HOMER

The Iliad

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Chapter 1

Homer's world and the making of the *Iliad*

1 The *Iliad* and Mycenaean civilisation

Homer's *Iliad* tells of a punitive Greek expedition against Troy, led by Agamemnon, king of Mycenae in southern Greece. The story is set in a remote heroic age, distinct from and superior to the present, in which war and warrior leaders are the norm. In historical terms this heroic age is to be identified with the Mycenaean civilisation of the second millennium B.C. (*c.* 1600–1100) and Homer's Greeks (called 'Argives', 'Danaans' or 'Achaeans') with the Mycenaeans, known from archaeological excavations at Mycenae and elsewhere.

The Mycenaeans were the first Greek speakers to establish a civilisation on Greek soil. Their ancestors had come from the north, *c.* 2000, completing one of many prehistoric migrations undertaken over several millennia by Indo-European-speaking peoples from (probably) somewhere to the north-west of the Black Sea. On their arrival they encountered a non-Indo-European 'Minoan' culture, which they eventually absorbed and displaced. The Greece they then created seems to have been a coherent miniature empire based on several palace centres, including one at Mycenae itself. It was bureaucratic and centralised, although its orderly surface no doubt concealed many divergencies, including new dialect groupings. Among its sophisticated features was writing in the syllabic script now known as Linear B. Among its foreign contacts was the ancient city of Troy, now Hissarlik in Turkey, situated a few miles from the Hellespont and the Aegean sea.

In a period of widespread disruption throughout the eastern Mediterranean towards the end of the second millennium, the Mycenaean palace culture, its bureaucracy and its writing, was destroyed, *c.* 1100. In the same period Troy was destroyed too – more than

once – as the different layers revealed by modern excavation show. The layer known to archaeologists as Troy VIIa met a violent end *c.* 1220, which corresponds roughly with the traditional date for the sack of Troy (1184) accepted by the Greeks of the classical period. Whether the destruction of Troy VIIa actually was the event that lies behind the Homeric saga and whether, if so, it was the work of a Mycenaean force, cannot be proved or disproved. Both assumptions, however, are commonly made, along with the large qualification that the Homeric version of events is poetry, not history, and may well have little in common with the original enterprise, whose scale (apart from anything else) has surely been greatly enhanced in the retelling.

2 The Dark Age and eighth-century pan-Hellenism

The overthrow of Mycenaean civilisation was also the work of unidentified agents, but the most plausible theory refers us to the so-called Dorian invasion: that is, to an influx of as yet uncivilised Greek-speakers (Dorians) from the north. The aftermath of the Mycenaean age, certainly, was fragmentation and the establishment, over much of mainland Greece, of a distinct dialect group, whose various versions of Doric Greek (or strictly 'West Greek') persisted into the classical period and beyond. Faced with the new invaders, the older established groups sought refuge in remote parts of the Greek world, like the Arcadian highlands of central southern Greece, or regrouped to the east, or else migrated still further eastwards to the islands and coastline of Asia Minor. There, in historic times, the predominant dialects were Ionic and Aeolic, both descendants of the versions of Greek once spoken over much of the Greek mainland, and the latter now spoken where Homer's Troy had formerly stood.

These movements and migrations are known by inference. They took place in what we call the Dark Age – dark, because it has left us few traces, and because (partly on that evidence) it exhibits a cultural inferiority to the periods before and after, even though it is in fact the age in which iron was introduced to Greece. When, in the eighth century, the recovery of Greek civilisation becomes apparent, we observe a cluster of events which tell against the fragmentation of the Dark Age and imply a new sense of Greek identity,

overriding tribal and dialectal differences. The organisation of the Greek world, it is true, is now based on the unitary city-state, the *polis*, whose independence is and remains its most cherished possession. The city-states, however, are now seen to share a consciousness of 'Hellenic' status (as it will soon be called) through their willingness to participate in common Greek actions and institutions. The climactic achievement of pan-Hellenism is no doubt the victorious struggle against the Persians in the fifth century, but its first expressions are already to be found in the eighth. In this century we note the inauguration of the first pan-Hellenic festival, the Olympic games (776); the rise of the Delphic oracle; and the invention and dissemination of a Greek alphabet from Semitic, probably Phoenician, sources. And in this same century Greece produced the *Iliad*: a work that celebrated the first known collective act by Greeks against an external power, and a work that offered all Greek speakers a common cultural point of reference, a view and version of the Greek gods that transcended local varieties, a standard pan-Hellenic poetic language, and a standard for – indeed, the very concept of – a national literature that was not simply the property of one parochial group. With the *Iliad* the pan-Hellenic ideal achieves a definitive form.

3 The date of the *Iliad*

The *Iliad* is to be dated to *c*. 730. This makes it the earliest extant work of Greek literature, and earlier than the *Odyssey*, also ascribed to Homer, and the wisdom literature of Hesiod. This dating, though widely accepted, rests on no early testimony. Thanks to the remoteness of the period to which the poem belongs and the comparative illiteracy of its culture, there is no contemporary information about its date either in absolute terms or in relation to other datable events.

Our dating is established by a combination of factors: the absence from the poem of any element that on either linguistic or historical grounds is definitely later than 700 or (if arguably later) any element that cannot be explained away as superficial distortion or trivial interpolation into an eighth-century original; the occasional occurrence in the poem of objects or customs (such as hoplite fighting

tactics) which seem, on archaeological evidence, to imply a date no earlier than 750; late eighth-century vase paintings which *may* be representations of scenes from the *Iliad* (the most plausible is one on an Attic jug, *c.* 730, now in the Louvre, which has been identified with the events of *Iliad* VII, especially the duel between Hector and Ajax); a verse inscription on a jug from Ischia in southern Italy, *c.* 700, which refers to the cup of Nestor, described at XI 632ff. (but the cup might have been well known independently); linguistic evidence that, by a generation or so, the *Iliad* precedes the *Odyssey* and the *Odyssey* the poems of Hesiod, in combination with the ancient tradition that Homer and Hesiod pre-dated seventh-century writers like Archilochus and Callinus; and the consideration that, whereas seventh-century poets and even Hesiod, were known to posterity as individuals, 'Homer' to later Greeks was (like some relic from a remoter period) little more than the name.

4 'Homer'

Though indeed little more than a name to later Greeks, Homer was still regarded by them as a real person, not as some kind of legendary figure, like the singer Orpheus, for instance; and *Hómēros* is, at the very least, a real Greek name (attested, as a matter of fact, in Aeolic-speaking districts). Various localities laid claim to him. The most plausible tradition associated him with the Ionian island of Chios. A poem probably by Simonides (*c.* 500 B.C.: *fr.* 8 West) quotes a famous line from the *Iliad* (VI 146) and ascribes it to 'the man from Chios'; and it seems that a guild of 'rhapsodes' (reciters) called 'Homeridae' (descendants of Homer, literal or spiritual) existed in Chios at least as early as the late sixth century.

At all events, 'Homer' was the name generally associated with the *Iliad* – and the *Odyssey*. Here too, though, there was uncertainty. There were voices in antiquity that suggested different authors for the two poems; on the other hand, various heroic epics now lost (some of them dealing with parts of the Trojan saga not covered by the *Iliad* or the *Odyssey*) were often ascribed to Homer as well. If a late citation is to be trusted (Pausanias, 9.9.5 = Callinus, *fr.* 6 West), this was already the case in the seventh century, to which many of these epics must have belonged. At any rate, doubts

expressed by the historian Herodotus (*c.* 430) about the Homeric authorship of two of these other poems (*History* II 117, IV 32) suggest that such ascriptions to Homer were current in the mid-fifth century. So too does a saying ascribed to the tragedian Aeschylus, that his plays were 'slices from the great banquets of Homer' (Athenaeus, VIII 347e). Many of Aeschylus' plays, extant or lost, dealt with known epic subjects, but it is apparent that he avoided reworking material from the *Iliad* or *Odyssey*. If the anecdote is authentic, then, 'Homer' for Aeschylus included at least some other early epics.

By the fourth century, however, 'Homer', without further qualification, meant the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. This is clear, for instance, from Aristotle's description of epic in his *Poetics* (chapters iv, xxiii) (although even there, the *Margites*, a lost seventh(?)-century mock-heroic poem, is still ascribed to Homer). Moreover, there is evidence that as early as the sixth century the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* were especially associated with each other and with Homer in contradistinction to early epic in general. In the first place, we have relevant testimony concerning the recitations of Homer at the great Athenian festival, the *Panathenaea*, at this time. From a variety of later sources we learn that one or other of the sixth-century rulers of Athens (the tyrant Pisistratus, or his son Hipparchus, or, less plausibly, the poet–statesman Solon) initiated legislation establishing the recitations and regulating their performance: they were to involve the epics of Homer only, and the epics were to be recited in full and in their proper order by a series of rhapsodes, with one ending where his predecessor left off. It is implicit in these accounts, the earliest of which belong to the fourth century (Lycurgus, *Leocrates* 102 and pseudo-Plato, *Hipparchus* 228b), that 'Homer', which did mean the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* by that time, meant the same in the sixth century itself.

The same implication may be drawn for the whole archaic period – the seventh, sixth and early fifth centuries – from a different kind of consideration. Aeschylus was not alone in avoiding Iliadic and Odyssean themes, while favouring other epic material: this seems to have been general practice for writers from the seventh century down to the fifth, despite the accepted stature of the two Homeric poems themselves. This remarkable phenomenon is difficult to explain, except on the assumption that the two epics

were distinguished from the rest, and from an early date, as specially Homeric.

We may conclude, then, that in the archaic period the name 'Homer', though often applied to heroic epic in general, was especially associated with our two epic poems, which were rapidly accepted as the masterpieces of the genre.

5 Do we have Homer's *Iliad?*

To speak, however, of 'our' two epics is to beg a large question: what is the relation between the *Iliad* (and the *Odyssey*) as we read it today and the Homeric original? This, in essence, is the so-called 'Homeric question', which has been considered and reconsidered for the best part of two hundred years.

The first printed edition of the *Iliad* was published in Florence in 1488. This and subsequent editions depend on medieval manuscripts (we possess about two hundred in all), the earliest of which belong to the tenth century A.D. These manuscripts in turn derive from a standard text, or 'vulgate', established by the scholars of Alexandria (Zenodotus, Aristophanes, Aristarchus) in the third and second centuries B.C. The Alexandrians' task was to collect and collate manuscripts of the two Homeric epics, then to produce a critical edition by rejecting suspect lines and choosing between variant readings. Besides their vulgate, they produced explanatory commentary on it (the basis of the marginal notes, or 'scholia', which accompany some of our medieval manuscripts) and also divided the two epics into twenty-four books each – one book for each letter of the Greek alphabet. In the fifth and fourth centuries B.C., the poems had been divided into different sections based on episodes: so Herodotus (II 116) refers to the 'exploits of Diomedes' (*Diomḗdeos aristeíē*), Thucydides (I 10) to the 'catalogue of ships' (*neō̃n katálogos*), Plato (*Ion* 539b) to the 'battle for the wall' (*teikhomakhía*). In the archaic period the poems must have been divided up for purposes of recitation, but on what basis is uncertain.

The effectiveness of the Alexandrians' editing is shown by ancient papyrus fragments of Homer. Those later than the second century B.C. generally conform to the vulgate; the earliest, which belong to the third century B.C., show remarkable fluctuations from it and

from each other. So too do Homeric quotations in fourth-century authors such as Plato. It is clear, then, that in the fourth and third centuries the text of Homer was not fixed; and it is likely that this instability goes back to the fifth century, when (with the spread of literacy) the book trade was beginning to grow and copies of the epics, accurate or inaccurate, would have multiplied and circulated freely. Direct evidence for the state of the text in the fifth century is scanty.

For the sixth century, however, we do have evidence, in the shape of the traditions concerning the Panathenaic recitations in the time of Pisistratus (see p. 5). If professional reciters in sixth-century Athens were required to recite Homer in full and strict sequence, there must have been an approved text for them to follow. Where it came from is not known (perhaps from the Homeridae of Chios), but we may assume that a new copy was made, which will have brought changes to the text, if only changes of dialect. The Homeric poems as a whole have an intermittent Attic colouring of a largely superficial kind, which cannot have been original and is most likely to have entered the tradition at this point. Our Alexandrian Homer, therefore, is the descendant of a Homer Atticised for Athenian audiences in the sixth century, which was later disseminated throughout the Greek world in accordance with the new cultural dominance of Athens.

Were any other changes involved at this time? One major change is suggested by the ancient scholia, which tell us that book X of the *Iliad*, the Dolon episode, was originally an independent 'Homeric' composition, but was 'put into the poem by Pisistratus'; and it is certainly true that various participants of the episode (Dolon himself, the Thracian king Rhesus, the king's wonderful white horses which the Achaeans capture) appear nowhere else in the poem, and that, for this and other reasons, X is much more detachable from the poem than any other episode of comparable length (see pp. 34, 39). As against this, however, there is a Corinthian cup of *c.* 600 B.C., now in Brussels, on which a variety of Iliadic scenes and figures are depicted, Dolon among them; the implication is that the 'Doloneia' was an accepted part of the *Iliad* before the time of Pisistratus, who was tyrant of Athens, on and off, from 561 to 527.

Other suggested changes in this period are still more speculative. A late tradition represented by a remark of Cicero (first century B.C.:

de Oratore, 3. 34. 137) assures us: 'Pisistratus is said to have been the first to arrange in their present order the books of Homer that were previously scattered.' This might mean that Pisistratus initiated the compilation of an *Iliad* and an *Odyssey* from numerous short compositions which had never, until that moment, formed parts of larger wholes. The notion was once fashionable, and is embodied in the once fashionable name for the Panathenaic phase of the transmission, the 'Pisistratean recension', but is incompatible with the sophisticated unity and homogeneity of the *Iliad* (the *Odyssey* is not our present concern). In any case, it is very unlikely that Pisistratus, or anyone else in sixth-century Athens, could have done something so drastic to something so well known without (for instance) the learned men of Alexandria being aware of it. What underlies the tradition is presumably what also underlies the institution of rules for Panathenaic recitation: the two epics had indeed existed as wholes, but rhapsodes tended to recite single episodes. Pisistratus (or whoever) insisted on authentic, integrated performance from the new, Atticised text.

Our discussion of dating offers no grounds for positing any distinctive changes to the *Iliad* after the eighth century, our discussion of transmission none for any significant changes after the midsixth. It remains entirely possible that in the intervening period there were modifications, small enough and early enough to be *un*distinctive and therefore now undetectable. The nature and extent of such changes depends largely on the nature of the transmission between the eighth and sixth centuries: was there an authoritative text or, indeed, a text of any kind in the possession of the Homeridae then? Above all, when was the *Iliad* first written down? Here, as nowhere else, we enter the realms of speculation and controversy. There was an ancient tradition that the Homeric epics had first been transmitted orally (and therefore, presumably, composed orally) and were only later written down (so Josephus, first century A.D., *Against Apion*, I 12). This hypothesis has been widely accepted since 1795, when the German scholar F. A. Wolf inaugurated the Homeric question in its modern form by claiming (*a*) that the epics were pre-literate, and (*b*) that 'Homer' was less an author in the modern sense than a long, anonymous process of composition. The second claim, however, is misconceived, and (if the *Iliad* is to be dated

to *c.* 730) the first claim is not strictly true. Widespread literacy, indeed, did not exist before the end of the sixth century; but informal inscriptions survive from the last third of the eighth, and it is reasonably assumed that the alphabet was introduced to Greece some decades before that.

However, the *Iliad* was almost certainly *not* composed by writing as we would understand it. Quite apart from any practical problems involved, with so long a work and writing technology (in Greece, at least) in its infancy, the compositional techniques visible in the poem are essentially oral (see pp. 14ff.). The poem, therefore, is oral in a newly literate age: it is transitional. A sign of this is the transitional status of its composer. Homer has a name and the beginnings, but only the beginnings, of a biography: he is to be contrasted with literate poets of later centuries *and equally* with his own entirely anonymous, and presumably wholly illiterate, predecessors. There is a correlation, then, between literacy and historical identity, and between illiteracy and anonymity. Homer seems to fall between the categories in one respect; it is our working hypothesis that he does so in the other.

As an oral poem, the *Iliad* does not presuppose our conception of a stable text over whose fate the author expects or demands absolute dominion beyond his lifetime. That conception is first explicit in the later archaic age. 'No one will change my words . . . these are the words of Theognis', is how one poet comes to articulate it in the sixth century (Theognis, 21–2). The early epic poet ascribes his words to outside agencies, the Muses. Well he might. In later, written, literature invocations to the Muse become a learned convention. For the composer of pre-literate poetry they sum up the limits of his proprietorial authorship. 'His' words were never strictly 'his'; he cannot therefore presume to control them for ever. The opening words of the *Iliad*, 'Goddess, sing [me] the wrath of Achilles', signify a pre-literate outlook.

On the other hand, the remarkable bulk of the poem is an equally clear sign of the new literacy. In a pre-literate society literature must be performed; it cannot be read. In the case of a poem like the *Iliad*, performance means public recitation. The *Iliad*, however, is a 'monumental' composition about 15,000 verses long. In its entirety it would have taken several days of discontinuous recitation, as

happened at the sixth-century *Panathenaea*: it could not, in any or-
dinary sense, be performed as a continuous whole. In a society that
presupposes performance, however, there is something extraordi-
nary about the composition of such a work. The natural explanation
is that the 'monumental' composer was exploring: that he glimpsed
the latent possibilities of the new medium of writing; that he saw in
it an opportunity to achieve something of special value and a means
of perpetuating that achievement indefinitely.

However, it does not follow that the *Iliad* was *composed* with any
assistance from writing, nor indeed that it was committed to writ-
ing immediately or even soon. We assume that the concept of a
fixed text, which the monumental composer's intuition had fore-
seen, created the pressure for a transcription: we need not assume
that the pressure was translated into immediate action. The poet, if
literate, *might* have written out his own poem, even though its com-
position was, in effect, pre-literate. He might instead have dictated
it to a scribe: 'oral dictated texts' – not, admittedly, of such great
extent – are known from Hittite and Ugaritic records of the second
millennium. Or, on either hypothesis, the transcription might have
been done in stages over a long period. This notion of the 'progres-
sive fixation' of the text has been used to account for the incidental
anomalies and inconsistencies observed between different parts of
the poem (see p. 21), although such features are observable in most
long works of literature to some degree and would be likely enough
in any long oral composition, however transcribed.

All of these possibilities are open to the objection that it would
have been difficult to transcribe such a long work so early (p. 9).
An alternative possibility is that the transmission of the poem was
in the first instance oral and that the transcription came later – in
the seventh century? – when writing techniques and technology
were more advanced. The immediate purpose of the transcription
would have been an *aide-mémoire* for reciters (the Homeridae or
whoever), and its product the hypothetical text used as the basis for
the Panathenaic transcription in the sixth century. It is implicit in
this hypothesis that large feats of memorising were for some decades
required, but then so they were, for shorter periods, on any of the
hypotheses discussed above; and we must allow for the impressive
feats of memory characteristic of many traditional societies.

We must also allow – on any of these hypotheses – for the inexactness of the memorising involved. It is probably inevitable that *any* period of oral transmission would have involved incidental modifications. Minor anomalies might be created or indeed ironed out, wittingly (as the conductor 'corrects' the plain indications of the score) or unwittingly. Minor felicities, or infelicities, in the spirit of the original might be added. However, the difficulties experienced in proving that 'suspect' details (including details so designated by the Alexandrians) are 'late' or 'untraditional', as often alleged, suggest that modifications are likely to have been most common in the decades immediately following the original composition, when the currency out of which the poem's attitudes and expressions were developed will have been still generally available: they will have been Homeric in spirit, though not in authorial fact. The element of Attic colouring is no earlier than the sixth century. A few other incidentals may have accrued, or been lost, *en route*.

No doubt, then, in the strict sense we do not possess Homer's *Iliad*. But is there really any reason why we need worry the question any further? There is no prospect of our ever restoring the eighth-century original and *knowing* that we have done so; whereas it is quite possible that, even if we could restore it, we should prefer the *Iliad* as we have it. We continue, however, to invoke 'Homer', and not simply as a convenience: nothing that has been said makes the *Iliad* a communal creation, like a coral reef. But Homer's contributions and any from (let us call them) his revisors stand together. The qualities of the poem are to be assessed in their own right, irrespective of conclusions about authorship, mine or any others.

6 Oral poetry: performance and public

The famous poet [*aoidós*] was performing [*áeide*] for them, and they sat listening in silence. He told of the Achaeans' disastrous homecoming from Troy . . . From her chamber upstairs . . . Penelope heard the inspired piece [*théspin aoidḗn*] . . . and in tears spoke to the divine poet: 'Phemius, there are many other histories of men and gods that poets celebrate to enchant mankind. You know them. Sit there and tell your listeners one of those; and they can go on drinking their wine in silence . . .' But wise Telemachus answered her: 'Mother, why do you grudge the worthy poet

giving us pleasure as his mind is moved to? . . . It is no sin for him to tell of the Achaeans' evil fate: people prefer the most topical piece they hear.'

(*Odyssey*, I 325ff.)

Never have I sailed over the broad sea, but only to Euboea from Aulis . . . I crossed over to Chalcis for the [funeral] games of Amphidamas. . . . I declare that there I was successful with a poem [*húmnōi*] and took the prize, a cauldron . . . which I dedicated to the Muses of Helicon . . .

(Hesiod, *Works and Days* 650ff.)

The *Iliad* may be unperformable as an unbroken whole, but it still presupposes performance. The original circumstances of performance can be reconstructed from descriptions in Homer (mostly in the *Odyssey*) and the slightly later *Works and Days* in conjunction with inferences from the epics themselves. Corroboration is available from other oral epic traditions, of which the best known is from what was, until recently, known as Yugoslavia. However, there is far too great a diversity of 'oral' types to give any one analogue, South Slavic or other, a definitive value (see Finnegan, *Oral Poetry*).

The oral performer in the Homeric tradition chanted his words, to the accompaniment of a stringed instrument, the *kithára* or *phórminx*, conventionally translated 'lyre'. What he chanted was a series of single verses ('lines' is obviously a very misleading term), all formally equivalent to each other. The music (now entirely lost) was essentially rhythmical support, but presumably also gave some minimal melodic colouring to the verse. The performance no doubt also included a measure of acting, but the word was the dominant ingredient. 'Song' is a common but misleading translation of Phemius' *aoidḗ*.

The metre of Homeric epic, like all ancient Greek metres, was quantitative: that is, based not on stress, but on patterns of heavy and light syllables (commonly, but less felicitously, called 'long' and 'short'). The metrical unit, the verse, was based on the dactyl, $-\cup\cup$, where '$-$' designates a heavy syllable and '$\cup$' a light one, and (as often in Greek verse) '$-$' was equivalent to, and could replace, $\cup\cup$. The single verse, though known as the dactylic hexameter ('sixmeasure'), was not a stereotyped sequence of six dactyls ($-\cup\cup-$ $\cup\cup-\cup\cup-\cup\cup-\cup\cup$), but a complex of alternatives, $-\overline{\cup\cup}-\overline{\cup\cup}-$ $\overline{\cup\cup}-\overline{\cup\cup}-\overline{\cup\cup}--$, or, most commonly, $-\overline{\cup\cup}-\overline{\cup\cup}-\overline{\cup\cup}-\overline{\cup\cup}-\cup\cup--$,

i.e. a sequence with a recognisable cadence (–∪∪––) preceded by a series of dactyls (–∪∪) or their equivalents (– –). The verse was thus a flexible but elaborately regulated entity, realised in various rhythms, e.g.:

I 6   *ex hoũ dḕ tà prõta diastḗtēn erísante*
I 11   *hoúneka tòn Khrúsēn ētímasen arētḕra*
I 130   *tòn d' apameibómenos proséphē kreiõn Agamémnōn.*

Rhythmical variety arose also from a tendency to compose in groups of verses, of which many would run on syntactically into the next ('enjambement'), and from the deployment of word-groups to produce breaks ('caesurae') at various points within the verse.

The performance was entertainment, hence suitable for a gathering during or after a meal, but 'serious', artistic entertainment: even the noisy banqueters in *Odyssey* I were expected to listen and concentrate in silence. Elevated festivals or games, such as Hesiod describes, and less elevated public gatherings would have provided other possible occasions. Whatever the occasion, however, a work as long as the *Iliad* could only be performed serially or in excerpts. Though members of the aristocracy might perform for their own entertainment, as Achilles does (IX 186ff.), the performing poet was normally a professional. He had a repertoire of different subjects, most of them what Achilles 'sings' to himself, *kléa andrõn* (IX 189), the glories of the legendary aristocracy. It is a possible, but not a necessary, inference that the contemporary aristocracy formed the basis of the audience, as it plainly would for a court poet like Phemius. At all events, Homer will have been but one of many performing poets, each with his own repertoire and, perhaps, his favourite audience.

The oral performance was wholly oral: neither performer nor audience made reference to a text. Furthermore, every performance was liable to differ from every other – in detail, arrangement, emphasis or length. It might, as a matter of fact, correspond closely to an earlier performance, because the poet had memorised his material, or (less likely) some other poet's, and was able to reproduce it from memory. It might, alternatively, be what the reproduced version must once have been, *improvised* in whole or in part. In a sense, any performance of a composition in any performing art is always unique, and contains something that was not 'there' until

that performance. The improvised performance, however, is different in kind. It is not actually the performance of a composition. It *is* the composition, and by definition it is not a fixed entity. The size of the *Iliad*, which precludes ordinary oral performance, implies an extraordinary mode of oral composition. There is still no need to invoke writing, however, even if there is no way of ruling it out. What we should probably envisage is a long and developed poetic tradition, given to experiment, with much mutual awareness, competition, imitation and 'cross-fertilisation' between poets, and (on the part of one poet) prolonged experiment and practice, leading to the perfection, over many years, of a monumental work. In performance, that work becomes increasingly fixed and so, eventually, available for memorised transmission (more or less exact) to reciters. As Finnegan has shown, all of these processes (and even the possible intervention of writing) are documented in other oral literary traditions.

7 Oral composition: the formulaic system

One phase of modern Homeric scholarship begins with Milman Parry (1902–35). It was Parry's great achievement to demonstrate that Homer's poetic technique was fundamentally oral (that is, a technique suited to improvisatory performance); and to show that the oral-improvisatory technique involved a system so large and complex that it could not have been the work of one poet, but of a long tradition of poets. For the better understanding of such 'traditions', Parry then set out to investigate the still living oral poetry of Yugoslavia.

Parry called Homer's system 'formulaic'. Its function he saw in purely compositional terms: the system existed to make improvised composition possible within the strict metrical constraints of epic verse. A skilled orator or raconteur can improvise in ordinary spoken prose; to improvise in verse, especially in a strict metre, some system is required. Unfortunately, in emphasising the traditional character of the oral system, Parry misinterpreted oral poets as manipulative craftsmen rather than creators, even though it was oral poets who created the system itself. Moreover, by an arbitrary extrapolation from origins to consequences, he convinced himself and

many others that the compositional difference between oral and written poetry somehow entailed that the aesthetic effects available to oral poetry must be different in kind – which for Parry meant that oral poetry was incapable of any form of stylistic richness, even a concealed cross-reference or a simple verbal surprise. For all that, his insistence that the system is an essential fact of Homeric poetry is soundly based. The Homeric formula deserves our attention.

Parry defined a formula as 'a group of words which is regularly employed under the same metrical conditions to express a given essential idea'. The simplest type of formula is a whole verse or block of verses which recurs elsewhere: thus the verse quoted above as I 130 –

> *tòn d' apameibómenos proséphē kreíōn Agamémnōn*
> in answer to him spoke lord Agamemnon –

recurs identically at I 285 and elsewhere. About one in eight of all the verses in the *Iliad* recur at least once elsewhere in the poem. They recur, when the context they suit recurs. Few of the contexts are conspicuous and few of the recurrences are conspicuous either, once we are attuned to the characteristic presence of repetition in the poem as a whole. In aesthetic terms, such repetitions are certainly limited in function, although not as inconsequential as Parry supposed: in conditions of oral performance, 'redundancy of information' facilitates on-the-spot comprehension; while under any conditions the cumulative effect of so many repeated elements is to convey a sense of overall regularity (see pp. 48ff., 88f.).

At the same time, we should note (as Parry again did not) that there are repetitions which *are* conspicuous, because the recurrent verses and their contexts are special. If we become less sensitive to ordinary repetitions, we become (if anything) more sensitive to extraordinary ones. For instance, the same three verses describe the momentous death of Patroclus at the hands of Hector (XVI 855ff.) and the parallel and connected killing of Hector by Achilles (XXII 361ff.): 'As he spoke, death's end came over him. His spirit slipped from his limbs and was gone to Hades, bemoaning its lot, leaving manhood and youth.' The passage itself and the two parallel contexts are striking, and the repetition unique. The same spotlight links the two moments: the result, inevitably, is a cross-reference.

The second type of formula is the formulaic phrase. Here belong the 'stock epithets' familiar to all readers of Homer as concomitants of common nouns, whether people or things. From a compositional point of view, as Parry saw, such epithets must be seen together with their nouns as distinctive metrical units which contrast with other such units in a particular functional way. Take the hero Achilles. In I 7 he appears in the nominative case as *dîos Akhilleús*, 'great Achilles'; the phrase occurs at the end of the verse. He next appears in the nominative at I 54, again at the end of the verse, but without any epithet. He then reappears at I 58 as *pódas ōkùs Akhilleús*, 'swift-footed Achilles', while at I 121 he is *podárkēs dîos Akhilleús*, 'fleet-footed great Achilles'; both phrases again close the verse. All of these instances occur in the context of the plague on the Achaean army and the quarrel between Achilles and Agamemnon that results from it. Within this sequence, Achilles is not appreciably less great or less swift- (or fleet-) footed from one moment to another. The epithets are each generic, in the sense that they point to Achilles' permanent qualities, not to any temporary mood or activity; and the noun-phrases they belong to form a system of equally permanent, but metrically contrasting, 'equivalents'. Each of these 'formulae' stands at the end of the verse, but each occupies a different metrical space, and therefore, in metrical terms, each completes a differently shaped beginning; and each recurs elsewhere in the poem under similar circumstances. In schematic form, the relationship is as follows:

Akhilleús	(I 54 +)	∪−−|
dîos Akhilleús	(I 7 +)	−∪∪−−|
pódas ōkùs Akhilleús	(I 58 +)	∪∪−∪∪−−|
podárkēs dîos Akhilleús	(I 121 +)	∪−−−∪∪−−|

(where '+' denotes a unit that recurs elsewhere, and '|' the verse-end).

Formulaic relationships similarly exist between units of identical metrical shape but contrasting syntactic function, as in a pair like:

'black ship' (dative singular)	*nēì melaínēi* (I 300 +)	−∪∪−−|
'balanced ships' (accusative plural)	*nêas eísas* (I 306 +)	−∪∪−−|

Homeric ships are no blacker in the dative singular than at other times, and no more balanced in the accusative plural than at other times. For metrical reasons, neither epithet could be used in both contexts; accordingly, the two alternate, but on a systematic basis. These and many other sets of formulae are so constituted that there is formulaic coverage of several different metrical contexts, and yet rarely more than a single formula for any single metrical context.

Frequent as they are, the formulaic repetitions of verses and phrases represent only a fraction of Homeric verse usage. Parry and his followers, however, argued that though some Homeric verses might look more formulaic than others, Homeric verse as a whole must be overwhelmingly, if not wholly, formulaic in fact. The thesis involves the designation of a third type of formula, represented by innumerable word-groups which are in some way *analogous* to one another by conforming (still within identical metrical contexts) to abstract patterns of, for instance, grammatical structure. By this criterion, the following can be identified as realisations of one formula:

apéktane dîos Akhilleús	VI	414	'great Achilles killed'
ekékleto dîos Akhilleús	XVIII	343	'great Achilles commanded'
epeúxato dîos Akhilleús	XX	388 +	'great Achilles exulted'
anéskheto dîos Akhilleús	XXI	67 +	'great Achilles raised'

Each instance contains a familiar noun-epithet phrase as grammatical subject together with a verb. Two of the composite units recur elsewhere, but quite apart from that recurrence, the instances count as members of one formula-family, because the inconstant elements, the verbs, are grammatically as well as metrically equivalent: they are all third person singular, past (aorist) tense. The logical conclusion of this argument is reached when 'analogy' is said to cover the tendency of a single word to 'gravitate' to a fixed part of the verse and, again, the relation between phrases which are metrically identical and grammatically parallel, but have nothing else in common. Thus the pair

teûkhe kúnessin	I	4	'[it] made for dogs'
dôken hetaírōi	XVII	698	'[he] gave to [his] comrade'

would be accepted as formulaic blood-brothers, on the grounds that, besides their shared metrical disposition, they share a grammatical structure (third-person singular verb in past tense, dative noun).

Parry's theory is open to various objections. Many supposedly fixed and unitary formulae of the second type are actually mobile within the verse and subject to other modifications: the model name-epithet groups, therefore, are extreme rather than typical. Again, the more stable formulae of the first two types tend to occur at the beginnings or ends of speeches, scenes and single verses; in the case of single verses, the end is the normal place. Formulaic density, therefore, is concentrated, not evenly distributed. More fundamentally, 'formula' is suspiciously undefinable. Parry began by defining it as the fixed means of expressing 'a given essential idea'. 'Essential ideas' implies a crude opposition to what Parry called 'ornament', and that reductive opposition presupposes an untenable theory of language. Furthermore, the association of formula and 'essential idea' is incompatible with those instances of analogy (some discussed by Parry himself) where phrases appear to belong together by association of sound not sense, as with:

(en) píoni dḗmōi	XVI	437 +	'(in) a rich land'
(boûn) . . . píona dēmṓi	XXIII	750	'(ox) rich in fat'
$-\cup\cup-\ -$			

On reflection, it is obvious that the whole class of formulae by analogy is barely relatable to 'essential ideas' at all.

If 'essential ideas' pose such problems, might the solution lie in giving more weight to 'analogy', as Parry himself increasingly did? After all, formulae must be invented once and first used once, and on its first use a formulaic phrase can only be (at most) a formula by analogy. Perhaps the formula by analogy, not the fixed formula, is the original type and, thereafter, the representative type. This may indeed be true – but it is no solution. If 'analogy' is to be representative, it must fit most, even all, of Homer's verse usage; but if it is to fit most, let alone all, of Homer's usage, 'analogy' must be conceived so broadly that it includes what all poets of all eras are wont to do: compose in metrical patterns. It would be impossible to imagine a more complete verbal inventiveness than Shakespeare's; yet even in the English blank verse line, which is vastly less

constricting than Homer's hexameters, Shakespeare can be seen to be composing in metrical patterns. Take, for instance, a set of instances from *Antony and Cleopatra*, which involve a favoured three-syllable cadence to close the line, notionally stressed / x / (where '/' marks a stressed syllable and 'x' an unstressed). The cadence consists of three monosyllables: first a pronominal subject (or equivalent implied), then an auxiliary verb, then a finite verb. There follows the finite verb's object, or a dependent phrase, or some other equivalent, in enjambement at the beginning of the next line:

thou didst drink	The stale of horses
I shall break	The cause of our expedience
and will make	No wars without doors
and did want	Of what I was
she did lie	In her pavilion
thou must know	'Tis not my profit
you did know	How much you were my conqueror
I will seek	Some way to leave him
and have fought	Not as you served the cause
you shall find	A benefit in this change.

The point is not that here Shakespeare is composing in 'formulae', but that when Homeric verse does what Shakespearean verse does here, there is no reason to invoke 'formulae' at all. Homer, it may be, composes in such patterns more extensively. The point is not affected.

The clear implication of this argument is that we should identify formulae only in the contrastive systems and the fixed, stable, repeated phrases or verses such as do *not* occur in fully literate poetry like Shakespeare's. Accordingly, we must accept that Homeric verse is part formulaic and part not; or rather that it embodies a spectrum from fixed, repeated elements, through contrastive systems and clear-cut parallel structures, to 'free' composition – that is, as free as strict metrical constraints permit.

As a modern analogy to the coexistence of these different elements we might consider the limerick. In this admittedly trivial (but also sophisticated) form, we have a given five-line metrical structure, a given rhythm within each line, and a given rhyme scheme. Provided it complies with these restrictions, the verbal contents of the limerick are notionally free. In general, however, the opening

words of the whole structure conform to one of a few set patterns, notably

> There was a(n) *a b* of *c*
> Who . . .

where *a* is a monosyllabic adjective (often 'young' or 'old'), *b* a noun like 'man', 'girl', 'person', and *c* a place. In the original versions of the limerick, its inventor, Edward Lear, tended to finish the sequence with a fifth line echoing the first and repeating its rhyme-word:

> That *x a b* of *c*.

Hence, e.g.:

> There was an old man of Hong Kong,
> Who never did anything wrong;
> He lay on his back
> With his head in a sack,
> That innocuous old man of Hong Kong.

The more fixed elements of the limerick serve as a base, a springboard or a homing-point for the more free. The same may be said of Homeric verse. A convenient example is the first verse of the *Iliad*, convenient partly because Parry himself chose I 1–25 as a representative sample for formulaic analysis:

> *mênin áeide theà Pēlēïádeō̄ Akhilêos*
> wrath 'sing', goddess, of Peleus' son Achilles
> 'goddess, sing the wrath of Achilles, son of Peleus'

The name-epithet phrase *Pēlēïádeō̄ Akhilêos* recurs elsewhere at the end of the verse (I 322 etc.): it is a set formula. The word *mênin* recurs *once* in all Homeric epic in the same position (the start of the verse) and in the same syntactical relationship with a genitival phrase at the end of the verse (XVI 711 *mênin . . . hekatēbólou Apóllōnos*, 'the wrath . . . of archer Apollo'). This is one of the types of parallel structuring that Parry identified as formulaic, and that we should not. The rest of the verse, even on the most generously conceived Parryan principle of 'analogy', is free. Some parts of the *Iliad* are more visibly formulaic than this verse, some are less. The texture of