From Homeric Structural Formularity to Nonnus’ Conventional Formulaic Style

A couple of premises are required. First of all, like almost all critics, we consider Nonnus the author both of the *Dionysiaca*¹ and the *Paraphrase of St John’s Gospel*,² which will also prove to be confirmed by the sharing of a conventional formulaic style.

The second premise starts from the recognition that to deal with Nonnus’ formulaic style we have to look back to its distant matrix, the Homeric formula, and since its very concept is controversial, it must preliminarily be defined.³ The Homeric formula, in the widest meaning, is constituted, in our opinion, by any formal module present at least twice, in an identical way or one such as to exhibit a correlation, at times only phonic or semantic; and by formal modules I mean elements pertinent to the form of the expression, whether verbal (from single words in a fixed metrical pattern or largely dominant⁴ in groups of words that cover a metrical sequence, from minimum to polystich) or structural (peculiar syntactic organizations),⁵ but also elements pertinent to the form of the content, either topic (single concepts repeated in similar contexts and in various forms, like numbers) or structural (like the laws of the regulation of time).

¹ For *Dion*., as a reference text I follow the edition by Vian et al. (1976–2006).
⁴ These are the so-called monoverbal formulas, of which I indicate below five examples, specific to late Greek epic: φωνή (§ 3 and n. 29), Ἦώς and ἀκροφανής (§ 4.1), ἀκρήδεμνος and ἀγοστός (§ 5).
⁵ Like what I call (D’Ippolito 1977, 76) ‘epesegesi litotica’, i.e. the exposition of a concept first in a positive and later in a negative form, or vice versa.
With the loss of orality of composition, the main reason for the formulaic structure of the archaic epic, and hence with the passage from rhapsodic epic, a theatrical genre, to reflected epic, a true literary genre, this technique loses its motivation, and is reduced above all to reuse of segments of Homeric text and to their variation and analogical combination. Hence in post-rhapsodic epic the formulaic approach undergoes a change of function: from a compositional method it is transformed, markedly reduced and with different characteristics, into an interdiscursive stylistic feature, almost a genre hallmark, in which however a poetic competition is played out that, as is obvious, presents varying characteristics in the centuries-long evolution of the genre. Indeed, a sort of hiatus exists between epics from Apollonius to Quintus and the late ancients, notably that ‘Egyptian school’ that arose between the third and fourth centuries with Triphiodorus, triumphed with Nonnus and his metrical ‘reform’, and finally involved, among others, the Nonnians Musaeus and Colluthus and the archaising Orphic Argonautica (OA).

For the former, the project was generally to start from a Homeric germ to develop it, according to more innovative models in Apollonius, less so in Quintus, so as to awaken the memory of Homer without slavishly imitating him: it is what has been called, speaking of Callimachus, ‘presque homérique’; by contrast, the late Greek epic writers, starting from Triphiodorus but more clearly with Nonnus, tended to create a new formulaic system.

More than in the Paraphrase, which is less free because of its being a meta-text, the conventional formulaic style, connoted as Homeric aemulatio, is

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7 This ordinary kind of relationship does not of course exclude cases of allusive intertextuality. The proper distinction between intertextuality (relationship between texts) and ‘interdiscursivity’ (relationship between types of speech, of language) is made by Segre (1982).
8 Triphiodorus having moved, for several decades, between the second half of the third century and the first of the fourth (cf., among the many, Miguélez Cavero 2013c, 4–6), the relative chronology of these late Greek epic writers has its uncertain point only in OA (I follow the argument that it comes after not only Quintus but also Nonnus: cf. Vian 1987a, 45–46).
9 For him we speak of ‘paraformularity’ or ‘formulaic imitations’ (Fantuzzi 1988, esp. 7–46, the chapter entitled ‘Formule omeriche ed imitazioni “formulari”’). Hinging on an alleged ‘rejection of formulaic repetition’ by the Alexandrian poets is the research of Ciani (1975), who seems to me to deny the premise, at least in part.
10 The first to speak of formulaic style for a Hellenistic epic poet, Quintus Smyrnaeus, to my knowledge was Vian (1959) 175–211.
11 Cahen (1929) 519–523.