RHYTHM AND REGULARITY IN HOMERIC COMPOSITION: QUESTIONS IN THE ODYSSEY

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The most significant event in Homer studies in the twentieth century was the publication, through the 1920s and 1930s, of a series of studies by Milman Parry. In these papers Parry discussed formulaic language and metre, Homeric language as a language of oral poetry, and, for comparative purposes, traditional oral song in the Balkans. Of great significance also was the appearance, some years later, of Albert Lord’s The Singer of Tales. In this volume Lord, who had been Parry’s assistant, attempted to set out, in the light of his own and Parry’s field studies, the processes of oral traditional composition. These two scholars, in opening our eyes to traditional storytelling in pre-literate or largely pre-literate cultures, raised new questions about traditional epic song and its production. One of these has been, in essence, ‘How could a poet within an oral culture have generated works of such a kind and on such a scale?’ Or, as Lord phrased it, ‘... how does the oral poet meet the ... requirements of rapid composition without the aid of writing and without memorizing a fixed form?’

Lord himself offered some answers to this question. In The Singer of Tales, following Parry, he established the critical importance of formulaic language as an enabling factor in oral composition. And he identified and attached great significance to a narrative unit larger than the formulaic phrase, which he called a theme. A memory for the themes of epic, he proposed, was essential to the composition of the narrative stretches of oral song. Although Lord’s claims for themes marked an important early step in our understanding of the processes of oral composition, we now understand that themes, or typical scenes, as others

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1 These essays are to be found in The Making of Homeric Verse: The Collected Papers of Milman Parry, ed. A. Parry (Oxford, 1971).
3 Lord, Singer of Tales, at 22.
5 Lord, Singer of Tales, at 68–98. Parry himself had been aware of this larger unit: see ‘On Typical Scenes in Homer’, in The Making of Homeric Verse, 404–7 (a review of Walter Arend, Die Typischen Scenen bei Homer [Berlin 1933]).
have termed them, are not unique to the epic tradition. Rather, these narrative segments may be traced to what cognitive psychology calls scripts, a term which describes the chunks of information about everyday events which we acquire in the course of life and store in memory in sequential form, as small episodes.  

We are in a better position now to understand how a poet like Homer, drawing on the resources of memory, may have generated the narrative stretches of his song. But, as any member of the audience might observe, only half (approximately) of each poem is presented as narrative. The remaining half is rendered in units of speech composed by the poet for his actors. Lord himself had little to say about direct speech in the epics; and his reluctance to consider the composition of the ‘spoken’ discourse in the poems has been continued, with only a few exceptions, until recent times. I attribute this reluctance in part to a greater variation in the spoken elements of oral song compared with the more easily recognizable and more predictable patterns of its narrative segments; and in part to our lack of comparative material. It is impossible for us to make a direct comparison of the speech forms used by Homer with the everyday talk of the time. It is important, however, that this topic be explored, even as we recognize the difficulties in doing so. We should therefore seek evidence in the poems that might tell us how Homer generated the speech which he attributes to his actors.

One work on Homeric speech which has been influential in recent years is Richard Martin’s study of heroic discourse. It is in response to, and in support of, his claim that there was a parallel between the discourse of Homer’s heroes and the talk which Homer heard around him.

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7 See J. Griffin, ‘Homeric Words and Speakers’, JHS 106 (1986), 36–57, at 37, who reminds us of the proportions of direct speech and indirect speech in the epics. Of the Iliad 45% is rendered as direct speech; of the Odyssey 67%. Speeches in the two poems taken together amount to nearly 55% of the total.

8 Confused by superficial variations in expression, we fail to notice underlying similarities in the form of speech acts which serve similar purposes. For further comment see E. Minchin, ‘Speech Acts in the Everyday World and in Homer: The Rebuke as a Case Study’, in Epea and Grammata: Oral and Written Communication in Ancient Greece, ed. I Worthington (Leiden, 2002), 71–97.