PART I

THE ORAL EPIC

I

THE HOMERIC POEMS ARE ORAL

Oral poetry will play a prominent part in this book. The true oral poet is one who transmits and composes poetry without the aid of writing, who absorbs songs easily from others and elaborates them extemore and by ear. Now it will be readily accepted that in preliterate societies, even quite unsophisticated ones, the gift of verbal memory is far more highly developed, through constant need and practice, than in societies like our own. Yet much more than mere learning by heart is involved in the process of oral poetry-making. Even so, the assimilation of an epic poem of several thousand lines, or the elaboration of a shorter poem to something like that length by his own additions or by transpositions from other songs, is no impossible feat for the exceptionally gifted oral singer in a largely or wholly unlettered community. This can be illustrated by specific examples from Yugoslavia or south Russia. The modern student of Homer may feel surprised about such capacities, but he must not be too incredulous.

§1. Heroic Age and heroic poetry

The narrative oral poet sings of the deeds of heroes, usually heroes of the past, and sometimes too of gods, giants or folk-tale figures. This heroic poetry is nearly always sung in lines with a uniform metrical pattern, a rapid and flowing rhythm like that of the Homeric hexameter or the looser decasyllable of Serbo-Croat verse. Even with the help of an easy and regular rhythmical framework, a restricted and standardized poetical vocabulary, and the great powers of memory of the non-literate, the oral heroic poet must almost invariably be a professional or semi-professional, one who begins his training as a boy and thereafter has constant practice.
Narrative songs were not the only ones, though there is often little or no surviving evidence of other categories. Work-songs, dance-songs and dirges must always have had a place in the kind of culture that gave rise to the oral narrative poet, and in some societies gnomic and didactic oral poetry flourished too. Yet songs of these other genres were in most ways less important than the heroic songs: they were shorter, often less formally arranged, and less closely associated with the nobility. Two common characteristics of nearly all kinds of oral poem, however, are that they were composed and remembered without the aid of writing and that they were sung or chanted, usually to a musical accompaniment. Poems are songs, and the Homeric word for a poet is δοίας (aoidos) or singer, one who accompanies himself on the lyre-like instrument known in Homer as the kitharis or phorminx.

It is strange that great heroic narrative poems of comparable structure and ideology should have grown up in different periods and parts of Europe: the Homeric poems in early Iron Age Greece, the Teutonic poems, including Beowulf and the Nibelungenlied, in the 4th to the 8th centuries A.D., the Celtic narratives in Ireland and Wales (in which, however, prose saga was mixed with poetry), especially down to the 13th or 14th century, the great Norse poems and sagas which flourished from the 9th to the 13th century, and the Russian and South Slavic heroic epics which have developed from before the 14th century to the present day—not to speak of Finnish heroic songs, or the Chanson de Roland, or the Byzantine epic of Digenes Akritas, or the much earlier and rather different Near Eastern tradition exemplified in the stories of Gilgamesh and Keret or in the Babylonian creation hymn. In some of these, especially the Scandinavian and Near Eastern poems, the element of magic, demonology or folk-tale is much stronger than in Homer. In others, like the Chanson de Roland, writing has played some part. Yet the heroic quality and the oral quality remain predominant. The reason for the similarity of these products is that they arose from basically similar cultures; each of them derives from a Heroic Age or its immediate successor. The main components of such an age, which tends to occur in the development of many different nations, are a taste for warfare and adventure, a powerful nobility, and a simple but temporarily adequate material culture devoid of much aesthetic refinement. In such conditions the heroic virtues of honour and martial courage dominate all others, ultimately with depressive effects on the stability and prosperity of the society. It is usually during the consequent period of decline that the poetical elaboration of glorious deeds, deeds that now lie in the past, reaches its climax.
The Homeric epic, developed in something like its present form by about 700 B.C., is an exceptional product of the Heroic Age of the late Achaean period, an age which had ended, historically speaking, as far back as 1100. That a tradition of oral heroic song maintained itself for so long, and grew to so late and startling a climax, is surprising enough. But fortunately the final collapse of the Achaean system, drastic as it was, had not brought about a total dispersal of population; many survivors were able to cultivate and transmit the memory of the heroic past. Another factor which fortified the Greek heroic tradition throughout the post-heroic age was the submergence of writing for a period of several centuries; and this in its turn had been helped by the laborious and imprecise nature of the Mycenaean script. During the period of total illiteracy of the 11th and 10th centuries oral poetry would be as much a necessity of life as it ever had been before—perhaps more so. Other heroic ages in other lands tended to be followed much more rapidly by the spread of writing, and their oral traditions may have been relatively less pure; though in parts of Europe an oral tradition has continued for even longer than four hundred years, because until recently writing never touched more than a small minority of the population. Even among the Achaeans only a small minority seems to have been literate; from the 7th century onwards, on the other hand, the impact of writing on the Greeks was rapid and pervasive.

In spite of these and other differences between one nation and another the concept of the Heroic Age as a recurrent phenomenon in the development of cultures, especially in Europe, is valid and useful. It allows us to understand the picture of the aoidos or professional singer as given in the Odyssey, and to envisage the way in which Homer himself—the first singer of a large-scale or ‘monumental’ epos, I mean—may have grown out of such a figure. It allows us, too, to credit the successors of singers like Demodocus with songs longer and more complex than those mentioned in the Odyssey, songs of the scale of Beowulf or the earlier Icelandic sagas. Yet the concept of the court poet of the Heroic Age must be diversified by the study of the popular or market-place poet. This is the kind that survives most tenaciously when a Heroic Age is ended and when the noblemen’s houses are divided or abandoned. The court minstrel is the typical poet in the Heroic Age, but we must be careful not to regard the composers of the Iliad and Odyssey as necessarily resembling that kind of singer in every respect. These poems were brought to perfection long after the Achaean Heroic Age had ended. Their audience must have included comparatively rich patrons and noblemen, but also, probably, the
general populace in various kinds of gathering. Heroic poetry appeals to the people as well as to heroes and their descendants; and the oral poets that can be studied best, those of modern Yugoslavia, have for long been popular poets who sing in coffee-houses, not court poets. Yet their subjects are mainly heroic and aristocratic.

§2. The language of formulas in Homer

The case for describing Homer as an oral poet would be incomplete if it depended solely on the importance of the minstrel in other heroic or post-heroic societies, together perhaps with the description of Phemius and Demodocus in the Odyssey and the absence of writing from Greece during much of the interval between the downfall of Mycenae and the probable date of the Iliad. Many critics, even before the American scholar Milman Parry, had concluded that Homer composed in a very different manner from Apollonius of Rhodes, Virgil or Milton. The language of the poems had for long been closely scrutinized, and by the early 1920’s Witte, Meister, Meillet and others had made a strong case for its classification as a formalized and traditional development, in which alternative dialect forms, for example, were chosen mainly to suit the requirements of metre. Of Parry himself, whose importance was generally overlooked until some time after his premature death in 1935, much has now been written. His contributions to Homeric scholarship are twofold: he saw the relevance of the modern oral poetry of Yugoslavia and succeeded in recording a great deal of it; and he demonstrated beyond doubt that Homer was an oral poet, depending on a gradually evolved traditional store of fixed phrases which covered most common ideas and situations—a store which was neither unnecessarily luxurious nor restrictively parsimonious.¹

These essential qualities of the oral poet’s treasury of verbal formulas were termed by Parry economy and scope. Düntzer and a few others had already recognized that the many recurrent phrases in Homer, most obviously the name-epithet formulas like ‘goodly Odysseus’ and ‘gleaming-helmeted Hector’, were used in a way that was not just haphazard or unimaginative, but on the contrary was somehow essential to the poet. Parry first showed that such fixed phrases in Homer composed a system so tight and logical that it could only be the outcome of many generations of refinement. This process of refinement consisted in the rejection of the otiouse—the merely decorative alternative—and the consolidation and expansion of whatever was functional and organic.

Now the Homeric hexameter verse tends to be more or less self-
contained in meaning; its ending usually coincides with a major or
minor pause, the end of a sentence or clause or at least the point at
which a predicate is divided from its subject. This means that there is
plenty of opportunity for the repetition of whole lines, the verse being
treated as a formula; and in fact about one-third of the verses in the
Iliad and Odyssey recur at least once. It is equally important that the
verse itself is divided into smaller sections by word-breaks which are
part of its structure; and into these sections are fitted recurrent phrases
or sense-units. The most significant internal divisions, which must
coincide with a gap between words, are the compulsory main caesura
in the third foot, either male or female (i.e. after the first long syllable
of that foot, or after its first trochee, −源源, the commoner ‘weak’
position); the preponderant ‘bucolic’ diaeresis before the fifth foot;
and the fairly common word-breaks after the first measure of the
fourth and second feet. The intervals between the beginning of the
verse and the second-foot break, or the beginning and the male
caesura, or between the male, female, fourth-foot or bucolic caesuras
and the end of the verse, are the main places in which standard phrases
or fixed formulas are employed. Since the verse-end is marked by the
fixed rhythm −源源 −源源 (as opposed to all other parts of the line, where
the sponde can be substituted for the basic dactyl at will) the poet
must first be sure of filling the latter part of the line. Thus the majority
of fixed phrases are designed to fill out portions of the verse-end.

The following verses illustrate the main organic sections of the
hexameter verse.

1 Ζεύς υψηθερμήτης, ἔτερον ἔτερον ἔτερον
Zeus high-thundering one, Trojans wished him (xvi. 121;*
for there are 4 other Homeric instances of the formula underlined here).

2 Μυρμιδόνες, ἔταροι
Myrmidones, comrades

Piληνάδεων Αχιλλῆος
of Peleus-offspring Achilles (xvi. 269 + 7
other instances).

3 ὁδό ράτο, βλητεν μὲν ἔτερον
So said he, and then shuddered

polύπος διος Ὀδυσσεύς
enduring god Odysseus (5. 171 + 37).

4 τὸν δ’ ἐτοαμεθόμονος προσίθη
Him then in answering thus did address

πολύκηπτος Ὀδυσσεύς
many-counseled Odysseus
(7. 207 + 80).

5 ὁδὸ ἡρα φανήσας κόρον ἐπέλεκτο
Thus then making response took up helmet

φαμιλίου Ἐκτέορ
glorious Hector (vi. 494 +

28).

* Roman book-numbers refer to the Iliad, Arabic to the Odyssey.
The translations are rather outlandish, but they preserve the metre. Now these examples illustrate the formal use of name-epithet phrases (underlined or italic) in the first instance, though they contain other fixed phrases too. There are many other kinds of formula, verbal or adverbial or containing ordinary nouns in a variety of cases. It is obvious that if the oral poet has at his command a number of alternative phrases for any given concept, each of slightly different metrical value and corresponding with the main intervals to be filled in the hexameter line, a great part of his task of impromptu verse-making is done, and he can concentrate on filling up the rest of the line with other words, formulas or combinations of formulas so as to express his own particular meaning.

It may be revealing to study other formulas, as well as the name-epithet groups, in our five examples. In I the phrase βοῦλετο νίκην (‘victory wished he’) occupies the same position in the verse (that of the name-epithet group in 5), as it does in four other and different lines of the Iliad. In one of these it is preceded, as in I, by Τρώισσι δέ (‘for Trojans’). That again is a formal usage, since these two words occur in the equivalent position, namely before the bucolic diaeresis, elsewhere. Thus when the poet wished to express the idea ‘he desired victory’ he always used βοῦλετο νίκην at the line-end, and when he wanted to say ‘for the Trojans’ with a connecting particle in the latter part of the verse Τρώισσι δέ (or τε) in that position the natural and inevitable way of doing so. I is entirely composed, therefore, of three juxtaposed formulas.

Short structural phrases may occur repeatedly in other sections of the verse too small to be classified among the main divisions: thus in 3 ὑς φέτο (‘so said he’) is a formula which occurs at the beginning of many other verses of the Iliad and Odyssey. The next word-group in 3, βίγνισθε δέ (‘and (then) shuddered’), is also a formula, though not so straightforwardly. It comes in the same position in the only other line of the Odyssey in which the verb appears, while in the Iliad it occurs seven times (including superficial variants), though usually at the very beginning of the line and not before the trochaic caesura. On the other hand other verbs of three long syllables followed by δέ or τε fall naturally into the latter position. Again, in 4 the predicate in the earlier part of the line is a formula, just as much as the name-epithet group at the end: τὸν δ’ ἄποιμασθένος προσέθη is absolutely standard for the sense ‘answered him as follows’, and with minor variants it occurs roughly 70 times in the Odyssey and 40 in the Iliad—a difference, incidentally, which may be significant for the question of author-
ship. In cases where the singer wishes to describe a metrically more extensive subject as answering someone, then he will use a shorter and slightly different formula: τὸν δ’ ἁμαρτείτης ἠπείτε, ‘him did answer thereafter’ (followed by ‘enduring goodly Odysseus’ and so on). This form occurs 72 times in the two poems. The choice of the longer or shorter ‘answered’ formula is in fact rather arbitrary where the subject is a major god or hero, because these can be described by either shorter or longer alternative name-epithet phrases; but there are many other characters whose specification requires more than the room left by the longer predicate.

There is, in fact, amazingly little unnecessary reduplication of formulas in Homer. To take the large number of name-epithet phrases in the nominative case: Parry showed that for eleven prominent gods and heroes there are no less than 824 uses of 55 different formulas in the Iliad and Odyssey as a whole.¹ These formulas, some of which are of course very frequent (πολυμήτης Ὀδυσσέας, ‘many-counseled Odysseus’, comes 81 times), are those which fill out the four commonest metrical segments of the verse, namely those exemplified in 1, 3, 4, 5 above. Out of the 824 uses only 15, involving only three different formulas, are reduplicative in the sense of being exact metrical equivalents of other commoner ones: for instance στρεμμικέρετα Ζεὺς (‘Zeus gath’rer of lightning’, once only) is an unfunctional variant of Ζεὺς τερτικέρανως (‘Zeus thunderbolt-joying’, four times). Thus in the extensive name-epithet nominative system there is an astounding economy of phrases, not more than 5 per cent of reduplication. At the same time the coverage or scope is almost equally striking. The four main parts of the verse to be filled, in the case of these eleven prominent characters, make a possibility of 44 name-epithet groups. Two of these positions cannot in any case be filled by particular names because of their metrical value, but out of the 42 remaining we find formulas for no less than 37, making roughly 88 per cent perfect coverage.

This degree of scope and economy cannot be accidental; nor can it be the creation of a single poet. No one singer could construct a system so rich in metrical alternatives and at the same time so closely shorn of unfunctional variation. Even a pen and paper composer would be hard pressed to achieve such a system, and to do so he would have to behave not like a poet but like a cryptographer—or a classical scholar; and his effort would be quite pointless, since the only reasonable purpose of such a construction is to enable the oral, non-literate poet both to assimilate and to increase a great stock of traditional heroic song. The system is so extensive because for generation after
generation individual singers had added a fresh phrase here and another there, as the necessity of their particular contexts demanded; it is so economical, spare and thrifty because needless alternatives—a mere encumbrance to the singer—were systematically if gradually discarded.

Closer examination of the details of the formular system shows how it helps the poet to remember traditional verses; for if a line is divided into three familiar phrase-units, say, rather than ten or a dozen word-units, it is easier to remember and reproduce. It also helps him to compose his own fresh lines with the minimum of effort. Epithets are standardized not only for people but also for many familiar objects, and once again they vary according to the portion of verse that it is desired to fill. If the idea ‘of a ship’ has to be expressed in the latter part of a verse, the ship will be described as ‘equal’, ‘curved around’ or ‘dark-prowed’ simply according as the final 2, 2½ or 3½ feet have to be filled. If the case is changed then the epithet may have to be changed too, and ἡ τὸ ἐπτὸς becomes ἡ πηλικάτονη. That is not because ships in the dative are any blacker and less equal than those in the genitive, nor is it because a ship in a particular context is envisaged as black rather than equal: it is black simply and solely because after the word ἡ and to fill the measure ὑ—ὑ we require an epithet of that value beginning with a consonant—since ἡ ends in a vowel. The Greek for ‘equal’ will not do; the Greek for ‘black’ will. Other common types of formula were adjusted in a similar manner to express the verb, or the verb and its object, and so on, and were designed to fill either the first or the second part of the verse and often to be mated with an appropriate subject-formula in the other part.

The singers of the Ionian oral tradition sometimes adapted a phrase to a new position or a new use without much conscious thought, by ear and by instinct. The formula in its standard use and form had a familiar metrical value, and it seems to have been assumed, sometimes wrongly, that this value persisted even after the standard form had been slightly altered; or perhaps it would be truer to say that there was no conscious assumption of any kind, that this problem is one that often does not occur to the oral singer. Thus μέροτος ἀνθρώπων (‘of articulate men’), is a well-known formula evidently developed for use in the genitive case. At xviii. 288 we see that at some stage some not very careful singer required a nominative phrase meaning ‘men’ for the same part of the line, and so transposed the familiar formula into μέροτος ἀνθρώπων, thus producing a technical fault of metre. In performance the singer would presumably disguise this fault by
artificially prolonging the -ς, and the audience would probably not notice the difference. Another result of the careless use of formulas is inappropriateness not of metre but of sense. Thus the basic idea ‘with the hand’ is often expressed by the formula χειρὶ πυρὶ, in which the epithet ‘thick’ helps to fill up the part of the verse following the bucolic diaeresis. When this epithet is applied not to the powerful fist of a warrior, which must have been its usual and so ‘proper’ function, but to the ladylike hand of the refined Penelope, the result, if it is noticed at all, is ludicrous. These are obvious cases, but there are others in which the redeployment of a formula reveals itself in more subtle ways; thus one of a pair of repeated passages may be seen as adapted from the other—or from the type of which the other is a fair representative—because of the forced adjustment of a component formula.

What is the minimum length of a formula? The maximum may be several complete lines, comprising a passage which is repeated whenever a typical scene, like the preparation of a meal or sacrifice or the launching or beaching of a ship, is to be described. The minimum may be two words like ὁς φάμο (‘so said he’) if we insist on the formula as a phrase-unit. But even single words have definite formular tendencies, since they gravitate strongly to certain positions in the verse according to their metrical value. The longer the word the less remarkable this fixity becomes; there are only two positions which a word like φιλόππολόμεσο (υουυυυυυυυυ) can occupy without disturbing the natural articulations of the hexameter line. Yet even disyllables show a strong preference for one or perhaps two positions in the verse, whereas there are theoretically several in which they could occur. Sometimes this preference is due to the fact that the word in question occurs predominantly in a particular formula, itself restricted in position. Often, though, the tendency toward fixity arises out of the pure mechanics of the hexameter verse and the way in which word-groups were disposed round the regular word-divisions so as to form rhythmical phrases. Thus metrical word-values, rather than particular single words, are formular in Homer, and this apparent restriction, like that imposed by fixed phrases, was of a kind to help rapid composition rather than hinder it. The singer begins to crystallize a thought of which the pivotal concept is ‘house’: he assigns δῶμα, for instance, to its preferred position, and can then confidently fit verbal and other nominal formulas round it. His verse is made with the minimum of conscious effort.
§3. The oral tradition and literacy

I hope to have outlined the broad principles of formular composition and to have shown by a small number of examples that Homer manifests the scope and economy of a developed oral tradition. One consequence is that every single line of the great poems must be assessed in terms of a traditional and formalized language and a traditional subject-matter. At the same time it is important to be aware that the Iliad and Odyssey came close to the very end of the true oral period. By the probable time of composition of the Theogony, the Aithiopis, and the Hymn to Demeter, none of which is likely to be very much later than 650, writing was reaching the point at which it could be extensively used for literary composition. Archilochus, who was certainly a literate composer, refers to an eclipse of the sun which must be that of 648. Moreover, graffito inscriptions on certain unambitious pots show that writing was used in different parts of the Greek world, and sometimes for casual and inessential purposes, as early as the last decades of the 8th century. The Dipylon prize jug with a hexameter couplet to the effect that the best of the dancers (?) shall receive this prize is datable from its shape and decoration to around 730;1 the Ithaca cup with another heroic verse or two is later, around 700, and the same is probably true of the little pot excavated in Ischia in 1954, with a couplet referring to the famous cup of Nestor in the eleventh book of the Iliad. Some fragments of cheap clay cups found on Mount Hymettus in Attica and bearing alphabetic inscriptions are to be placed around 700, and the earliest painted (as opposed to incised) inscription, on a fragment of a latest-Geometric plaque found in Aegina, is of about the same date.2

These cases suggest that the Greek alphabet must have been developed (in origin for more essential uses?) at some time before 725. It was derived, of course, from the Phoenician script, and had to undergo a fair degree of adaptation—notably in the diversion of some Phoenician signs to vowels, which were not expressed by separate letters in the Semitic script. For this reason the process most probably presupposes recurrent contact with a Phoenicianized culture over some years. At present the favoured point of contact is Al Mina at the mouth of the Orontes, where there was a Greek colony probably called Poseideion; but another possibility is Cyprus, with which trade from Greece was restored around 800 B.C.3

In any event we know that writing was used for short inscriptions of a vaguely literary nature by the last decades of the 8th century; we