with him to Harvard were a pair of handsome white dogs, the larger worthy of the name of Argos. He used to wash them in Fresh Pond until a policeman abruptly informed him that it also served as the Cambridge reservoir and he was forced to stride home after two lathered and shivering animals. That was not the only occasion on which he reminded his friends of another connoisseur of heroic lore, Don Quixote."

⁴ W. B. Stanford (1971:36): "From the time when in 1924, at the age of twenty-three, Milman Parry began work on his thesis for a doctorate of letters in the Sorbonne, he concerned himself almost entirely with the style of the Homeric poems. When he died ten years later he had, like Alexander the Great at a similar age, established a new order in the whole territory of those much-disputed poems. After his death his Epigonoï developed his conquests. A new age in the study of early Greek epic poetry had begun."

⁵ A. Nicolson in his popular book *Why Homer Matters* (2014): "Milman Parry is a god of Homeric studies" (73); "The motivations apparent in Keats are in Parry too" (75); "Parry is like Homer's Gauguin or Stravinsky" (89).

⁶ A. Parry (1971:xxxvii) mentions that Milman took a photograph of himself in native dress, revealing "a romantic and even histrionic side of himself which reminds one of T. E. Lawrence." This photograph appears on page 438 of the 1971 hardback edition of *The Collected Papers of Milman Parry*, but it is not reprinted in the 1987 paperback edition. Parry is apparently wearing the traditional dress of his host Began Ljuca, a Muslim story-teller and adjutant in the court of King Nikola of Montenegro, who helped Parry and Lord with their fieldwork in the town of Bijelo Polje in northern Montenegro. The hat, vest, and sash that Began wears, and even the cigarette holder and large-handled knife that he carries, in a photograph in the Milman Parry Collection of Oral Literature (MPC0749, accessible in Harvard Library's HOLLIS Images catalog), are the same as Parry wears and carries in the photograph on page 438. The background is also identical, so both photographs seem to have been taken at the same place and on the same occasion.

became the subject of a heroic song composed by the singer (*guslar*) Milovan Vojičić and fully ornamented with traditional formulas: “Professor Milman Parry the glorious,” the “gray falcon,” who “flew from the beautiful land of America,” “to our heroic fatherland,” to “gather songs of heroes.”⁷

Parry’s unexpected death too took on the aura of a tragic, and even heroic, event. His death was dramatic enough in reality and had no need of embellishment; nonetheless, details were changed and invented to sensationalize the event in oral traditions, in the popular press, and even in the academic publications of professional scholars. Classical scholars in particular, like the epic poets whom they studied, took the liberty to manipulate the inherited details in order to fit them better into the frameworks of their own narratives. An embellishment that began to appear very shortly—after the observation of a respectful silence—was that Milman Parry’s death was a suicide. He had deliberately shot himself with his own pistol while alone in a hotel room in Los Angeles. Another embellishment followed upon this one: that Parry had killed himself out of despondency over Harvard’s refusal to grant him a permanent appointment. We had, so to speak, a modern Ajax, who killed himself out of anger and dismay over not receiving the armor of Achilles, a prize that he thought he deserved. At first an oral tradition, these embellishments eventually began to work their way into written documents, not just in the popular press but even in the serious publications of highly-regarded classical scholars. This version of the event has now become a staple in the broadly-used media of digital biographies and encyclopedias.

In what follows I aim to focus on the myths that have arisen around Milman Parry’s life and death. This is, admittedly, a trivial topic compared to Parry’s enduring intellectual legacy: his discovery that the Homeric epics are the result of a long oral tradition; his formal articulation of the oral-formulaic theory; and his (and his student Albert Lord’s) hypothesis of oral dictation as the driving force behind the survival of the Homeric epics as we know them. Parry’s scholarship brought new questions to the rich banquet of Homeric Studies, and it caused scholars to reconsider old ones in a new light. Was Homer completely illiterate? When and how were the Homeric epics initially written down? What is the relationship between our inherited manuscripts of the Homeric epics and their first written forms? Did the Homeric epics continue to be transmitted in multiple versions even after their initial transcription? Does the oral-formulaic theory completely undermine the analytic view of multiple authorship? Does it preclude creativity or originality on the part of the poet? There is an enormous body of literature on Parry’s intellectual legacy, and to become familiar with it one can do no better than to begin with Adam Parry’s introduction to his father’s collected works (A. Parry 1971), balanced by Stephen Mitchell and Gregory Nagy’s introduction to Albert Lord’s *Singer of Tales* (Mitchell and Nagy 2000), with Lord’s *Singer of Tales* itself, and enlarged by John Miles Foley’s exhaustive annotated bibliographies and monographs on Parry’s influence on the study of oral poetry (Foley 1981, 1985, 1987, 1988, 1990, 1991, 1995, and 1999a). The bibliography is vast, and I have contributed to it from time to time myself (Reece 1993, 2005, 2009, 2011a, 2011b, 2014, and 2015). The great majority of scholars who have contributed to Parry’s intellectual legacy, however, have not been bothered by the details of Parry’s biography or by the myths that grew

⁷ “The Song of Milman Parry” is printed in Lord 1960:272-75.

up around his life and death. And that is as it should be. Here, though, I wish to focus precisely on these myths, trivial as they may seem to some in comparison with Parry's rich intellectual legacy. The two topics overlap at times, and I have tried to highlight where they do, but in essence I am interested here in Parry's *mythos* rather than his *logos*.

The Final Days of Milman Parry's Life

The following details of the final days of Parry's life are drawn from the police report, coroner's report, and death certificate,⁸ and from contemporary newspaper accounts,⁹ with background material drawn from national censuses, birth, marriage, and death certificates, city records, voter lists, passport applications, ship manifests, academic transcripts, and university archives,¹⁰ and from other contemporary documents by people who knew the Parrys.¹¹ While these details paint an interesting human portrait of Parry in his final days, they lack the sensational features of the many embellished accounts.

On September 12th of 1935 Milman Parry (age 33), along with his wife Marian (age 36), daughter Marian (age 11), and son Adam (age 7), as well as his assistant Albert Lord (age 23), arrived on Ellis Island aboard the S.S. Conte Grande from Trieste, Italy. The Parrys had spent the previous fifteen months in Yugoslavia, and Lord had joined them for the last eleven. The Parrys

⁸ In 1999 I obtained from the Registrar-Recorder/County Clerk of Los Angeles an official copy of Milman Parry's Certificate of Death. The coroner's report is embedded in the Certificate of Death. I reconstructed the police report, which can only be obtained by subpoena, from contemporary newspaper accounts, which are largely based on *Associated Press* and *United Press International* reports.

⁹ The most informative accounts are in the December 4th and 5th issues of *The Los Angeles Times* and the December 4th issues of *The Oakland Tribune*, *The New York Times*, *The Boston Globe*, *The Harvard Crimson*, and *The Joplin News Herald*. Parry's death was widely reported, and additional details can be found in the December 4th issues of *The Hanover Evening Sun*, *The Biddeford Daily Journal*, *The Carbondale Daily Free Press*, *The Madison Wisconsin State Journal*, *The Nevada State Journal*, *The San Antonio Express*, and *The Bluefield Daily Telegraph*.

¹⁰ I gained access to many of the U.S. federal census records (espec. 1880-1940), birth, marriage, and death certificates, military records, U.S. city directories (for addresses), state voter lists, U.S. high school yearbook collections, passport applications, and U.S. immigration forms (form 630A: "List of United States Citizens Arriving at a Port of Entry") through a subscription to Ancestry.com LLC. I gained access to Milman Parry's employment and teaching records at Harvard from the reports of the President of Harvard College and of the Harvard University Treasurer, as published in the *Official Register of Harvard University* (available online at <https://guides.library.harvard.edu/harvard-radcliffe-online-historical-reference-shelf>).

¹¹ I received from Milman Parry's grandson, Andrew Feld, an official copy of Parry's academic transcripts from Berkeley, both for the B.A. and M.A., a ten-page draft of a time-line of Parry's life crafted by Sterling Dow in 1964, and an anonymous four-page draft detailing some of the major events of Parry's life. I acquired from the Milman Parry Collection of Oral Literature a copy of a personal letter from Milman to his sister Addison in November of 1935 and a transcription of an interview by Pamela Newhouse of Milman's wife Marian in 1981. I have also benefitted from conversations with David Elmer, Professor of the Classics and Curator of the Milman Parry Collection of Oral Literature at Harvard University, with Robert Kanigel, Professor Emeritus of Science Writing at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, who is in the process of writing a full-length biography of Milman Parry for Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, and with Blaž Zabel, Ph.D. candidate in classics at Durham University, who is writing a dissertation that includes a consideration of Milman Parry's life. Their reconstructions of the details of Parry's life largely dovetail with mine, though they come to some different conclusions in areas where the documentary evidence is obscure.

had rented a house on a hill overlooking the Adriatic Sea in the scenic town of Dubrovnik, where the family would establish a home, and from which Milman and Albert could go out on excursions to various regions of the country to make acoustic and dictated records of live performances by South Slavic singers (*guslari*). By all measures their fieldwork had been a stunning success: they had recorded around 700,000 lines of South Slavic song, more than 12,500 individual texts, mostly in written form, but also around 750 of them in oral form recorded on 3,580 aluminum disks, all of which they would shortly deposit at Harvard University in what would later be called the Milman Parry Collection of Oral Literature.¹² The timing of Parry's fieldwork was felicitous, resulting in a unique collection that could never be replicated: it was late enough for Parry to use new technologies of electronic recording but early enough that there still existed a true living oral tradition in Yugoslavia that could be recorded.

Parry had been appointed in 1929 to a position at Harvard as Instructor in Greek and Latin and Tutor in the Division of Ancient Languages. After three years as instructor, Parry had been promoted in 1932 to Assistant Professor of Greek and Latin and appointed to a three-year term. Then, during the summer of 1935, as he had recently learned while still in Yugoslavia, Parry had been reappointed to a second three-year term as Assistant Professor of Greek and Latin. Parry had been granted a reduced teaching assignment for the fall semester of 1935: a single undergraduate course in Greek prose composition with only three students—and with the teaching responsibilities shared with two other professors. He needed some leisure to unpack and organize the considerable materials from his previous year's fieldwork in Yugoslavia, materials that would provide, he thought, the foundation for a new book-length project on comparative oral traditions, to be titled *The Singer of Tales*.

The reduced teaching responsibilities also gave Parry the latitude, late in the fall semester, to make what appears to have been an unexpected trip out to California in order to attend to some family matters. So, after organizing his collected materials, persuading his apprentice Albert Lord to begin graduate study in comparative literature at Harvard, attending to the bulk of his minimal fall semester teaching duties, and delivering a lecture on his field work at one of Harvard's undergraduate residences just a few days previous, he set out for California in late November for what was expected to be a fairly short visit.¹³ He fully intended to get back to the East Coast by Christmas, at the latest, for he had submitted an abstract of a paper for the annual meeting of the American Philological Association to be held at the Hotel Astor in New

¹² In addition to the records from his fieldwork in Yugoslavia, the estate of Milman Parry donated to the Harvard Library upon his death "875 manuscript note-books and a large collection of records, as yet untranscribed, containing much new material on Serbian ballad poetry, together with 202 volumes, 303 pamphlets, and 13 maps," in addition to "a rich treasure of rare books from Parry's personal library." So Briggs 1937:286, and also Bynum 1974:264-65.

¹³ Milman's wife Marian was already in California, so he left his two children Marian (age 11) and Adam (age 7) in the custody of his colleague William Greene and his wife, who lived just down the street from the Parrys (so *The Daily Boston Globe* [December 4, 1935:17]). However, Milman Parry's granddaughter, Laura Feld, has shared with me (via e-mail, April 3, 2019) her mother Marian's memory that their new live-in maid, a young Swede, took care of the children at their new apartment in Cambridge (at 43 Linnaean Street) during their parents' visit to California.

York City from December 26-28.¹⁴ This paper, titled “Homer and Huso: I. The Singer’s Rests in Greek and Southslavic Heroic Song,” was drawn from his recent fieldwork: it considered the singers’ rests during long performances of traditional heroic songs among Bosnian Muslims and what these might suggest about the divisions of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* into books or chants. Instead, as fate would have it, Parry’s name would be included in the necrology of the A.P.A. proceedings, and his paper would be read “by title.”¹⁵

Marian Parry had gone out to Los Angeles earlier in November to attend to her physically ailing mother, but she had met up with Milman in the Bay Area by late November, where they spent some time visiting Milman’s relatives in Berkeley, Oakland, and San Francisco. Milman’s father Isaac and his third wife Blanche (Milman’s mother Alice had died seventeen years earlier) lived in San Francisco. His oldest sibling, his half-brother George, and family lived in Oakland. One of his older sisters, Mary Addison, still single, lived in Berkeley, but her twin sister Mary Allison had married in 1930 and moved to Houston, Texas. His older sister Lucile, whom Milman and Marian intended to visit later in their trip, had also married and moved to San Diego. Parry also took advantage of the occasion to visit his former teachers at Berkeley.¹⁶ Perhaps he had timed his visit to coincide with the 37th annual meeting of the Philological Association of the Pacific Coast at Stanford University on November 29-30, where his former mentor at Berkeley, George Calhoun, was giving the presidential address. In any case, it appears that the Parrys stayed in the Bay Area for several days.¹⁷

By December 3rd Milman and Marian had made their way from San Francisco down to Los Angeles. Their purpose in visiting Los Angeles was to assist Marian’s ill mother, Mildred Thanouser, with financial matters related to her estate. The details of these financial matters remain obscure, but they appear to have been important enough to bring Marian, and later Milman, on a cross-country journey to Los Angeles. Mildred, 64 years old, had been living in a large and luxurious home at 6680 Whitley Terrace, near the Hollywood Bowl, and may have been planning to move into a smaller dwelling in the Nob Hill Towers at 2430 Ocean View

¹⁴ In fact, Milman expected to be back in Boston well before mid-December, but, once he was able to assess the situation in California, he sent a telegram to his close friend James Ware, Lecturer in Chinese at Harvard, notifying him that he might not be able to return to Boston until December 17 (so *The Daily Boston Globe* [December 4th, 1935:17]).

¹⁵ I am citing here from the proceedings of the 67th annual meeting of the A.P.A. in Post 1935:vi (panel listing), xii (necrology), and xlvii (paper abstract).

¹⁶ Sterling Dow relates in some notes that he composed in 1964 about Parry’s life—now housed in the Milman Parry Collection—that his former professor, Ivan Linforth, recalled having a visit with Milman at the time and that he seemed happy, quiet, and composed.

¹⁷ The chronology is very difficult to reconstruct here. A letter written by Milman to his sister Addison on November 16th—recently donated to the Milman Parry Collection—indicates that he was still in Cambridge at that time, and that Marian was with her mother in Los Angeles and was planning to come up to Berkeley. But if this is the case, the statement on the coroner’s report that Milman had been in California for 21 days prior to his death must be inaccurate. Perhaps the detail of Milman’s “twenty-one days” in California on the coroner’s report was extrapolated from the number of days that Marian had been in California. I owe this last conjecture to Robert Kanigel, who is writing a full-length biography of Milman Parry.

Avenue, six miles closer to the downtown area.¹⁸ Mildred had lost her husband Frank when she was 43, while they were living in Milwaukee, and had been left to raise her 16-year-old daughter Marian there. She was very close to her only child and also to her son-in-law Milman. When Marian headed off to college at the University of California, Berkeley, Mildred had followed, and the two even shared a rented house in Oakland for some time. There Mildred was able to make the acquaintance of Marian's college classmate, Milman, who had lost his own mother when he was a senior in high school. Mildred herself decided to take classes toward a master's degree at Berkeley and stayed in California long enough to witness Marian and Milman's marriage in 1923 and the birth of their daughter, also Marian, in 1924. Mildred had even visited the three of them for an extended period the following year in Paris, while Milman was studying at the Sorbonne. Since then, Mildred had moved to Los Angeles.

On the afternoon of December 3 the Parrys, having just arrived in Los Angeles from San Francisco by plane, rented a suite in the Palms Hotel at 626 South Alvarado Street, opposite Westlake Park (renamed MacArthur Park in 1942). Built ten years earlier, this 100-room hotel with private bath and phone charged \$5 per week for a room. The Palms Hotel was conveniently located just a ten-minute walk from the Nob Hill Towers. Apparently the financial matters that they had come to Los Angeles to help Mildred resolve were not too pressing by this time, for the Parrys had made plans to visit San Diego the next day for an extended stay with Milman's older sister Lucile Youngjohn, her husband Ramiel, and their two children Christine (age 13) and Milman (age 8).

Once they entered their suite at the Palms Hotel, Marian remained in the main room while Parry went into the bedroom to unpack his suitcase. Very shortly thereafter, Marian heard the muffled report of a gunshot from the bedroom and rushed in to find Parry wounded and bleeding on the floor. Milman had apparently gotten into the habit of carrying a handgun in response to the dangerous conditions he encountered during his travels through rural areas of

¹⁸ I base this conjecture on the sparse documentary evidence that has survived. Mildred's address at 6680 Whitley Terrace in Hollywood is noted in the October 8th, 1935, issue of the *Los Angeles Times*, A6, and also in Milman's November 16 letter to his sister Addison. But the "local address" listed for both Milman and Marian on the coroner's report is 2430 Ocean View Avenue (the Nob Hill Towers). Whose address could that be other than Mildred's? The "financial matters related to her estate" plausibly had something to do with her move to a new residence. Milman Parry's granddaughter, Laura Feld, has shared with me (via e-mail, April 1, 2019) the additional detail, drawn from the family's memory, that "Mildred's substantial fortune was disappearing into the hands of gigolos and gangsters."

Yugoslavia.¹⁹ He had packed his handgun, wrapped in a shirt, in his suitcase. The safety catch had jostled loose, or had not been set to start with, and as Parry was unpacking his suitcase the handgun discharged from inside, shooting a bullet into Parry's chest that grazed his heart. Marian immediately called an ambulance, but Parry died before any medical help could arrive on the scene.

Detective Lieutenants Ed Romero and B. L. Jones of the L.A. Police Department filed the police report after questioning Marian and examining the hotel room. They reported that the incident was an accident, the weapon having discharged when Parry reached into his suitcase. The Los Angeles County coroner, Frank A. Nance, who examined Parry's body, made a formal inquiry into Parry's death, and signed his death certificate, reported that the principal cause of death was a "gunshot wound of the chest," that the death was due to an "accident" (the terms "suicide" and "homicide" are crossed out on the death certificate), that the nature of the injury was a "shooting," and that the manner of injury was a handgun "accidentally discharged in suitcase." Dr. Wagner from the Los Angeles Coroner's Office also signed the death certificate, and Dr. George Parrish filed the certificate. No autopsy was performed. All contemporary newspaper accounts, which are largely based on *Associated Press* and *United Press International* reports, which are, in turn, drawn from the police report, attribute Parry's death to an unfortunate accident.

A funeral service was held two days later, on Thursday, December 5, at 1:30 pm at the Pierce Brothers Mortuary. After the service Parry's body was cremated at the Los Angeles Crematory. No record survives of the disposition of the ashes.

In sum, based on contemporary documents, there appears to have been nothing mysterious or sensational or heroic about Parry's death. Carelessness resulted in an unfortunate mishap that led to the sad and pointless death of one of the rising stars in the fields of classics, comparative literature, and anthropology.

Obituaries, tributes, and memorials by those who knew Parry well—his teachers, colleagues, and students—all attributed Parry's death to an unfortunate accident. In his 1934-35 annual report, the president of Harvard, James Conant, informed the college that "Milman Parry . . . was killed by a tragic accident in Los Angeles on December 3 in his thirty-fourth

¹⁹ Adam Parry (1971:xxxvi) reports that "the country itself was wild . . . banditry was not uncommon in the inland valleys, and an air of risk and adventure always accompanied Parry's several trips into the interior." Sterling Dow asserts in the notes that he composed in 1964 about Parry's life that Parry was killed by the very pistol he had carried in Yugoslavia. Erich Segal (1971:16), in his review of *The Collected Papers of Milman Parry* in the *New York Times*, reports that Milman Parry carried a gun: "Yugoslavia in the thirties was primitive and wild; Parry was obliged to carry a gun for his own protection." Mary Knight (1993:12) also reports that Parry carried a gun in Yugoslavia: "He killed himself accidentally with a gun he had long carried to defend himself against bandits." She informed me (via e-mail, December 8, 2018) that her sources for this statement were Charles Rowan Beye and John Miles Foley. Beye, she says, was confident in his sources, including Adam Parry, who were personal contacts. Barry Powell, in his contribution to a 1993 discussion on the University of Kentucky's Classics-L "listserv," says: "There is a lot of folklore about the death of the Parrys, but the story I heard is that Milman often carried a loaded pistol with him (a carry-over from days in Yugoslavia, where there were bandits on the roads)." Marian Parry (daughter of Milman) gave a short speech at a 2010 conference at Harvard, documented in the archives of the Milman Parry Collection of Oral Literature, in which she describes her father bringing back home as a guest to Dubrovnik a Slavic "hero" who sported a gun in his sash. The hero pointed out the notches in the handle and told her that they represented the number of men he had killed. He went on to say that "it was best when they died fast, both for them and for me." And, indeed, some of the photos of Slavic "heroes" in traditional garb in the Milman Parry Collection illustrate a highly-ornamented handle of a pistol sticking out from the sash.

year.”²⁰ In the February, 1936, issue of the *Harvard University Gazette*, Parry’s colleagues Charles Gulick, William Greene, and John Finley (1936:93) concluded their obituary for Parry with the words: “On what was to have been a brief visit to California, he met his accidental death in Los Angeles on December 3, 1935.”²¹ Parry’s student at Harvard, Harry Levin, in a touching memorial to his mentor in *The Classical Journal*, lamented (1937:265): “The accident in Los Angeles on the third of December, 1935, was as trivial and pointless as that which killed his hero, Colonel Lawrence of Arabia, a few months before.” Parry’s advisor at the Sorbonne, Aimé Puech, in an affectionate tribute to his student, wrote, upon hearing the news of his death (1936:87): “Une triste nouvelle m’est arrive récemment d’Amérique; ce charmant Milman Parry, que nous avons connu, jeune étudiant, à la Sorbonne, et qui, retourné dans son pays d’origine, s’était fait apprécier et aimer à Harvard, comme on l’appréciait et aimait à Paris, vient de mourir, victime d’un accident tragique.”

Nonetheless, as is often the case in the wake of a sudden and unexpected event, initial accounts, especially in the newspaper reports from all over the country, contained conflicting details. Was Milman Parry 32 or 33 at the time of his death? Where did he go to college: Berkeley, Stanford, or the University of Southern California? Was his wife’s name Marion or Marian? Did the Parrys travel together or separately from Boston to the West Coast? Did the Parrys arrive in Los Angeles on December 2nd or 3rd—or had they arrived three weeks earlier? Did they come to Los Angeles directly from Cambridge, or did they pass through San Francisco? Did they check into a hotel or an apartment? Did they check in during the morning or afternoon? Did Parry shoot himself in a hotel/apartment or in his mother-in-law’s home? How long had they been at the hotel/apartment when the gun shot occurred? Did Marian hear the gunshot from the next room, or did she fail to hear it at all? What kind of firearm did Parry possess: a .25-caliber pistol, a .38-caliber automatic pistol, a revolver, or a shotgun?²² Did he die in the hotel/apartment or *en route* to the hospital? A comparison of these initial accounts offers a revealing study in the unreliability of both oral and written versions of unexpected but newsworthy events.

The Myth of Milman Parry’s Suicide

It wasn’t long before whispers of suicide began to circulate. Some simply found the circumstances suspicious: a man killed by his own pistol in a hotel room in downtown Los Angeles. Some apparently relished the contemplation of the macabre. But others appear to have had a deep desire to see in Parry an epic, or perhaps even tragic, figure. They seemingly subscribed to the notion that truly exceptional human beings, and especially “those whom the

²⁰ Conant 1936:30: “Milman Parry, Assistant Professor of Greek and Latin, was killed by a tragic accident in Los Angeles on December 3 in his thirty-fourth year. By his death the University loses one of its most promising younger scholars.”

²¹ Similarly William Greene’s memorial of Parry the following year (1937:536): “On what was expected to be a brief visit to California, Parry met his accidental death in Los Angeles on December 3, 1935.”

²² The introduction of a shotgun to the story is probably much later, in spite of Marco Gemin’s (2014:1) assertion: “Reports at the time said that he was accidentally killed by a shotgun in a hotel room in Los Angeles.”

gods love,” tend to die heroic deaths at a young age. A sensational death at 33 years of age was particularly appropriate for a larger-than-life hero, calling to mind Alexander the Great, Jesus Christ, or King Richard II. A mere accident was just too trivial and meaningless. Classical scholars, steeped in the Greek epic traditions as they were, did not want to see in Parry an accident-prone Elpenor, who in a drunken stupor fell off the roof of Circe’s house and broke his neck; they preferred an heroic Ajax, who out of anger and despondency chose to fall on his own sword after not receiving the prize he thought that he deserved. This is borne out in the recurrent oral tradition—one that arose fairly quickly after his death—that Milman Parry had committed suicide, and, moreover, that he had done so out of despondency over Harvard’s refusal to grant him a permanent appointment.

This oral tradition became pervasive enough that Charles Rowan Beye, in his entry on Milman Parry in a 1990 biography of classical scholars, felt the need to squelch it (1990:364):

On 3 December 1935, in a Los Angeles hotel room, Parry died of wounds from a gun he had in his possession. Despite the academic world’s persistent determination to see this as a suicide on the theory that Parry was denied tenure at Harvard, there is no evidence that he would not have been promoted (he had just been reappointed to a second three-year term as Assistant Professor in the summer of 1935), and the physical circumstances of his death argue against suicide.

Such attempts as Beye’s, however, did little to suppress the oral tradition. In 1993 there occurred a sustained and wide-ranging conversation on the University of Kentucky’s Classical Greek and Latin Discussion Group (Classics-L, an electronic “Listserv”) about the untimely and tragic deaths of scholars who worked in the field of Homeric Studies: Milman Parry, Adam Parry, Anne Amory Parry, Michael Ventris, Colin MacLeod.²³ The discussants were mostly prominent scholars in the field of classics and especially Homeric studies. I record some of their comments below, but, because of the informal nature of the discussion, I have not included their names.

First, there appear in the informal conversation, as in any oral tradition, numerous factual errors: that Parry died in an auto accident (a conflation with his son Adam’s death); that he died in San Francisco while visiting his wife’s parents (he was in Los Angeles, as was his mother-in-law, but his father-in-law had died 20 years earlier); that he was in Los Angeles because the annual meeting of the American Philological Association was being held there (the meeting was in New York City that year).

Several discussants express suspicion about the unusual nature of Parry’s death: “Parry’s obituary, which reports that Parry was unpacking his bags in the next room when the gun went off accidentally, is bound to raise anyone’s eyebrows.” “I suspect that many readers of Parry’s obituaries found it possible to infer the possibility of suicide.” “Milman Parry shot himself while he was cleaning his gun, according to his family. It may or may not have been an accident.” “Of course, what appears in print after a man’s death is always sanitized—speak no ill of the dead. Suicide is a nasty business and easy to cover up.”

²³ The searchable archives of the University of Kentucky’s Classical Greek and Latin Discussion Group (Classics-L) no longer go back as early as 1993. The archives are available at <http://lsv.uky.edu/archives/classics-l.html>.

Some discussants take the additional step of relating Parry's death to Harvard's unwillingness to offer him a permanent position: "It always takes me aback, but Parry had just been denied tenure at Harvard." "I heard that Milman Parry died in Los Angeles after being denied tenure." "Harvard's ill-treatment of Parry is a standard part of the tale." "Milman Parry was in Los Angeles to take up teaching duties [having broken his ties with Harvard, presumably]."

Digital media such as this electronic discussion group are modern analogues of ancient oral traditions, and the association of Parry's death with suicide has seeped deep into this digital universe, permeating standard digital biographies and encyclopedias. The short articles on Milman Parry in the digital versions of *The Cambridge Dictionary of American Biography* and *The Hutchinson Unabridged Encyclopedia* state that Milman Parry "taught at Harvard from 1930 until his sudden death (possibly suicide) in 1935." The article on Milman Parry in that font of all modern knowledge, *Wikipedia* (accessed 03/22/2019), asserts that Parry "died in Los Angeles from either an accidental gunshot while unpacking his suitcase or suicide."

Popular works by scholars outside the immediate discipline of classics have continued to perpetuate this myth to the present day. So Jonathan Gottschall in his 2008 book *The Rape of Troy* (16): "Classicists have argued, often bitterly, about whether it may have been a suicide linked to depression over possible denial of tenure at Harvard." Also Colin Wells (2015:95) in a series of articles from 2015 to 2018 on the introduction of the alphabet to Greece: "In 1930s America such phrasing was commonly used to mask suicide, which left a greater residue of social stigma than it does now."²⁴ More often than not such comments are inserted flippantly, for their sensational value, and do not have much to do with the larger narrative of the work.

However, more complex and sophisticated versions of the myth of Parry's death have been fashioned by some highly-regarded classical scholars who have committed their suspicions of Parry's suicide to print in the more traditional media of scholarly reviews, articles, and books. These versions tend to be more insidious inasmuch as they make a deliberate attempt to mold their accounts of the events to support their own larger narratives. They are, in a sense, creating a Parry in an image that they find useful for their purposes, and, in some cases, they even appear to be creating a Parry in their own image.

I offer as an example, first, the implications that classical scholar William Calder has drawn about Parry's death. We see them in a comment that Calder makes in a review of Paul Dräger's edition of the school notes on Wilamowitz's lectures on Homer's *Iliad* taken by a 20-year-old Swiss student, Alfred Züricher (1867-1895). In a brief aside, Calder (2008:302) observes that Züricher "died in a manner uncannily similar to Milman Parry, whether a suicide or accidentally in his bedroom, shot by his personal revolver." Nothing further; just a brief aside, perhaps to increase the pathos over the death of a promising scholar, whether Züricher or Parry, who died far too young.

²⁴ C. Wells (2015:95): "Speculation about his death continues to this day, and the question remains unsettled. One possible motive for suicide—entrenched academic resistance to Parry's revolutionary ideas—has been commonly assumed, yet seems unlikely." C. Wells (2018:107): "Such phrasing was commonly used at the time to mask suicide or, conceivably, an accident at the hands of a child or other family member. Parry's death remains a blank."

One might not think too much of this except for the fact that this is a narrative that Calder (1977:316-17) had pushed earlier in his accounts of the lives of various classicists in the U.S., but there with the further implication that Parry's suicide was triggered by Harvard's rejection of him, and that Harvard's rejection of him was a result of anti-Semitism. In his description of the professional life of James Loeb, who studied classics as an undergraduate at Harvard and went on to fund and establish the Loeb Classical Library there, Calder asserts that a professional career in classics was unthinkable for an American Jew of the time (Loeb's ancestors were German Jews, and his extended family members were still practicing Jews in New York City in Loeb's own day). Calder goes on to record that Loeb emigrated to Bavaria, and that Harvard never granted him an honorary degree, despite his generosity to the college—although Munich and Cambridge, with which he had much looser ties, saw fit to do so. Calder then mentions two other classicists who suffered similar fates: Charles Waldstein, later Sir Charles Walston, a Jewish-American archaeologist who received a master of arts degree at Columbia in 1873 but who was forced to go abroad to pursue an academic position at Cambridge, and Milman Parry, who “took his own life.”

Calder's strong implication—really much more than an implication—is that Milman Parry, like James Loeb, was shunned by Harvard because of anti-Semitism, but while Loeb responded by emigrating to Bavaria, Parry responded by killing himself. Throughout his many commentaries on the personal correspondence of Ulrich von Wilamowitz-Moellendorff, Calder demonstrates his penchant for salacious and tawdry details about noted scholars, especially details that might tarnish their reputations. Theodor Mommsen was a little man who was irritated that his son-in-law Wilamowitz was forty centimeters taller than he, and therefore refused to be photographed near him (Calder 1980:222-23). James Loeb fell in love with a Christian woman, but his (Jewish) family would not allow his marriage to a gentile; Loeb's ensuing psychological collapse led to his seeking help from Sigmund Freud in Vienna (Calder 1977:317). The sudden and premature death of William Oldfather was thought by some to be a suicide triggered by his despair over the defeat of Germany in WWII (Calder 1976:119). Calder includes these details, apparently, to show that he is “in the know” about the personal lives of these highly-esteemed scholars. His assertion about Parry, though, is not just a flippant aside based on hearsay; the detail of Parry's suicide is marshaled to support his narrative about a deep-seated prejudice against Jewish scholars at Harvard at this time.²⁵ Never mind that Parry's ancestors were Welsh, Scottish, and English Quakers.²⁶ And never mind that Parry had at one time even entertained the

²⁵ Parry's tenure at Harvard does coincide with a time in Harvard's history, under the presidency of Abbott Lawrence Lowell (1909-1933), when there was a conscious effort made to reduce the number of Jewish students. By the early 1920s, 20 to 25 percent of the undergraduate student body at Harvard was Jewish. President Lowell proposed a formal Jewish quota of 12 percent. See M. Keller and P. Keller 2001:48-51; Synnott 2004:195-214; Karabel 2006:77-109. According to M. Keller and P. Keller (2001:243), Herbert Bloch became the Harvard Classics Department's first tenured Jewish professor in 1953, Ernst Badian its second in 1971. To be precise, Badian was appointed to a position in History in 1971 and then also in classics in 1973.

²⁶ So Levin 1937:259; A. Parry 1971:xxii; Beyre 1990:364. Milman's great-great grandfather Thomas Parry emigrated from Pembrokeshire, Wales, according to the 1841 Wales Census, and he is listed on the Exeter, Pennsylvania, Quaker records (as is his son Isaac).

notion of committing himself to a life of full-time Christian ministry.²⁷ It is conceivable that Calder is here invoking the ancestry of Milman's wife Marian (née Thanhouser): she had German Jewish roots, perhaps going all the way back to the village of Thannhausen in Bavaria, from which many Jews emigrated. Elsewhere Calder reports that the classical philologist and philosopher Julius Stenzel (1883-1935) was removed from his post at the University of Kiel because his wife Bertha Mugdan was Jewish. Stenzel was humiliated and broken and died an unexpected death from thrombosis just a week before the death of Milman Parry (Calder 1983:267). Whatever Calder's intentions are here, it seems far beyond the pale that Harvard, even in the 1930's, would have denied Parry a permanent post because of his wife's ancestry.²⁸

I offer as a second example the insinuation of classicists Victor Davis Hanson and John Heath in their popular book *Who Killed Homer?* (1998:15-16) that Milman Parry's fate was the natural result of a self-made commoner like Parry not being justly respected by a snobby, elite institution like Harvard. This depiction of Parry as an "everyman" who challenged the "privileged elite" can be traced back to the period shortly after his death.

Parry's student at Harvard, Harry Levin, in his 1937 portrait of Parry's development as a Homeric scholar, invokes his mentor's humble beginnings in Oakland (1937:259):

He [Parry] had not come upon the language [Greek] until he left his modest Quaker family and crossed the bay to study chemistry at the University of California. The things he valued meant all the more to him because he had not always been able to count upon them. The illumination which Greek suddenly shed on an overburdened adolescence led him through Homer and Hesiod and whatever he could find of the earliest monuments, without other guides. When a distinguished Harvard scholar visited Berkeley in 1923, he had a pupil who had qualified himself for stringent graduate studies in Pindar and Aeschylus.

It appears that Levin is incorrect on almost all counts here. Parry had no interest in studying chemistry; in fact, the only science course he took in college was a zoology course in his sophomore year (he dropped out of anatomy in his junior year). Parry did not have to "cross the bay" to get to Berkeley; the campus was just a few miles away, all by land, from his home in Oakland. There is little indication that Parry was unable to pursue what he valued before he enrolled at Berkeley; he had attended one of the finest high schools in the Oakland area, the newly opened Oakland Technical High School, where he had devoted himself to a curriculum heavily weighted toward college preparation in the humanities, including four full years of Latin. Once at Berkeley, Parry did not need any affirmation from "a distinguished Harvard scholar" (here Levin is referring to Herbert Weir Smyth, who was Sather Professor at Berkeley

²⁷ The Saturday evening, March 27th, 1920, issue of *The Oakland Tribune* reports that Milman Parry, an undergraduate at Berkeley at the time, attended the Y. M. C. A.'s Christian Calling Conference in Modesto, California, "for serious consideration of Christian work as a life calling."

²⁸ This is not to say that Marian Parry did not encounter anti-Jewish sentiment at Harvard. In an interview that Pamela Newhouse conducted in 1981 (housed in the Milman Parry Collection) Marian recalls feeling excluded from the social life at Harvard because of her Jewishness, and she even recalls several unpleasant remarks directed toward her by members of the Classics Department. She says that Milman responded by discouraging her from attending certain social functions.

when Parry was a graduate student); he already had at his disposal several distinguished Berkeley scholars to guide his way. In short, as Parry's own son Adam points out, "his adolescence was no more burdened, or 'overburdened,' than is that of most of us" (A. Parry 1971:xxii-xxiii n. 2).²⁹

Levin's portrait of Parry going off to college to pursue the practical sciences but abandoning them for the study of classics is reasserted in Charles Rowan Beye's biography of Parry (1990:361): Parry was "intent on finding a major field in the natural sciences," but once at Berkeley "his interest turned to classical literature." The detail is also repeated in John Miles Foley's (1999b:77-78) biography of Parry in *American National Biography*: "Parry intended to study chemistry." In fact, Parry's transcript at Berkeley depicts someone who was deeply interested from the beginning in the humanities, and specifically in the classics. Parry enrolled in beginning-level Greek and in more advanced Latin already in his first year, and he tried to fit as many Greek courses as possible into his seven semesters at Berkeley. His two main interests outside of classics were in English literature (six semesters) and in the new field of anthropology (three semesters).³⁰

The depiction of Parry as a practical blue-collar worker, and even, when circumstances demanded, a denizen of the peasant class, appears again in a 1974 survey of the study of oral traditions at Harvard since 1856 by David Bynum, former curator of the Milman Parry Collection of Oral Literature at Harvard. Bynum compares the contributions of Milman Parry with those of his Harvard predecessors Francis James Child and George Lyman Kittredge (Bynum 1974:255, 258):

Milman Parry's early intellectual development paralleled Child's in several fateful ways. The similarity of their minds had roots in the similar circumstances of their childhood. Child's father, a sailmaker, and Parry's father, a carpenter, were both independent artisans whose modest incomes afforded no material luxury or educational advantage for their children. Born to the idea of reliance on their own talent and work, both Child and Parry were practical men as well as extraordinary scholars. . . . To some extent Child had always remained subject to the nineteenth-century bourgeois prejudice that rural or agrarian life was incompatible with culture of high quality. Parry, who had been a poultry farmer for a year before he went to Paris, had no such prejudice.

²⁹ In the same discussion, A. Parry points out some of the factual errors in Levin's account of his father.

³⁰ Parry's transcripts from Berkeley reveal that he was actually quite narrowly focused on the classics from the start of his college education. He took the courses in military science, physical education, and hygiene required of freshmen and sophomores, but reluctantly, and he did not distinguish himself in those subjects. He took the minimum number of courses required for breadth in the social and natural sciences (for example, political science, economics, public speaking, zoology), and he did not distinguish himself in these subjects either. He maintained an interest in English literature throughout his undergraduate program (six courses), and received high marks in these courses, at least in his first two years. And, somewhat unusual for the time, in his junior and senior years he took three courses in anthropology. He took one Latin course during each of his seven semesters at Berkeley, and he scored the highest marks possible in four of them. But his real passion from the beginning was in Greek. He took as much Greek as he could fit in—thirteen courses in seven semesters—and got the highest marks possible in nine of them. He even took a graduate-level Greek course during his senior year. Classicist John Garcia (2001:58-84) has written about Parry's unusual interest in anthropology and of his teacher A. L. Kroeber's influence on his later fieldwork in Yugoslavia.

In fact Parry's father was not a carpenter but a pharmacist, and apparently a rather successful one at that, as he owned his own drugstore for a time. And while Parry worked with his hands at several temporary jobs throughout his youth—sawmill, railroad, metal works, electric works—there is no record of his ever working at a poultry farm. During their final year in California Milman and Marian lived near Santa Cruz for a very short period with a family who had some chickens, and Milman may have helped out with the chores; and they may have had some chickens themselves when they lived for a period out in the country in Mill Valley, but many people raised their own chickens in those days, and that hardly qualifies Milman as living “a rural or agrarian life incompatible with culture of high quality.” Yet, for some reason, this caricature of Parry as a poultry farmer has caught on. It is perpetuated by Adam Nicolson in his popular book *Why Homer Matters* (2014:73, 76):

There was nothing precious or elitist about him [Parry], and his life and mind ranged widely. For a year he was a poultry farmer. . . . In 1922 the classics faculty at Berkeley told Parry that there was no chance he would get a doctorate by following up on his master's thesis on the formulas in Homer. It was not what an American classicist did. For a year Parry worked with his chickens, but he recognized that his future studies would find most encouragement with the anthropologists in Paris, and when he was twenty-two he went there to do his doctorate at the Sorbonne.

Again, Parry may have tended to some chickens for a short period between his completion of the master's degree at Berkeley and his departure for France—the year during which his daughter Marian was born—but this is irrelevant to the fact that he was from an average middle-class family in Oakland in the early 1900s.³¹ His father, who had traveled broadly and was a corporal in the National Guard, was a stably-employed pharmacist whose salary could support their family of seven in a rented home. His mother, Marie Alice Parry (née Emerson), was a piano teacher, and she taught her son how to play. Parry went to the finest public high school in the area, where he took four years of Latin, and then to the finest university in California, where he studied Greek with George Calhoun, Ivan Linforth, and James Allen, three of the most distinguished Hellenists of the time. Parry was also exposed to the regular cycle of visiting professors at Berkeley, including two Sather Lecturers who appear to have had an influence on his academic life: John Scott, who in 1920-21, when Parry was in his third year as an undergraduate, offered eight lectures on Homer that are saturated with the issues of the analyst-unitarian divide (Scott himself espoused a conservative form of the unitarian position); and Herbert Smyth, who in 1922-23, when Parry was a graduate student, lectured on Aeschylus, and later recommended Parry for a position at Harvard. In short, Parry, who had a supercilious indifference about being inducted into the academic honor society Phi Beta Kappa at Berkeley, and who did not even bother to attend his own graduation, was not compelled to follow a

³¹ In the short speech, mentioned earlier, that Parry's daughter Marian gave at Harvard in 2010, she recalls that her father once brought fifteen chickens and a rooster back to their home in Dubrovnik from one of his excursions into the countryside (this was during their second stay in Yugoslavia in 1934-35). Marian reports that she was happy that they now had eggs (and chicken).

vocational path; he had the leisure, the capacity, and the will to pursue whatever intrigued his sharp intellect.

Also, by marrying his college classmate, Marian Thanouser, Parry had attached himself to a wealthy family of the mercantile class and had thereby increased his opportunities further.³² Marian had received a substantial inheritance as a 16-year-old upon the death of her father. She drew from these resources to fund the family's move to Paris, where Milman spent a year learning French and another three years on graduate study at the Sorbonne. Parry had also won a scholarship for at least two years of that study, so with the combined funds they were able to live comfortably in Paris, and even to hire a maid. Marian had grown up in a home with live-in servants, and she maintained this practice throughout her marriage with Milman. They hired a live-in servant, a recent Irish immigrant, when they took up residence near the Harvard campus. Even while abroad in Dubrovnik, a popular seaside resort at the time, where the entire family stayed in a rented house on a hill overlooking the sea, they enlisted the services of a maid.

Nonetheless, the accounts of Harry Levin, David Bynum, Adam Nicolson, and others have combined to create a caricature of Milman Parry as a working-class stiff—a poultry-farming son of a carpenter—who managed to lift himself up by his own bootstraps from his peasant origins, thanks, in part at least, to the graciousness of the more privileged classical elite of his day. Perhaps the single most influential propagator of this caricature of Parry, and particularly of its relationship to the myth of his suicide, is Victor Davis Hanson and John Heath's popular *Who Killed Homer?*, a book-length screed lamenting the demise of classical studies in the United States. Hanson and Heath (1998:15-16) mention in their account of Parry's tragic death that "the gun found near his body in a Los Angeles motel room, combined with his insecure position at Harvard, led many classicists to conclude that his mysterious death was a suicide caused by a denial of tenure." They go on to admit that there was "little conclusive evidence for either the suicide or the failure of promotion," but by then, as they must have known well, the genie was out of the bottle. And Hanson and Heath clearly meant it to be, for this anecdote of Milman Parry's death nicely supported their narrative about the reasons for the demise of classical studies in the U.S.: that snobby, dull, cloistered, professional classicists at (mostly) East-Coast, Ivy League, parochial research institutions like Harvard University were squelching the energy of imaginative, robust, adventurous, self-made, self-taught, untraditional zealots of the classics like Milman Parry (or Heinrich Schliemann, or Michael Ventris, or Hanson and Heath themselves), who had been born in California and educated in its public school system (again, like Hanson and Heath themselves), and who had been granted no scholarship money for

³² Milman's wife Marian was the only child of Frank and Mildred Thanouser (née Landauer) from Wisconsin. The January 27, 1894, issue of *The Atlanta Constitution* describes Mildred Landauer as "a member of one of the wealthiest and most prominent families of Milwaukee," and Frank Thanouser as "one of Atlanta's prominent and successful business men." Marian's uncle Edwin Thanouser was the founder of the famous Thanouser Company (later the Thanouser Film Corporation), a pioneering movie studio that produced over a thousand films. Marian's father Frank was a dry goods merchant, as was his father Samuel (who had an estate worth \$6,000 in 1860, plus a servant and a clerk). Frank and Mildred had two live-in servants in 1910. Mildred appears still to have had a substantial estate when the Parrys visited her in Los Angeles in 1935.

graduate study in the United States (here quite unlike Hanson and Heath, both of whom did their graduate work in the rich bosom of Stanford University).³³

Milman Parry's Status at Harvard

Since Milman Parry's academic prospects at Harvard have played such a central role in the development of the myth of his death, it may be worthwhile to evaluate Parry's professional status there. In short, while Parry was benefitting from the excellent professional opportunities available to him as an instructor and then assistant professor at Harvard, his future there was uncertain, as the potential of a permanent position for him was unclear.

On the one hand, Parry's academic career was following what should have been for him a reassuring upward trajectory. Upon receiving the *Docteur-ès-Lettres* at the Sorbonne in Paris in 1928, Parry had accepted a post as Head of the Latin Department at Drake University in Des Moines, Iowa, for the 1928-29 academic year.³⁴ While he was there, the recently retired Eliot Professor of Greek at Harvard, Herbert Weir Smyth, who had been very impressed by Parry as a graduate student at Berkeley in 1922-23 when he was visiting as Sather Professor, recommended Parry for a position as an instructor at Harvard and suggested that he deliver a paper at the 1928 annual meeting of the American Philological Association in New York City in late December.³⁵ Parry's paper, "Did Homer Understand the Epic γλῶτται?," was a précis of his article of that year, "The Homeric Gloss: A Study in Word-Sense," in *Transactions and Proceedings of the American Philological Association*. This was the moment of Parry's permanent shift in orientation from the West to the East Coast. He accepted a one-year appointment as Instructor in Greek and Latin and Tutor in the Division of Ancient Languages at Harvard. This appointment was renewed twice, and after three years as instructor, Parry was promoted in 1932 to Assistant Professor of Greek and Latin and appointed to a three-year term. Then, during the summer of 1935, toward the end of his second visit to Yugoslavia, Parry was reappointed to a second three-year term as Assistant Professor of Greek and Latin.

³³ This is a leitmotif that winds its way through Victor Davis Hanson's subsequent writing as well (for example, Hanson 2016), as he becomes a conservative political commentator for *National Review* and *The Washington Times* (and currently senior fellow at the Hoover Institution at Stanford University).

³⁴ F. H. Potter (1928:158): "Dr. Milman Parry has been appointed head of the Latin department to succeed Professor Charles O. Denny, who was forced by ill health to retire last spring after many years of valuable service at Drake University." According to the recollection of his wife Marian, in the interview recorded in 1981 by Pamela Newhouse mentioned earlier, Milman's appointment at Drake was facilitated by George Calhoun, his former professor at Berkeley. Marian recalls that shortly thereafter Milman was offered two positions at Berkeley—one in French and another in Latin—but that Milman didn't really enjoy teaching Latin and saw no prospect of a position opening up in Greek at Berkeley any time soon.

³⁵ A. Parry (1971:xxix): "Herbert Weir Smyth of Harvard University, as Sather Professor at the University of California, had taught Parry when he was an undergraduate. On learning that he was once more in America, Smyth suggested that Parry read a paper at the American Philological Association meeting in New York at the end of 1928. At that meeting Parry was offered and accepted a position at Harvard." Two corrections should be made to Adam Parry's account: Milman Parry was a graduate student when Smyth visited Berkeley; and he was formally offered the position at Harvard shortly before the A.P.A. meeting via a letter from C. N. Jackson, Chair of the Classics Department.

During his six years at Harvard Parry and his family—wife Marian, daughter Marian, son Adam, live-in servant Bridie Fitzgerald, and two handsome white collies—lived at 14 Shepard Street, just half a mile from the Classics Department, from where Parry could be intimately involved in the activities of the college and department. He held a position as tutor of Kirkland House, acted for several years as Secretary of the Department of the Classics, and served for four years as one of the editors of *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology*.³⁶ Parry's enthusiasm for drama received an outlet when in 1933 he proposed and directed a production for the Classical Club at Harvard of Sophocles' *Philoctetes* in ancient Greek.³⁷ He reportedly recruited the cast for the production by holding before them the privilege of memorizing several hundred lines of Sophocles in Greek (Levin 1937:259).

Parry's teaching at Harvard is reported to have been of a high quality. His teaching situation would be the envy of most classicists today. He was on paid leave for three of the thirteen semesters that he was employed at Harvard. While in residence he taught eight different courses a total of twenty-one times (plus one independent study). His staples were Homer and Greek prose composition, but he also taught undergraduate courses in first-year Greek and in Latin literature, and graduate-level courses in Thucydides, Tacitus' *Annales*, and Greek and Latin metrics. Half of his courses were team-taught full-year courses, and the other half were half-year courses, so, by current methods of accounting, he was responsible for around 75 students during each of his five years of full-time teaching.³⁸ This was an ideal teaching situation professionally: one pictures with envy a full-year course on Homeric Greek team-taught with John Finley to twenty-two undergraduates, or a semester-length course on Greek and Latin metrics to three graduate students. According to his closest colleagues and most dedicated students Parry was a gifted and effective teacher. As three of his colleagues recall (Gulick, Greene, and Finley 1936:93): "His critical gifts and his wide knowledge of many forms of literature made him a remarkably effective teacher. He spared neither time nor effort in laboring for his students, and his advice was at once sympathetic and forceful." Harry Levin, Parry's student at the time, recalls his exhilaration as a freshman at Harvard (1937:260):

After an anticipated routine of parsing and scanning, Parry would dismiss Terence and introduce Molière and Sacha Guitry, or further illustrations from comic supplements and burlesque shows. . . . Literal-minded graduate students sometimes complained that they would carefully

³⁶ Parry was one of three editors of *HSCP* in 1930, 1931, 1932, and 1933; he published articles in *HSCP* too, in 1930 and 1932.

³⁷ C. W. Gleason and J. B. Stearns (1933:73): "The Harvard Classical Club presented the *Philoctetes* of Sophocles on the fifteenth and seventeenth of March, in Lowell House, Cambridge. The performance, which was directed by Professor Milman Parry, was given in Greek. Masks were used, and the choruses were sung to music written by Mr. Elliott Carter. The chief speaking parts were taken by R. S. Fitzgerald, R. V. Scudder, and H. T. Levin, all undergraduates in Harvard College. The chorus was trained by Mr. E. C. Weist. A large audience was present at each performance." This was not Parry's first foray into drama. In the Spring of 1923, while pursuing an M.A. in classics at Berkeley, Parry, along with three other students, wrote the script for a musical called "But it Wasn't," on the topic, "Does a man win a girl through strength, poetry, or by being a practical business man?" This was performed at the Senior Extravaganza in May, 1923 (right around the time that he married Marian).

³⁸ I have elicited Parry's teaching schedule from the 1929-36 reports of the President of Harvard College, as published in the *Official Register of Harvard University*.

collate a passage in Tacitus and be greeted with a lecture on its use by Racine, or that those who wanted to know the history of textual criticism of Thucydides were asked to criticize Spengler's theories of history.

Parry was also making significant headway on his many research projects. The two French theses that he had completed for his Docteur-ès-Lettres at the Sorbonne in Paris in 1928 were well received by those who could gain access to them. The two long articles in *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* in 1930 and 1932 that introduced his work in English were beginning to have a major impact on how American and British Homerists were addressing the "Homeric Question." Parry also published three shorter articles in *Transactions and Proceedings of the American Philological Association*, two in *Classical Philology*, and one in *Language* between 1928 and 1934, and he delivered several papers at the annual meetings of the American Philological Association. As an indication of the value attached to Parry's work, in 1932 he joined all the senior members of the faculty in the Classics Department at Harvard in being elected as a fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences.

There was, to be sure, some resistance to Parry's work, as there always is to any novel, and especially iconoclastic, idea. This resistance came on at least two fronts. Some, especially German Analysts who objected to Parry's essential Unitarianism, deliberately ignored his work: for example, Wolfgang Schadewaldt, Reinhold Merkelbach, and Karl Reinhardt.³⁹ Others, primarily Anglophone scholars with a more Unitarian bent, who romantically championed Homer's individualism as a mark of his greatness, were uncomfortable with the idea of a poet who seemed to them imprisoned by his tradition: for example, Samuel Bassett, Theodore Wade-Gery, William Stanford.⁴⁰ They objected that Parry had removed the creative poet from the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, turning the greatest of poets into a puppet on a string or a well-trained ape. They could not acknowledge that anything of worth about the sophisticated poetry of the highly-esteemed Homer could be learned by comparing it with the popular folk-songs of Yugoslavian *guslari*.

But many prominent scholars, even outside his immediate Harvard and Berkeley circles (Albert Lord, John Finley, George Calhoun, and so forth), perceived the full importance of Parry's work quickly, long before his works were collected and published together by his son Adam in 1971, and appreciated that Parry had opened up a new window into many aspects of the study of the Homeric epics: for example, Pierre Chantraine, Martin Nilsson, Rhys Carpenter, and Denys Page.⁴¹ James Conant, President of Harvard College, was not exaggerating when, in his 1934-35 annual report, he lamented that "by his [Parry's] death the University loses one of its most promising younger scholars" (1936:30). Parry's colleagues in the Classics Department were equally effusive about his scholarship: "We have lost one of the most brilliant scholars we have

³⁹ The following three major works, for example, all of which wrestle with the problems of sources and composition of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, could have benefited greatly from the light of Parry's discoveries: Schadewaldt 1938; Merkelbach 1951; Reinhardt 1961.

⁴⁰ For their direct criticism of Parry: Bassett 1938:14-19; Wade-Gery 1952:38-39; Stanford 1971:36-51.

⁴¹ For their direct acclaim of Parry: Chantraine 1929:293-300; Nilsson 1933:179-82; Carpenter 1946:6-9; Page 1955:139.

ever had here,” said Charles Gulick, Eliot Professor of Greek Literature, in the December 4th, 1935, issue of *The Harvard Crimson*. “One of the most brilliant and promising younger scholars in America,” said Edward Rand, Pope Professor of Latin, in the same issue. “One of the most promising classical scholars in the country,” said William Greene in the December 4th, 1935, issue of *The New York Times*. “His premature death has inflicted a great loss upon the study of Homer in America,” said Joshua Whatmough in the 1936 issue of the periodical *Language* (Whatmough 1936:151). Appropriately, the 1936 issue of *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* was dedicated to Parry’s memory.

Harvard rewarded Parry for his efforts by granting him a full-year leave to conduct his fieldwork in Yugoslavia during the 1934-35 academic year. This was an exceptional privilege, as it was very unusual at Harvard at this time for a non-tenured faculty member to receive a full-year leave. Moreover, Harvard provided Parry generous funding through the William F. Milton Fund and the Joseph H. Clarke Bequest.⁴² Parry’s work abroad was also funded by the Rockefeller Foundation and the American Council of Learned Societies.⁴³

Those acquainted with Harvard’s more recent practice of withholding tenure from its junior faculty and instead making its permanent appointments from outside the university might suspect that for this reason Parry’s prospects for a permanent appointment at Harvard were dim, for Parry had come to Harvard as an instructor just a year out of graduate school. But the fact that he was working his way up from the bottom would not necessarily have been something held against him at that time. On the contrary, in the Harvard Classics Department of the 1930s almost all the senior members had worked their way over many years through the ranks into permanent positions as full professors, and four of the junior members whose terms intersected with Parry’s—William Greene, Mason Hammond, John Finley, and (almost) Sterling Dow—would eventually work their way through the ranks over the course of many years to become full professors. So Parry should not have regarded his failure to gain a permanent position after only six years at Harvard as the death knell of his career there: most of his colleagues had taken, or would take, much longer to work their way through the ranks.

On the other hand, it is likely that Parry, who could be impetuous at times, was disappointed that Harvard was not moving more quickly to promote him to a permanent position. He had come to Harvard with his Ph.D. in hand, unlike several of his colleagues, and he had taught at Harvard for three years as an instructor and three more as an assistant professor. It appears that Parry was hoping for a promotion to a tenured position sometime during his year of fieldwork in Yugoslavia (1934-35). He had addressed the Board of Overseers of Harvard College on May 15, 1934, shortly before he departed for Yugoslavia, in what David Bynum (1979:242)

⁴² So the April 7, 1935, issue of *The New York Times*: “Milman Parry, Assistant Professor of Greek and Latin—To transcribe oral poetry of the southern Slavs.” This is confirmed by Albert Lord (1954:xiii). The Joseph H. Clarke Bequest amounted to \$929.93 according to the *Statement of the Treasurer of Harvard College for the Fiscal Year 1934-35* (*Official Register of Harvard University* 33, no. 47, December 14, 1935:142).

⁴³ G. L. Hendrickson (1935:xxiv): “Members of our Association will read with much interest of many important undertakings in various fields of inquiry assisted in some degree by the A.C.L.S., and some of these touch our studies so closely that attention may be called to them, though they were not presented for the first time within the past year and do not therefore belong strictly to this report. A special and melancholy interest attaches to the notice on page 7 of the study of ‘Oral Poetry of the Southern Slavs,’ by reason of the tragic death of Professor Milman Parry, whose work was proceeding so successfully.”

describes as part of a consideration for his “professional advancement.” In his presentation to the Board of Overseers, “Parry elected to explain himself, his work, and its place in the intellectual life of the University by discussing ‘The Historical Method in Literary Criticism.’”⁴⁴ His presentation was later published as “The Historical Method in Literary Criticism” in the *Harvard Alumni Bulletin* (M. Parry 1936:778-82). In his address, Parry appears to express some criticism both of Harvard University generally and of the Classics Department specifically. He alerts his audience of Harvard Overseers to the dangers posed by those who, instead of embracing the historical method, create a fictional past for political purposes, most recently for nationalistic purposes that exploit race and class. Parry’s statement could very well describe the deep-seated anti-Semitism at Harvard in the early 1930s, when it catered primarily to white, male Protestants of the Boston Brahmin class and the New York elite. As an antidote Parry offers his audience a scenario of a study of the past that has at its center a search for truth through the historical method. He suggests that teachers must teach about the past not just to a few students but to a much wider cross-section of society so that many people will gain an understanding of how to conduct themselves nobly and effectively on behalf of human welfare. Parry laments that those who currently teach Greek and Latin literature have lost the sense of the importance of the discipline for humanity, and that their philological isolation has led to the decline of the discipline. Parry here is more or less describing the senior faculty of the Harvard Classics Department at the time: a group of austere, detached, conservative scholars who spent much of their time studying ancient commentaries and scholia, practicing textual criticism, and compiling word indices. It almost goes without saying that Parry’s address to the Board of Overseers did not have its desired effect. He did not receive a permanent appointment, or even a promotion. Instead, as he was to learn the following summer, his current status as untenured assistant professor would be extended for three more years. Perhaps, the administrators reasoned, Parry’s infatuation with peasant folk-songs might yield some useful results someday, but they were not going to place too large a bet on that outcome—especially in a time of financial constraints for the college brought about by the Great Depression.

Sterling Dow, who was a faculty member in the Classics and History Departments at Harvard from 1936-70, and who even served as the University Archivist, was in a good position to know the details about Parry’s status at Harvard. Yet he admits that he was never sure about the reasoning behind Harvard’s refusal to offer Parry a permanent appointment. He surmises that Parry was simply too unconventional (Dow 1979:33-34):

Rhys Carpenter knew of Parry’s work and was quick to encourage it. This was happy, because Parry needed it. Harvard refused Parry a permanent appointment. Judgment about that decision is easy now: we say it was deplorable. But although I was in Greece the whole time, and was too junior to hold any appointment but only fellowships, it is easy also to surmise that Parry himself, who fitted no conventional mould, may have helped to make the decision natural. I have never known. But later I did arrange to have his portrait hung in the Smyth Classical Library at Harvard alongside those of the other deceased (“permanent”) members of the Department. Later, in

⁴⁴ D. E. Bynum (1979:242): “Addressing the Board of Overseers of Harvard College on 15 May, 1934, when he was being considered for a professional advancement, Milman Parry elected to explain himself, his work, and its place in the intellectual life of the University by discussing ‘The Historical Method in Literary Criticism.’”

Berkeley, I found in the University Library his graduate school essay, the first statement of his doctrine, unknown even to his son; I studied his background and life, and did my something to promote his doctrines.⁴⁵

Having been turned down once for a permanent appointment in 1935, it is possible that Parry had become doubtful about his prospects for a permanent position at Harvard altogether. The Classics Department during Parry's tenure was composed of a very insular group of faculty: all but one of the faculty members with permanent positions, as well as all of those who would eventually gain permanent positions, had Harvard undergraduate degrees, and most had their graduate degrees from Harvard as well. Parry was clearly an "outsider." Moreover, it was probably becoming apparent to Parry that his main competition for a permanent post was his slightly younger colleague John Finley, the quintessential Harvard man, also a Homerist, who was working his way up the ranks in tandem with Parry. Parry probably realized that the department was too small for two Homerists who were less than two years apart in age. Indeed, after Parry's death Finley took over many of the courses that Parry had been teaching, and he would go on to become Master of Eliot House and Eliot Professor of Greek Literature. He would also play a major role in establishing the general educational requirements for undergraduates at Harvard, and he would, in 1953, even become a finalist for the position of President of Harvard.⁴⁶ John Finley, Mason Hammond, and Sterling Dow, all members of the Harvard undergraduate class of 1925, would go on to lead the Classics Department at Harvard for an entire generation.⁴⁷

Parry, for his part, was becoming an increasingly "unconventional" classicist. As a result of his fieldwork in Yugoslavia he had become more interested in comparative studies. According to three of his Harvard colleagues, Parry wished to establish a new program in oral poetry in the Department of Comparative Literature (Gulick, Greene, and Finley 1936:93):

He himself, however, had for sometime ceased to be exclusively concerned with Homer. . . . He returned at the beginning of this college year hoping that on the publication of his Serbian material he might establish the study of oral poetry in the Department of Comparative Literature—a study in which he foresaw fruitful results for Anthropology, History, and Music, as well as for European literature in general.

⁴⁵ Sterling Dow had never actually met Parry (Dow 1979:4). He had received bachelor's (1925) and master's (1928) degrees at Harvard immediately before Parry arrived, and he received his Ph.D. (1936) at Harvard after Parry's death. He was in Athens (1931-36) doing fieldwork and writing his dissertation during most of Parry's time at Harvard (1929-35). Dow came back to Harvard as an instructor in 1936 and stayed until his retirement as John E. Hudson Professor of Archaeology in 1970.

⁴⁶ See the informative memorials for John Finley in *The New York Times* (Thomas 1995:B9) and *The Harvard Gazette* (Nagy et al. 2000).

⁴⁷ On the Classics Department's "hermetic" character, see M. Keller and P. Keller (2001:136-37): "John H. Finley, a member of the faculty from 1933 to 1976 and Master of Eliot House from 1941 to 1968, was 'the embodiment of Harvard' to generations of undergraduates who took his courses in Greek history. Finley, Roman historian Mason Hammond, and Greek historian Sterling Dow—all members of the Harvard class of 1925, all intensely conscious of the fact that Hammond was a summa graduate, Finley a magna, Dow a cum laude—dominated the department through the Conant years."

Parry had begun a new book-length project on comparative oral traditions titled *The Singer of Tales*, a project that his student Albert Lord would take on after Parry's death.⁴⁸ He was planning to commit himself to the intensive study of the material on South Slavic heroic and lyric song that he had collected with a view to answering a wide range of questions of a comparative nature: What are the key differences between oral and written poetry? How does an oral poem pass from one singer to another? What changes does it undergo in the course of that exchange? How alike or different are the various performances by a single singer of the same song? How is a singer affected by his audience? What is the effect of the introduction of literacy upon an oral tradition? Parry conceived of the primary audience of his work as Slavists, folklorists, and anthropologists, who were primarily interested in what Parry called "the song of unlettered peoples," but, of course, he also kept in mind how all this new knowledge could, by working backwards, be useful for the study of what he called "the early poetry," such as the *Iliad*, *Odyssey*, the *chansons de geste*, and *Beowulf* (Lord 1948:37).

In sum, in contemplating the early and unexpected death of one of the shining stars of their discipline, many classicists have wanted to see Milman Parry as a tragic Ajax rather than an unfortunate Elpenor. If those are the only two options, Parry is probably better identified as an Elpenor. But it appears that Parry himself had moved on by this point in his career. In what was to become the last surviving document that he wrote—a short letter to his sister in November of 1935—he mentions his desire to spend the following summer extending his fieldwork in the Balkans to Albania. Perhaps, rather than Ajax or Elpenor, Parry would have preferred a comparison with one of the great Slavic heroes that he devoted his later years to studying: a Smailagić Meho or a Kraljević Marko.

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⁴⁸ Parry had actually typed out seven pages of the introductory chapter: these are documented in Albert Lord's article "Homer, Parry, and Huso" (Lord 1948:37-40). Lord followed up on his mentor's research agenda during his graduate studies and beyond, publishing his own *Singer of Tales* in 1960.

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