

The Grain of Greek Voices

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Oral tradition in Greece before the mid-fifth century BCE? Law, ritual, myth, education-through-dance (*khoreia*), invective, games, wisdom, praise, lament—almost every verbal institution imaginable employed stylized language, formulaic diction, characteristic rhythms, or time-honored performance habits. They were transmitted wholly, or partly, without writing. At the same time, such institutions—some reaching back millennia—were open to new interpretations and refashionings. As in many oral cultures, to innovate was in fact “traditional.” My working assumption is that all facets of early Greek social life need to be evaluated when one investigates a given “oral tradition.” But we have to avoid lumping all such institutions together, as if their shared “orality” were the primary point of interest. Affiliations and nuances of social context and contestation surrounded each and demand respect.

When the creative analyses of Milman Parry and Albert Lord turned attention first to the traditional nature—and by extrapolation to the “orality”—of Homeric poetry, they also opened new perspectives on the many other forms of Greek verbal culture. Reimagining not just the technical conventions but the social conditions under which Homeric poetry arose brought about a total re-examination of Greek culture. In this reappraisal, comparative evidence came to play a major role as a suggestive analogy and a useful heuristic device.

Interesting new directions? First, the expansion and refining of comparative studies. John Foley has led the way both by his writings (e.g., 2002) and by his establishment of effective clearinghouses for sharing work. Increasingly sophisticated folkloristics (see, e.g., Reynolds 1995, Honko 1998) open up new questions about performance *in context*. Second, an urge to explore the varied mutual relations of “performance” genres within the seventh-fifth centuries BCE. W. Robert Connor inspired a social-historical approach that took account of the poetics of specific social “genres.” His influence has been great on many younger scholars whose works incorporate “oralist” perspectives whether the subject is Greek lyric, proverb use,

Delphic oracles, or colonization stories. Recognizing “performance” as an overarching social-poetic concept is the deeper urge at work here, with profound effects on the field: it is hard to name a single American Hellenist untouched.¹ Finally, an evolutionary, multilevel perspective has begun to replace New Critical attitudes that prized texts as objects, technique as primary, and Homeric verse as a culmination. A guiding light is the work of Gregory Nagy, from his pathbreaking studies in cultural semantics (1979) to his magisterial *Pindar’s Homer* (1990). His more recent studies on the crystallization of the Homeric text from the eighth to the first centuries BCE illustrate how a New Diachrony (if one can call it that) is able not just to describe the system of Greek poetics but to motivate and track *changes* within it.² He has taken up the challenges adumbrated in Albert Lord’s later work (1991 and 1995), where “oral” and “written” are no longer divided by a deep gulf. The historically grounded, fine-grain analyses of the reception-history of Homer point to new vistas in the understanding of oral-derived and transitional texts.

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References

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¹ See, e.g., Connor 2000 (a seminal article); for his influence, cf. Dougherty and Kurke 1993.

² See Nagy’s contribution to this collection.

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