Introduction: a brief survey of concepts and aims

The two central concepts of this book can be summed up in the words *performance* and *composition*, which are to be taken as two different aspects of one process in oral poetics. The emphasis here is on performance, as the title of the book indicates.

The basic work on the interaction of performance and composition continues to be Albert Lord’s *The Singer of Tales.* ¹ Since we will be concentrating here on the oral poetics of ancient Greece, it is important to stress, from the very start, the importance of Lord’s book for Hellenists.² Though it is cited by many who offer various arguments about “oral poetry,” the book is often treated only superficially, and there are even instances where those who agree or disagree with it have evidently not read it at all.

The complementarity of *performance* and *composition*, as observed by Lord, parallels that of *parole* and *langue*, as formulated by Ferdinand de Saussure in the field of linguistics.³ The present book places the emphasis on *parole*, parallel to the emphasis on *performance*.⁴

The English noun *song*, along with the verb *sing*, expresses admirably the coexistence of performance and composition as a

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¹ Lord 1960.
³ Saussure 1916. A critical summary in Ducrot and Todorov 1979, 118–120.
⁴ See for example the implications of *parole* in my preface (pp. ix–xi) to the inaugural volume of the “Myth and Poetics” series, Martin 1989, *The Language of Heroes*. See also Dronke 1977, 13–31, the Introduction, which is entitled “Performers and Performance.” Eric Havelock remarks in *The Muse Learns to Write* (1986, 93) that “surviving orality also explains why Greek literature to Euripides is composed as a performance, and in the language of performance.” The term *orality*, however, can lead to many misunderstandings, some of which I survey in N 1992a.
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continuum. Further, the idea of performance inherent in song, which is absent from the word poetry, makes it more useful to apply the word song rather than poetry to archaic Greek traditions, which do not explicitly distinguish song from poetry. The resonance of performance led Albert Lord to describe the medium of the South Slavic guslar— and of Homer— as song rather than poetry. The same idea figures prominently in the title of his pathfinding book, The Singer of Tales.5

The background for applying the linguistic terms langue and parole, especially with reference to other linguistic terms such as synchronic and diachronic, unmarked and marked, has been worked out in Pindar’s Homer, a compendium of over ten years of research,6 and in the essay “Early Greek Views of Poetry and Poets” in volume I of the Cambridge History of Literary Criticism, which can serve as an epitome of that compendium.7 Another essay, “Homerian Questions,” offers a general outline of comparative linguistic as well as ethnographic approaches, summing up in this way the task at hand: “The essence of performing song and poetry, an essence permanently lost from the paideia that we have inherited from the ancient Greeks, is for me the primary question.”8

A qualification is needed concerning the term comparative, which in linguistics can be used in two senses, one more specific and the other more general. The first is represented by the méthode comparative, perfected by linguists like Antoine Meillet, where comparison entails the study of cognate forms and meanings within the discipline of historical linguistics.9 The second sense is more general, referring to the study of typological parallels, that is, of analogies between historically unrelated languages.10 While

5 Lord 1960.
6 N 1990a.
7 N 1989. One additional set of terms introduced in the present work involves the distinction that needs to be made, in analyzing oral poetics, between a syntagmatic or “horizontal” axis of combination and a paradigmatic or “vertical” axis of selection. Cf. Ducrot and Todorov 1979:111: “Thus the meaning of a word is determined both by the influence of those that surround it in discourse and by the memory of those that could have taken its place.”
8 N 1992a.23.
9 Meillet 1925.
10 A classic example is the study of Benveniste 1946 on the function of the third person in the verb-systems of a wide variety of unrelated languages.
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the establishing of cognates or borrowings is a matter of empirically proving a historical connection between the languages compared, the adding of typological parallels need not be taken as proof for a given argument, but only as an intuitive reinforcement. The “beyond” in the subtitle of this book refers to both senses of comparison, applied to the study of song and poetry in performance.

Suffice it for the moment to offer one example each of the two senses of the term comparative. To start with the more specific sense: if we compare the meters of Song 44 of Sappho with those of Homeric hexameter, we are dealing with forms that are arguably cognate, that is, derivable from a common source. The more general sense of the term comes into play if we compare, for example, the conventions of a performer’s switching from second person to first person in Song 1 of Sappho with similar conventions in the female initiation songs of Athapaskan language groups like the Apache and Navajo. Such a comparison is not a matter of proving something outright, since the ancient Greek and the contemporary Athapaskan traditions are obviously unrelated to each other historically. What is achieved, rather, is simply the enhanced likelihood that parallel lines of interpretation might lead to a deeper understanding of the individual traditions being compared.

One long-range comparative inference reached in previous work extends into the present book, which is, that group dynamics in performance help explain solo dynamics more effectively than the other way around. This inference leads to a new emphasis on the distinction between group and audience, which in turn leads to refinements of the Greek concept of mimesis. Ultimately, these questions converge on a more specific question, that is, the relationship of lyric and epic.

Epic is more difficult to define diachronically than lyric. The eventual form of ancient Greek epic is more complex than that of “lyric,” despite the fact that epic happens to be the earliest-attested body of literature in Greek history. “Epic” is also more

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11 Such a comparison is the main topic of N 1974 ch. 4.
12 See ch. 4 in this book.
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difficult to define synchronically, because it is even more deceptive than “lyric” when we apply the distinction between what Plato and Aristotle call diegesis and mimesis. While the first of these two terms is easily understood as ‘narrative’, the second is much more difficult to pin down. It will be argued at length that the primary meaning of mimesis is ‘dramatic re-enactment’. Suffice it to stress for now a central conclusion reached in this book, that the diegesis of epic is subsumed by mimesis. We may recall the perceptive wording of Stephen Halliwell, who considers the possibility that “Aristotle’s guiding notion of mimesis is implicitly that of enactment: poetry proper (which may include some works in prose) does not describe, narrate or offer argument, but dramatises and embodies human speech and action.”\(^{15}\) Such a formulation of Aristotle’s notion can apply even to the “I” who narrates Homeric song.\(^{16}\)

The ultimate aim, then, is to show that both epic and lyric in ancient Greece were fundamentally a medium of mimesis, which we can understand only if we keep asking how, when, where, and why these two kinds of verbal art were performed.

\(^{15}\) Halliwell 1986.118.
\(^{16}\) There is a key formulation in Martin 1989.87–88.
PART I

Mimesis and the making of identity in poetic performance
I

The Homeric nightingale and the poetics of variation in the art of a troubadour

Let us begin with a passage from epic, where the epic is representing lyric, not epic. Specifically the lyric form is a song of lament. Penelope is at the moment comparing herself to a nightingale, the typical songbird of lament in ancient Greek traditions, who in a previous life had been a woman who suffered the ultimate grief of ‘inadvertently’ killing her own child:

ός ί' ὅτε Παισάρεου κούρη, χλωρητῆς ἄηδων,
καλὸν ἀείδησιν ἔαρος νέον ἱσταμένοιο,
δεινόρεων ἐν πετάλοιοι καθεξικείνεσιν πυκνοῖς,
ἡ τε θαμά τροπτώσα χέιε πολυπχέα φωνή,
παϊδ' ὀλυφυρωμένη 'Ιτιλον φίλον, ὅτι ποτὲ χαλκῷ
kτείνε δι' ἄφραδίς, κούρου Ζήθωοι ἄνακτος.

As when the daughter of Pandareos, the nightingale [aïdôn]
in the green\footnote{On the identification of the aïdôn, here apparently personified as Aedon, with what we know as the nightingale (Luscinia megarhynchos), see Thompson 1936.16–22; cf. Pischinger 1901.15–16 and Schmid 1904.3–4. For the moment, khloriēs (χλωρητῆς) is rendered as ‘in the green’. Cf. Irwin 1974.72–73, who points out that the usage of khloriēs must be related to that of khloroákhēn (χλοροφούχχην), conventionally translated as ‘green-throated’, which serves as epithet of the nightingale in Simonides PMG 586.2 (ἄηδωνες ... χλωροφούχχενες). The visual characteristics of khloriēs, even if we translate it imperfectly as ‘green’, are linked metaphorically with the auditory characteristics of the nightingale’s voice: see p. 1901.}
sings beautifully at the onset anew of springtime,
perched in the dense foliage of trees,
and she pours forth, changing it around thick and fast, a voice with many resoundings,
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lamenting her child, the dear Itylos, whom once upon a
time with weapon of bronze she killed inadvertently, the
son of Zethos the king.

Odyssey 19.518-523

This form of the story, where the unfortunate woman is
daughter of Pandareos and wife of Zethos, is different from the
better-known variant native to Athens, where Proce the daugh-
ter of Pandion and wife of Tereus deliberately kills her child Itys. For now, however, the focus is on the variations not in the myth
but rather in the actual wording of the passage. At verse 521, a
variant reading πολυνεκρέα (poludeukēa), the meaning of which is
unclear, is reported by Aelian De natura animalium 3.38, in place of
what we see in the text as quoted, πολυνεκρέα (poluekhēa) ‘with
many resoundings’.

In a book about the textual history of the Homeric poems, one
critic notes that poludeukēs (the nominative) is “rarer” than po-
unehēs, adding: “we have seen, however, that many conjectures
were introduced by the ancients into Homer and that sometimes
the original was replaced by a rarer and more difficult word.” In
his footnotes, he offers this opinion: “in a poet such as Homer
the simpler and less sophisticated expression is likely to be the
original one.”

Let us juxtapose this opinion with a general formulation
offered by Albert Lord in response to modern cultural precon-
ceptions about oral poetry:

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1 On the onomatopoeia implicit in the name Itylos = Itulos, as derivative of Itus, see p.4107. In the ancient Greek lyric traditions, as we will see, this name apparently mimics the birdsong of the nightingale.


3 Van der Valk p. 83. My emphasis. He points out, however, that the variant πολυδευκεία (poludeukia) of Odyssey 19.121 is attested not only in Aelian but also in Hesychius, where πολυδευκεία φωνή is glossed as τὴν πολλὰς δοκείαν ‘the voice’ similar to many (on the basis of the arguments assembled in ch.4, we will see that this gloss is perhaps not far off the mark). In Hesychius we also find, besides πολυδευκεία φωνή, the variant that prevailed in the Homer text as it has come down to us: πολυνεκρέα φωνή.

4 Van der Valk 1949.83n4. My emphasis.
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Our real difficulty arises from the fact that, unlike the oral poet, we are not accustomed to thinking in terms of fluidity. We find it difficult to grasp something that is multiform. It seems to us necessary to construct an ideal text or to seek an original, and we remain dissatisfied with an ever-changing phenomenon. I believe that once we know the facts of oral composition we must cease trying to find an original of any traditional song. From one point of view each performance is an original.6

If we apply this line of thinking to the passage about the nightingale, we may ask whether the variant readings poluēkhēs and poludēnkēs may both be “original,” if indeed they stem ultimately from variant performances in oral poetry. But how do we square variation in performance with variation in text? This question brings me to consider two concepts, mouvance and variance. As we will see, neither of these concepts provides an immediate answer to the question at hand, but together they help shape an ultimate answer.

The term mouvance was suggested by Paul Zumthor as a way of coming to terms with his perception that a medieval literary production like the Chanson de Roland is not so much a finished product, un achèvement, as it is a text in progress, un texte en train de se faire.7 Viewing mouvance as a widespread phenomenon in medieval manuscript transmission, Zumthor defines it as a quasi-abstraction that becomes a reality in the interplay of variant readings in different manuscripts of a given work; he pictures mouvance as a kind of “incessant vibration,” a fundamental process of instability.8 He links mouvance with the workings of oral tradition: for example, he suggests that certain textual variations in the Carmina Burana reflect the potential for actual variations in performance.9

6 Lord 1660.100. My emphases.
7 Zumthor 1972.73.
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Zumthor’s idea of mouvance is not far removed from the idea of variance, which is a second concept that I apply to the general question of variation in performance and variation in text. This term variance was formulated by Bernard Cerquiglini in his influential Éloge de la variante.¹⁰ For Cerquiglini, “medieval writing does not produce variants; it is variance.”¹¹ Unlike mouvance, however, Cerquiglini’s model of variance is not to be viewed in terms of oral tradition as reflected in written tradition: his definition insists that the written tradition itself is a matter of variance.¹²

While there is much to be learned from Cerquiglini’s far-reaching insights concerning the fact of variation in medieval manuscript traditions, it is more useful for now to pursue the implications of Zumthor’s term mouvance. There are two reasons.

First, since the term mouvance is predicated on a link with oral traditions, it seems apt for describing a wide variety of situations where we do indeed observe a distinct degree and even a distinct kind of textual variation: there is a genuine distinction, it can be argued, between variant manuscript readings stemming from errors or deliberate changes in the mechanical process of writing copies of previous manuscripts on the one hand and, on the other, variant manuscript readings reflecting a performance tradition that is still alive in a given culture. This observation about the writing down of poetic wording extends also to the writing down of melodic patterns that may accompany the wording, as the research of musicologists has suggested: in the case of the medieval French chansonnières, for example, “there was not only a scriptless culture next to a literate one, but also a notationless culture side by side with a very small notated one.”¹³ It has even

¹¹ Cerquiglini 1989.111: “Or l’écriture médiévale ne produit pas de variantes, elle est variance.” Cf. Nichols 1990.1, with reference to “new” philology, as he points out at p. 1, “editors of the ‘old’ philological persuasion sought to limit variation, not reproduce it.” In the same volume edited by Nichols, we may note the remarks on Cerquiglini by Fleischman 1990.19 and Bloch 1990.46. Pickens 1994 offers a critique of the “new” philology in medieval studies.
¹² See Cerquiglini 1989.120f19, where he distances himself from Zumthor’s idea of mouvance. Other important works on the question of approaches to variation in the editing of texts include McGann 1983 (cf. also 1991) and Gabler 1984 (cf. 1993); see in general Greetham 1993. Thanks to Jenny Wallace for introducing me to the pioneering studies of McGann.
¹³ Van der Werf 1993.173.
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been argued that "for each chanson there existed probably as many versions as there were jongleurs who performed that particular chanson."[14]

Second, mouvance is not just a word coined by Zumthor: we are about to see a word meaning 'to move' which actually designates the process of mouvance and which is being used by a given song-making tradition in referring to its own capacity for variation. Moreover, this word meaning 'to move' is used in this given tradition to refer to the song of both the nightingale and the poet.

It should be noted in advance that the tradition in question – even the culture in question – differs in many ways from that of the ancient Greeks. We must therefore recognize from the start that any parallels we may find between the two traditions about to be compared are merely typological ones, and the implications of such parallelisms will have to be re-examined at length in terms of the available Greek evidence – to which we will turn in the two chapters that follow this one. Still, the poetic and even philological problems that we are about to see are in some respects strikingly similar to those faced by specialists in the ancient Greek Classics.

The key word in question is Provençal mover, the equivalent of French mouvoir and meaning, like the French word, 'to move'. The textual tradition in question involves the medieval Provençal chansonniers – in this case a sub-set of songs or lyric poems attributed to a twelfth-century troubadour named Jaufre Rudel, prince of Blaye. The edition in question is a 1978 publication by Rupert

[14] Van der Werf 1967.232. There will be more below concerning the convergences as well as divergences between jongleur as "performer" and trouvère as "composer." For instances where the scribe may have copied from memory what was heard in formal performance – or even in his own informal unit-by-unit reperformance – rather than what was seen in an earlier copy, see van der Werf 1965.65–66. Though there are isolated instances where the musical notation may have been affected by the copyist's adherence to principles of theory rather than praxis (van der Werf p. 66), it can be said in general that "the chansons of the trouvères originated and circulated in a notationless musical culture in which notation and theory exercised little or no influence" (p. 67, with his highlighting). Surveying the textual variants in the musical notations of medieval French chansons, he notes that "only an infinitesimally small number of them" are mechanical errors of the scribe. This formulation differs from that of earlier editors who "seem to have been guided by the principle that most of the discrepancies in the sources are deteriorations caused by scribal inaccuracy or by inadequacies of the oral tradition" (van der Werf 1965.62).