

## Oral Poetics and Homeric Poetry

Gregory Nagy

The concept of oral tradition, especially as we see it redefined in the work of Milman Parry (1971) and Albert Lord (espec. 1960/2000), has had a major impact on the understanding of Homer and Homeric poetry in the field of classics. Volume 1 of *Greek Literature* (Nagy 2001) features reprints of twenty studies illustrating this impact, along with an extensive introduction and bibliography. The introduction and bibliography are available gratis at <http://chs.harvard.edu/chspubs/ninevol/index.htm>. Nowadays, classicists who publish on Homer generally acknowledge the relevance of Parry's and Lord's work, though all too many publications still reveal a woefully superficial understanding of this work (for a list of ten common misunderstandings, see Nagy 1996:19-27).

A most pressing problem in the field of classics is that the concept of oral tradition tends to be applied—however superficially—only to Homer, while the rest of Greek literature continues to be studied without an awareness of any need for applying the same concept (for a corrective, see Lord 1991:espec. ch. 2).

Another problem is that some influential classicists, in their publications on Homer, have separated the work of Parry from that of Lord (Nagy 2003:ch. 3, with bibliography). A most prominent example is the introduction written by Adam Parry to the collected papers of his father (Parry 1971:ix-lxii). Since most of Milman Parry's work on Homer predated his study of living oral traditions in the former Yugoslavia, the separating of his work from Lord's leaves the relevance of oral traditions to Homeric studies seriously undervalued.

This problem folds into a larger problem. Those who have no direct knowledge of oral traditions generally assume that "orality," as distinct from "literacy," can be universally defined. And yet, the only universal distinction between oral and literary traditions is the historical anteriority of the first to the second. Beyond this obvious observation, it is pointless to attempt any universalizing definition of oral or even of written tradition. In

cultures that do not depend on the technology of writing, the concept of “orality” is meaningless (Lord 1995:105, n. 26).

An ongoing challenge in Homeric studies is the persistent assumption that oral traditions are inferior to literary traditions (for a critique of this assumption, see Mitchell and Nagy 2000:xiv).

For current research in Homeric poetry, a most interesting new direction in oral tradition studies centers on the interaction of genre and occasions of performance (Martin 1989, Bakker 1997). “In a living oral tradition, people are exposed to verbal art constantly, not just on specific entertainment occasions, which can happen every night in certain seasons. When they work, eat, drink, and do other social small-group activities, myth, song, and saying are always woven into their talk. Consequently, it is not inaccurate to describe them as bilingual, fluent in their natural language but also in the *Kunstsprache* of their local verbal art forms” (Martin 1993:227).

*Harvard University*

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