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INTRODUCTION

The Paradox of Homeric Creativity

Dixeris egregie, notum si callida verbum
reddiderit iunctura novum

(Horace, *Ars Poetica* 47–48)

You will speak outstandingly, if a skilled combination
will make a familiar word new

Οὐδὲ γὰρ ῥᾴστον
ἀρρήτων ἐπέων πύλας
ἐξευρεῖν

(Bacchylides, *Paean* 5)

For it is not easy
to find the doors of things unsaid

Human language, is, by definition, creative. Anyone, even a child, can easily come up with a sentence that has never been uttered before, and we get the impression that this may be true for most of what we say in our everyday lives.[1] When it comes to anything longer than a sentence or a phrase, creating new language from scratch strikes us as easier and more natural than reproducing a pre-existing text exactly: anybody can speak for several hours without previous planning, while exactly remembering and reproducing a text of similar length would require significantly more effort. Without any special training, our capacity to create language seems to easily outstrip our capacity to remember it.[2]

When it comes to poetry and literature, we regard creativity as even more essential. While of course we recognize that originality can be hard to achieve (as Bacchylides reminds us), we have come to understand

[1] This is claimed by, among others, Pinker (1994: 9): "Virtually every sentence that a person utters or understands is a brand-new combination of words, appearing for the first time in the history of the universe." Data from corpus linguistics may belie this impression (more on this in Chapter 1 below).

[2] The topic of how oral traditions exploit the resources of human memory has attracted considerable attention on the part of cognitive psychologists. For oral traditions in general, see Rubin (1995); for an application of cognitive psychology to Homer, see Minchin (2001).

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creativity as the poet's main task and defining feature (as Horace, and the Hellenistic tradition he inherits, reminds us as well). It is on this basis that poets are judged and praised. And we would not call somebody a poet for memorizing and reciting somebody else's words: reproduction, in other words, is seen as a means of last resort – or as the purview of the lesser artist.

Within this frame of thinking, Homer[3] presents us with a paradox. As we comb through the poems, as Milman Parry and Albert Lord (and many before and after them) did, we find layer upon layer of tradition and automation. Many of Homer's expressions are, in a sense, not original creations: they are traditional formulas, passed down for what could be generations; and neither are his stories: they are traditional themes, stretching back hundreds of years. At close inspection, a complex machinery emerges, with precise laws regulating the placement of words in the line or motifs in an episode, and the very choice of vocabulary and dialectal inflections. How do we reconcile all of this mechanicity with Homer's standing as the first great poet in the Western tradition?

There are two ways of reacting to this discovery, each reflecting a different conception of how human creativity works. The first is to investigate how Homer could have exercised his creativity *despite* the mechanicity involved. Following this line of inquiry, we study the machinery in order to filter out its effects, so that we can focus on what made Homer unique and original. True, the machinery is there, but Homer *transcended* the machinery, exploiting it to create something new – and this, the reasoning goes, is why Homer's works survived, while others did not. Much research in this vein has been produced since Parry's demonstration of the traditionality of Homer's technique, in the attempt to

[3] The word "Homer" is used in many ways by scholars, depending on their own beliefs and convictions with respect to the Homeric question (i.e., the problem of how the texts of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* as we have them came to be). In the most traditional sense, scholars use "Homer" as they would "Shakespeare" or "Dante" – real poets who lived at a given point in time and whose lives and insights are reflected in their art. Sometimes scholars continue this usage even when they believe that two distinct poets (at a minimum) should be responsible for the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* respectively (in this sense, the term is used to mean "the poet of the *Iliad* and/or the *Odyssey*"). Of course, the realization that Homer's art is oral complicates matters considerably: if scholars of the oralist persuasion (such as myself) use the term "Homer," they often intend it as a shortcut, either to mean "the *text* of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* as we have them" (e.g., this word is found three times in Homer), or as a personification of archaic Greek oral epic tradition as reflected in the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* as we have them (e.g., Homer's art, technique, creativity, greatness, etc.). A useful terminological discussion is offered in Ready (2019: vii–viii).

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salvage Homer from the lower ranks of oral-traditional poets and to vindicate his poetic greatness.[4]

The second route is to investigate the machinery itself, in order to understand it not as an obstacle to the poet's work, but as what *enabled* Homer's creativity and greatness. Perhaps Homer did not achieve greatness despite the machinery, but *because* of it. Perhaps he did not *transcend* the machinery: he simply used it, masterfully, to achieve precisely what it was designed to do – to create great poetry. Could it be, in other words, that we have misjudged the machinery and its effects?

For one thing, machineries of this kind are more common than we sometimes recognize. Oral-traditional poetry is a near-universal phenomenon,[5] and while many different kinds of oral traditions exist, and each tradition's methods are unique, the hypothesis that this book pursues is that these traditions are *adaptive*. They develop systems that complement and boost the poet's cognitive skills and help poets achieve their goals, and do not detract from them. And they do so in ways that are subtler and smarter than we may have realized so far, and which may illuminate some hidden features of human creativity and cognition.

My overall goal in this book is to pursue this second route, specifically by taking three defining features of Homer's poetry (formularity, meter, and *Kunstsprache*) and reassessing them as aids, not obstacles, to the poet's creativity. In doing so, we shall be assisted by several contemporary disciplines (particularly linguistics and the cognitive sciences), and we shall explore many everyday, contemporary parallels for the aforementioned features, in order to gain a more concrete understanding of how Homer's traditional machinery contributes to his poetry. What is at stake, ultimately, is our understanding of creativity, artistry, and the conditions that enable poetic greatness.

Even though I aim to contribute to many ongoing debates on the topic of Homer's language and poetic technique, I wrote this book with the beginner in mind, hoping that even a non-specialist could pick it up and find useful introductions to the main formal features of Homer's poetry, along with new ways to understand them. I assume familiarity with the

[4] The trouble with this type of reasoning is that, since Homer is pretty much all that we have left of archaic heroic poetry (the cycle survives in very few fragments, though much work has been done to reconstruct its themes: see Burgess 2001), establishing what is traditional vs. what *must* have been Homer's innovation is often a circular matter (what we like and find striking must be Homer's, and the rest must be the tradition).

[5] For an overview, see Finnegan (1977), and more recently, Foley (2002).

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Greek alphabet (and ideally some basic knowledge of Greek language and literature), but beyond that, I try to provide explanations, examples, and translations for all matters under discussion. A glossary at the end of the book provides short definitions for technical linguistic terms, and copious footnotes throughout serve the same purpose.

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CHAPTER 1

Formularity

Our starting point in the investigation of Homer's machinery is *formularity*, which we can broadly define as the poet's reliance on prefabricated linguistic sequences in the composition of his verses. Few introductions to Homer will fail to mention the frequent recurrence of phrases like *long-suffering divine Odysseus* (42x in the poems) or *swift-footed Achilles* (30x),[1] and most (if not all) modern language translations of the epics will try to convey some of this repetitiveness as they render Homer's verses. Any reader of Homer will soon discover that this repetitiveness does not affect short phrases alone: whole clauses recur unchanged, from the atmospherically evocative *When early-born, rosy-fingered Dawn appeared* (22x) to the entertainingly irate "*What words escaped the fence of your teeth?*" (8x). And there are entire scenes, like duels or banquets, which often appear to be composed entirely, or almost entirely, of slight variations of the same handful of expressions.

Over the last century, formularity has acquired the status of perhaps the most notorious feature of Homer's style, and it has played a fundamental role in revealing the oral-traditional background of Homer's art. Formularity is also the feature of Homer's style on which the field is most divided, with scholars variously disagreeing on its definition, its function, and the extent to which it appears in the poems (50 percent? 90 percent?), and whether it can be used to demonstrate the orality of a text.

Because of the complex history of the term, I shall first give an overview of how the concept has evolved within Homeric studies, and the many issues it comprises (for a history of oral-formulaic theory outside of Homeric studies, see now Frog and Lamb 2022). Next, we will turn to

[1] These repeated expressions consisting of a proper name (e.g., Odysseus) and some "epithetic words" (e.g., *long-suffering*, *divine*) modifying it have been called *noun–epithet formulae* in Homeric scholarship since Parry's (1971: 17) seminal study.

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linguistics and cognitive studies in order to find parallels for Homeric formularity in everyday language and cognition, and to establish whether there are any qualitative or quantitative differences between formularity in Homer and formularity in natural languages. Finally, we will tackle the practical questions of how best to describe Homeric formularity, and how to evaluate its meaning and antiquity.

1.1 The History of Homeric Formularity

1.1.1 Parry: Homer's Style as Traditional

Few scholars nowadays would doubt that formularity played a substantial role in the poet's technique. After all, formularity is very *visible* in the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* as we have them. As Parry explained:

> The easiest and best way of showing the place the formula holds in Homeric style will be to point out all of the expressions occurring in a given passage which are found elsewhere in the *Iliad* or the *Odyssey*, in such a way that, as one reads, one may see how the poet has used them to express his thought. (Parry 1971: 301)

Below, I reproduce the first twenty-five lines of *Iliad* 1 as given in Parry's *Homer and Homeric Style* (1971: 301–2), minus the heavy apparatus (the added translation is mine).[2] For several decades, this type of illustration was the only available evidence of the density of formulas in Homer, and played an important role in shaping the debate on Homeric style. Here, solid underlining identifies expressions that are found, unchanged, elsewhere in the poems (what Parry would call *formulas*). Broken underlining identifies expressions that appear to be slight variations of expressions found elsewhere in the poems (what Parry would call *formulaic expressions*).[3]

[2] Unless specified otherwise, the Greek text reproduced in this book reflects the *Thesaurus Linguae Graecae* (http://stephanus.tlg.uci.edu). For Homer, this means the editions of Allen (1931) for the *Iliad* and Von der Mühll (1962) for the *Odyssey*.

[3] Note that, in theory, both criteria can be true at the same time, and thus an expression might appear to be a slight variation of an already-known formula *and* it might be repeated elsewhere in the poems. While this is not captured in Parry's analysis, it is captured in Lord's analysis of the first fifteen lines of the same passage (Lord 1960: 143), where almost every line is shown with a thorough broken underlining – suggesting that close to everything about the phraseology is traditional, even when expressions are not repeated verbatim.

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(1)

Μῆνιν ἄειδε θεὰ Πηληϊάδεω Ἀχιλῆος (1)	The wrath sing, o goddess, of Peleus' son, Achilles, (1)
οὐλομένην, ἣ μυρί' Ἀχαιοῖς ἄλγε' ἔθηκε,	ruinous, which brought countless sufferings upon the Achaeans,
πολλὰς δ' ἰφθίμους ψυχὰς Ἄϊδι προΐαψεν	and hurled down to Hades many excellent souls
ἡρώων, αὐτοὺς δὲ ἑλώρια τεῦχε κύνεσσιν	of heroes, and their bodies, it left them prey to the dogs
οἰωνοῖσί τε πᾶσι, Διὸς δ' ἐτελείετο βουλή, (5)	and birds of all kinds, and so the will of Zeus was done, (5)
ἐξ οὗ δὴ τὰ πρῶτα διαστήτην ἐρίσαντε	from the time the two first began their stand-off,
Ἀτρεΐδης τε ἄναξ ἀνδρῶν καὶ δῖος Ἀχιλλεύς.	the son of Atreus, lord of men, and divine Achilles.
Τίς τάρ σφωε θεῶν ἔριδι ξυνέηκε μάχεσθαι;	But who was it among the gods who set them up to fight?
Λητοῦς καὶ Διὸς υἱός· ὃ γὰρ βασιλῆϊ χολωθείς	It was the son of Zeus and Leto: for he was angry with the king,
νοῦσον ἀνὰ στρατὸν ὄρσε κακήν, ὀλέκοντο δὲ	and he awoke a plague among the army, a terrible one, and the people were
λαοί, (10)	dying, (10)
οὕνεκα τὸν Χρύσην ἠτίμασεν ἀρητῆρα	because the son of Atreus had disrespected his priest, Khrúsēs.
Ἀτρεΐδης· ὃ γὰρ ἦλθε θοὰς ἐπὶ νῆας Ἀχαιῶν	He had come to the fast ships of the Achaeans,
λυσόμενός τε θύγατρα φέρων τ' ἀπερείσι' ἄποινα,	wanting to free his daughter, bringing infinite gifts,
στέμματ' ἔχων ἐν χερσὶν ἑκηβόλου Ἀπόλλωνος	holding in his hands the insignia of apollo the far-shooter,
χρυσέῳ ἀνὰ σκήπτρῳ, καὶ λίσσετο πάντας Ἀχαιούς, (15)	on his golden staff, and he implored all of the Achaeans, (15)
Ἀτρεΐδα δὲ μάλιστα δύω, κοσμήτορε λαῶν·	and especially the two sons of Atreus, leaders of men:
Ἀτρεΐδαι τε καὶ ἄλλοι ἐϋκνήμιδες Ἀχαιοί,	"Sons of Atreus and all other strong-greaved Achaeans,
ὑμῖν μὲν θεοὶ δοῖεν Ὀλύμπια δώματ' ἔχοντες	may the gods, who inhabit the houses of Olympus, grant you
ἐκπέρσαι Πριάμοιο πόλιν, εὖ δ' οἴκαδ' ἱκέσθαι·	to take the city of Priam, and to return home unscathed.
παῖδα δ' ἐμοὶ λύσαιτε φίλην, τὰ δ' ἄποινα δέχεσθαι, (20)	But free my daughter, and accept my gifts,
ἁζόμενοι Διὸς υἱὸν ἑκηβόλον Ἀπόλλωνα.	appeasing the son of Zeus, Apollo the far-shooter."

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Ἔνθ' ἄλλοι μὲν πάντες ἐπευφήμησαν Ἀχαιοὶ	And then all of the other Achaeans called out in approval,
αἰδεῖσθαί θ' ἱερῆα καὶ ἀγλαὰ δέχθαι ἄποινα·	to show respect to the priest and to accept the splendid gifts:
ἀλλ' οὐκ Ἀτρεΐδῃ Ἀγαμέμνονι ἤνδανε θυμῷ,	But this did not please the *thūmós* of Agamemnon, the son of Atreus;
ἀλλὰ κακῶς ἀφίει, κρατερὸν δ' ἐπὶ μῦθον ἔτελλε· (25)	instead, he sent him away badly, and he gave him a harsh command: (25)

In this sample, there is hardly a line without underlining, which means that there is hardly a line whose component expressions do not also appear somewhere else in our corpus. The message here is that the poet does not seem to be striving for originality. Rather, he seems to be putting verses together the way a child assembles a Lego castle: by snapping together prefabricated bricks (i.e., the underlined parts).

As confirmation of this theory, metrical blemishes may often be found at the junctures between bricks: sometimes, the poet will try to snap together pieces that don't perfectly fit (something that, admittedly, the Lego simile does not allow), and a small metrical bump will result. The classical study is Parry (1971: 201–21): for instance, in order to mention Telemachus in the second half of the line, the poet relied on the noun–epithet formula Ὀδυσσῆος φίλος υἱός "Odysseus' dear son," which is isometric (i.e., metrically equivalent) to many other famous noun–epithet formulas (βοὴν ἀγαθὸς Διομήδης "Diomedes good at the war-cry," βοὴν ἀγαθὸς Μενέλαος "Menelaus, good at the war-cry," πολύτλας δῖος Ὀδυσσεύς "much-suffering divine Odysseus," etc.), but begins with a vowel. While the latter formulas can happily follow a formulaic expression containing the verb ἠρᾶτο "s/he prayed," the former cannot: when the poet, used to combining ἠρᾶτο with noun–epithet formulas of that shape, tries to snap the pieces together, a metrical bump (in this case, hiatus, i.e., the meeting of two vowels at a word boundary) results:[4]

(2) δὴ τότ' ἔπειτ' ἠρᾶτο βοὴν ἀγαθὸς Διομήδης (*Il.* 5.114)
and then Diomedes good at the war-cry prayed.

(3) ὣς δ' αὔτως ἠρᾶτο Ὀδυσσῆος φίλος υἱός. (*Od.* 3.64)
thus in this manner Odysseus' dear son prayed.

[4] For an introduction to Homeric metrics (and metrical bumps therein), see Chapter 2.

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These small bumps are a strong indication that the poet is composing by juxtaposing the bricks, and that he has come to rely on this strategy so much that, sometimes, he will disregard the meter to continue composing in this way.

But who made the bricks? Are they the poet's invention? And how could one go about establishing this either way? Parry observed that, in Homer, noun–epithet formulas, when considered together, appear to form a system which displays both *extension* and *economy* (or *thrift*). For each task, the poet has just as many different-sized bricks as they need (*extension*), and virtually nothing more (*economy*). Extension and economy are exemplified in Parry's charts for noun–epithet formulas, one of which I partially reproduce in Table 1.1.[5]

Next, Parry turned to poets who wrote in the epic tradition and who attempted to imitate Homer's style, such as Virgil and Apollonius Rhodius. He showed that these poets behaved differently from Homer. While they did rely on some premade expressions (akin to Homer's noun–epithet formulas), there appeared to be no system in place: there were too many bricks for some tasks, and none for others, with no regard for economy or extension (Parry 1971: 24–36).

Parry argued that this difference could be explained by tradition: while Virgil and Apollonius made their own bricks (and just for a few tasks), Homer inherited them, in very large numbers, from the poets before him. It was the force of tradition which, over generations, and through a process similar to natural selection, strategically shaped the bricks into the elegant interlocking system that Homer had at his disposal.[6] In other words, Parry concluded, Homer's technique was (mostly) traditional, while that of Virgil or Apollonius was (mostly) individual.[7]

[5] One should notice how, even in Parry's formulation, economy is a strong tendency rather than an absolute law: even among noun–epithet formulas for main heroes, one finds equivalent formulas, though usually one of the variants is overwhelmingly more common than the other.

[6] An attempt to more fully articulate this process of evolution and renewal in the technique is seen in Hainsworth (1978). Gray (1947) studies the system of epithets for metal weapons in an attempt to uncover how the tradition develops new phraseology for technological innovations.

[7] Sale (1996) extends Parry's study by comparing extension and economy of formulas (as well as other criteria) in Homer and Quintus Smyrnaeus, demonstrating how even a very good literary imitator of Homer such as Quintus could not match the formal properties of Homer's formularity.

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Table 1.1 *Parry's noun–epithet formulas for Odysseus and Achilles in the nominative (after Parry 1971: 39)*

	Between the feminine caesura and the end of the line	Between the hephthemimeral caesura and the end of the line	Between the bucolic diaeresis and end of the line
Odysseus	πολύτλας δῖος Ὀδυσσεύς "long-suffering divine Odysseus" (38)	πολύμητις Ὀδυσσεύς "Odysseus of many counsels" (81) πτολίπορθος Ὀδυσσεύς "Odysseus conqueror of cities" (4)	δῖος Ὀδυσσεύς "divine Odysseus" (60) ἐσθλὸς Ὀδυσσεύς "good Odysseus" (3)
Achilles	ποδάρκης δῖος Ἀχιλλεύς "divine Achilles who runs to the rescue" (21)	πόδας ὠκὺς Ἀχιλλεύς "swift-footed Achilles" (31) μεγάθυμος Ἀχιλλεύς "Achilles of the great *thūmós*" (1)	δῖος Ἀχιλλεύς "divine Achilles" (34) ὠκὺς Ἀχιλλεύς "swift Achilles" (5)

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