THE PARRY-LORD THEORY OF HOMERIC COMPOSITION

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Homer is universally allowed to have had the greatest invention of any writer whatever.—Pope Preface to the Iliad ad init. (published 1715)
The songs were current in the tradition; Homer did not make them up.—Lord The Singer of Tales 151 (published 1960)

We may safely say that no scholar will again find himself able to embrace the unitarian hypothesis.—Pattison Essays i, 382 (published 1865)
We cannot say that the same person composed both poems, but there can hardly be a doubt that each was given its present form by a single person with all the resources of a professional bard at his finger-tips.—Davison in Wace & Stubbings A Companion to Homer 258 (published 1962)

Orthodoxies die, but not the Homeric question. That seems to be the lesson of experience, and since the Milman Parry, or as we can now call it, the Parry-Lord view of Homer as a traditional oral poet has attained the status of an orthodoxy,¹ we should perhaps begin to feel anxious for its health. To outward appearances this is still robust. It is even suggested that all previous Homeric criticism has been rendered null and void. "From ancient times until the present we have been misled about the true nature of Homer's art and greatness... We have exercised our imagination and ingenuity in finding a kind of unity, individuality, and originality in the Homeric poems that are irrelevant" (Lord 1960, 147–8). This claim, if true, would invalidate not only all ancient literary criticism but also all ancient literature which was based on ideas about Homer. Nor is it made by a minor enthusiast, but by the chief pupil and successor of Milman Parry himself. It cannot therefore be dismissed out of hand.

The outlines of the theory
The outlines of the theory² are familiar to all classical scholars, and a fortiori to all Homerists. Epic poetry, which still exists in some parts of the world and which used to exist in many more, is specifically the singing of stories. It is normal for these to be accompanied by instrumental music, and this is generally played by the singer himself. The singer is no mere reciter. "He composes the songs. He must be sensible of both occasion and audience... He may corrupt a good story, or he may enhance and set right a story which he received from the tradition in a corrupt state. He is no mere mouthpiece

¹ As the Fury after the sinner, so after orthodoxy heresy-hunting. Dow (AJPh 83, 1962, 90–7), reviewing Pages's book on the Iliad, finds 'a failure to grasp the full significance' of the Parry-Lord-Bowra proof of the oral composition of Homeric epic.
² The quotations in the next two paragraphs come from Lord's own short description of the theory, published in 1962 in Wace and Stubbings.
who repeats slavishly what he has learned. He is a creative artist.' This process of oral composition is made possible by the use of formulas (e.g., ἐκτωρ, θεός ἐπὶ νῆσος Ἀχαιῶν) and of formulaic systems (e.g., ἐγχος κάπρον).

The formulaic technique enables the singer to build his verses. In a similar way he can build his story by the proper deployment of themes. Examples of themes are assemblies, catalogues, armings. A theme can be contracted or expanded at will, and, in general, 'the better the singer, the greater the amount of ornamentation'. But there is also the need for appropriateness, and a theme must be adjusted to fit its particular context. Where 'the talent of the individual singer is most evident' is in the arrangement of the themes, and in seeing that they are not incompatible. When a singer claims to be repeating a song 'word for word the same' what he really means—and does—is repeat it 'theme for theme'.

This, put very briefly, is the Parry-Lord theory of Homer. There is nothing new in what it tells us of the comparatively humble circumstances of the poet's life. So much can be deduced from the picture of minstrels given in the Homeric poems themselves; it was the common opinion of antiquity, and was re-affirmed by Bentley, whose Homer sung 'for small earnings and good cheer'. It was also in the eighteenth century that Wood questioned and Wolf denied Homer's ability to write, and ever since then the idea of an illiterate Homer has been familiar to the world of scholarship.

Nor is what Parry tells us about the Homeric style totally new. One ingredient of the theory was the hypothesis of a Kunstsprache—that Homeric Greek was not an eclectic amalgam of all dialects, nor the real 'mixed dialect' of any one place, but a specifically poetic language which had never been spoken by anybody, and which was a creation of Homeric verse. The theory was argued by Witte in his article in Pauly-Wissowa VIII 2213-47 in 1913, and in 1921 formed the title of a book by Meister Die Homerische Kunstsprache. The other ingredient was contributed by nineteenth century research into the oral poetry of the world. It became clear that such poetry existed in many different genres, and that the closest analogy with Homer was to be found in oral narrative poetry (described by Radloff, van Gennep, Murko, and others). Parry's main original contribution was the detailed working out of this analogy and the demonstration that by it the growth and working of the Homeric Kunstsprache could be explained. As he wrote himself, 'If we know what an oral diction is, we shall have the larger background which the theory of a language made to fit the hexameter calls for' (Parry 1932, 5–6).

In regard to the question of Homeric authorship Parry felt himself unable to offer any valid judgment of his own until he had studied oral poetry in
actual practice and grasped ‘what it is that makes a poem good or bad’ in the judgment of the poet and his hearers. For this purpose he carried out extensive field-work in Yugoslavia, but he died before he could publish his results. The work has been continued by his pupil, A. B. Lord. Lord’s main contribution has been in the publication and analysis of the Serbo-Croatian tales, but he has also been concerned with Parry’s Homeric theory. He has largely developed the theory of thematic structure, shifted the emphasis from ‘formula’ to ‘formulaic’ in his account of style, and made up his mind on the question of how the Homeric poems were first put into permanent form, which Parry had left undecided. Hence the term Parry-Lord theory can only be used for general description: in detail master and pupil sometimes differ.

Associated doctrine
It is as impossible to doubt the core of the theory—that Homeric poetry is the end-product of an oral tradition of story singing—as it is to help admiring the clarity and sensitivity with which Parry first put it forward. But associated with this picture of Homer as an oral poet is a body of doctrine which is at the same time more theoretical in nature and more practical in consequence:

1. Homer never forgets. Virtually everything in oral poetry is repetition. If a phrase in Homer does not occur on more than one occasion it is because we have so little of him. ‘If we had even twice as much of Homer’s poetry as we have . . . we should very often find that Homer was using a formula for the second time, where, as far as our evidence goes, he is only using a formula which is like another.’ (Parry 1930, 133–4)

2. Epic was not born yesterday. The observed ‘thrift’ in the use of formulae (by which any particular thing-to-be-said has in general only one way of being fitted into a particular part of the verse) could not be the work of a single poet but must be the result of a long tradition. (Parry 1930, 87)

3. The end of epic is a sudden death. Oral narrative poetry differs toto caelo from written composition. Poetry must be either oral or written. There can be no transitional stage. (Lord 1960, 124–138)

These three dogmas are all of the greatest importance when we come to apply the Parry-Lord theory to the solution of actual problems. The first, by declaring every phrase in the Iliad (and Odyssey according to Parry) to have been already pre-existent in Homer’s memory, precludes the discovery of any stylistic development within Homeric epic. The second, by declaring that formula systems take a great length of time to be built up, hinders—if it does not altogether preclude—the discovery of material development in the content of Homeric epic. Of course a theory which states that further knowledge is impossible, however unwelcome, need not necessarily be untrue. Kirk (1962, 334) may be right in talking about the impenetrability
of oral epic. But the difficulty of discovering the history of Yugoslavian and other oral epic of the modern world may not be due so much to the type of art-form as to the fact of its being no longer creative. Church architecture, for its supposed anonymity, has often been compared to Homeric epic. But it is easier to talk meaningfully of the history and development of the anonymous mediaeval church than it is of its nineteenth century successor when the art of ecclesiastical architecture was in comparative decline.

The third dogma affects the later history of the Homeric texts rather than their composition. It is denied that the *ipsissima verba* of a performance of an oral poem would ever be memorised. Therefore there can have been no time when Homer was preserved by reciters. It follows that the only way in which Homer can have come down to us is directly from the poet himself, either by means of an actual autograph, or—far more probably according to Lord—as a result of a dictation given by the poet to a second party.

*Oral poetry and written poetry*

In examining these dogmas and their consequences it will be appropriate to proceed ὑστερον πρῶτερον Ὀμηρικὸς and to begin with the last.³

Lord’s theoretical argument on this point (Lord 1960, 124–138) is that a ‘transitional text’ is impossible because the ‘two techniques’ (of oral and of written composition) are ‘contradictory and mutually exclusive’ (page 129). Thus we find (page 134) that ‘when a tradition or an individual goes from oral to written, he, or it, goes from an adult, mature style of one kind to a

³ The arguments of Parry and Lord on this question are perhaps distorted by peculiarities in their own beliefs about writing. Lord imagines that it is an automatic assumption of modern scholars that ‘written style is always superior to oral style’ (Lord 1960, 134), and spends much emotion in defending the honour of what he calls ‘oral’ as opposed to ‘written society’ (ibid. 138). Nevertheless after praising a passage in one of his Yugoslavian songs he can write: ‘Had Ugljanin been a literate poet who sat down with pen in hand to devise these lines with their inner balances and syncopations, he could not have done better’ (ibid. 57). But do poets devise their lines? Lord may have inherited this concept from his master, Parry, pen in hand, was apparently unlike the rest of us. ‘Writing materials gave him time to pause’ we hear of a hypothetical literate Homer, because ‘new groups of words ... crowded annoyingly about his head’ suggesting alternative expressions for every situation (Parry 1932, 144). All writers may envy such a Homer. But few speakers will. He cannot operate without ‘a formulaic diction which will give him his phrases all made, and made in such a way that, at the slightest bidding of the poet, they will link themselves together in an unbroken pattern . . .’. Admittedly Homer sang in Greek hexameters. But how can Parry be sure that Greek hexameters are so difficult to compose?

Above all neither Parry nor Lord show any awareness of

The poet’s eye, in a fine frenzy rolling,  
Doth glance from heaven to earth, from earth to heaven;  
And, as imagination bodies forth  
The forms of things unknown, the poet’s pen  
Turns them to shapes . . .
faltering and embryonic style of another sort'. This is a firm distinction indeed, and whatever we may think of the possibility of applying it in Greek poetry we may be inclined to felicitate the student of Yugoslavian epic on having at least one issue so clear cut. But not if we remember what we have read two pages earlier about 'texts that over the years have given me pause as to whether they might be termed transitional'. Our hopes that we have at last found a touchstone of objectivity in Homeric matters will be still further dimmed if we re-read the beginning of the next paragraph on page 132. 'The songs of Kačić and of later writers in the style of oral epic can be distinguished from truly oral epic, provided that one knows the oral tradition well. Sometimes the distinguishing marks are obvious . . . ' (my italics). Nor are the positive criteria produced to justify their classification as 'definitely written' encouraging for the Homerist—such as regularity of metre, or in some poems of a rhyme scheme said to be not characteristic of the oral tradition of the particular region. He may wonder how on earth he is ever to decide the vital, yet evidently delicate, question of whether his remote Homer is 'written' or 'oral' when such detailed knowledge of local conditions is necessary to decide it in the case of poets in a tradition that is still alive. But there is worse to come. One must have not only regional knowledge but also sensitivity to the poet's intention, one must be able to judge that he intended a particular line to be unique or chose a particular word 'for a nontraditional effect'. Again, when we read that Kačić and Njegoš, though sometimes 'strikingly close to the folk epic' were nevertheless 'psychologically out of the oral tradition of composition' because 'they were after all educated men, learned in books' and 'could not compose an oral epic', we may feel that after all our hopes of escape we are squarely back in the land of StilgefühL.

Indeed the firm distinction drawn by Lord between the 'oral' and 'written' style could not be more firmly blurred than it is by Lord himself when he writes (page 130): 'The fact that nonformulaic expressions will be found in an oral text proves that the seeds of the "literary" style are already present in oral style; and likewise the presence of "formulas" in "literary" style indicates its origin in oral style. These "formulas" are vestigial. This is not surprising. We are working in a continuum of man's artistic expression in words. We are attempting to measure with some degree of accuracy the strength and mixture of traditional patterns of expression.' Exactly. A whisky and soda may be mixed in any proportion. Why, then, try to prove that it must be either pure alcohol or pure fizz? Of course what you can say about whisky and soda is that once mixed it won't keep. And this, if anything, is what Lord's evidence about the 'transitional' stage of epic does prove.

In this connection the Homerist may legitimately ask what is Lord's view of the later history of the Greek epos. For though literature has normally
been imported from abroad and 'there is no direct line of descent from the
chansons de geste to the Henriade or from Beowulf to Paradise Lost' (page
138), this is not and cannot be a general rule or literature could not have
started. In particular Greece can claim to have transmuted a great many
native genres other than epic from 'oral' to 'written'. So why not epic too?
And where is the great divide between the Iliad, the Odyssey, the Cyclic
Epics, the Hymns, Panyassis, Choerilus, and Antimachus to be fixed? Lord
does not tell us. Indeed he gives no serious discussion of the style of the
surviving cyclic fragments or of the Hymns, and never mentions fifth
century epic at all.

But there is an even more embarrassing question that the Homerist with
a long memory may ask. If there is no 'transitional' stage, and if the neces­
sary conclusion from this is that Homer dictated his work himself, then
what has happened to the purpose for which the whole of Parry's theory of
Homeric composition was originally invented? For the specific problem
which Parry's theory answered was the same problem that had originally
exercised Wolf—the state of our text of Homer. 'How', asked Parry of the
unitarians (Parry 1930, 75), 'have they explained the unique number of
good variant readings in our text of Homer, and the need for the laborious
editions of Aristarchus and the other grammarians and the extra lines,
which grow in number as new papyri are found?' That was the question.
The answer came two years later (Parry 1932, 46–7). 'One thing is plain:
our manuscripts cannot all go back to a manuscript of Homer's time; for
their variant readings, while some are due to copyists, are for the most part
the variants of an oral tradition, which means that the manuscripts that
the Alexandrians used came from different oral traditions.'

We may however question this last phrase of Parry's. 'Different oral
traditions' would surely produce versions of the story too far apart ever to
be collated into a single text: to do this even with different versions taken
down from the same singer would be difficult enough, as examination of
the versions of Marko and Nina by Petar Vidić given by Lord (1960, 236–41)
seems to show. What we must have then to account for the variant reading
is different dictations from an originally single version. This version one
must imagine not as a written but as a memorised one, learned from the
lips of the poet (a possibility envisaged by Parry4), and transmitted at first
by singers, who would naturally retain for some time their capacity for
original composition, and later perhaps by pure reciters. This theory will
account not only for the 'good variant readings'; it will also account—
without strain—for the existence of the Homeridae and the later rhapsodes, and for the gradual transition of the Greek epos from the Iliad, whose composition was certainly oral, to Antimachus, who certainly wrote.

The age of Homeric formulae
From the doctrine of 'sudden death' it is time for us to pass to the doctrine of 'not born yesterday'. This arises from Parry's discovery that there is very little duplication in Homer's metrical formulae. For instance the phrase χορυθαίολος Ἑκτωρ occurs 25 times in the Iliad. It fills a particular part of the hexameter—the last two and a half feet—and there is no other phrase for Hector which performs the same metrical function. This 'economy' or 'thrift', as Parry called it, is not quite perfect. In the examples he collected there are between five and ten per cent of unnecessary doublets. Nevertheless the lack of duplication is certainly significant. And there is not only thrift. There is also richness in the number of ways the same thing-to-be-said can be made to fill different metrical lengths. For instance with Hector still in the nominative case and still occupying the end of the verse, we find:

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<tr>
<th>Last 2 feet</th>
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<td>κορυθαίολος Ἑκτωρ</td>
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<tr>
<td>μέγας κορυθαίολος Ἑκτωρ</td>
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<tr>
<td>βρμικος Ἑκτωρ</td>
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Note that the first two formulae are not doublets. Whether the initial letter is a vowel or a consonant makes all the difference to its suitability for any particular verse. Initial double consonants make a further difference still.

This can be illustrated in the corresponding schema for Odysseus:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Last 2 feet</th>
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<tr>
<td>δἰος Ὀδυσσεύς</td>
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<tr>
<td>πολύμητις Ὀδυσσεύς</td>
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<tr>
<td>πολύλας δἰος Ὀδυσσεύς</td>
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<tr>
<td>ἑσθλὸς Ὀδυσσεύς</td>
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<tr>
<td>πολυπορόδος Ὀδυσσεύς</td>
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</table>

This richness of formulae for expressing the same essential idea can be called the 'length' or 'scope' of the system, and Parry felt that the length and the thrift of these formulaic systems were 'striking enough to be sure proof that only the very smallest part could be the work of one poet' (Parry 1930, 87). This impression has passed into being a commonplace of Homeric criticism. 'Common sense insists,' says Page (1959, 225), 'that the time required for the development of this vast, intricate, and highly economical phraseology is to be reckoned in generations, perhaps in hundreds of years. And since a formula, once it has outstripped and outlived all competitors, is (as a general rule) irreplaceable and immortal, it is to be expected that many phrases created for the Mycenaean Epic, having
become formulas in the course of time, must have survived unchanged into the Ionian Iliad.’ Kirk agrees (1962, 64): ‘The 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.’ Eminent names—and it would be easy to add more. One cannot question that the age of the Homeric formulaic systems is an orthodoxy, or that it is an orthodoxy with the most important consequences. One can ask the question, though, on what it is based.

The question is more easily asked than answered. It is particularly difficult to see how the thrift of a system needs time to achieve. This is not a thing that can be discovered by the study of modern oral traditions. Not, at least, if we are to believe Parry, who says that in comparing the systems in Homer with those of later poetry ‘we shall not, as it happens, have much to do with the thrift of the system, since we shall find it hard enough to get together outside of Homer any systems which show the first quality of length’ (Parry 1930, 87–8). This is honestly said, but does not help us to find our answer. Can we hope to find it from what remains of Greek epic? Hardly. The Iliad is our earliest attested text. We can never hope to glimpse the unweeded garden of otiose formulae that the theory invites us to imagine as having once existed. We might perhaps hope to find that post-Iliadic epic was even more tidy in this respect than the Iliad and from this extrapolate backwards to a long previous process of purification. But as far as I know this expedient has never been suggested. What then is left? Only the balance of probabilities. We have two pictures to choose between. One is of generations of oral poets slowly sifting out the most suitable formulae from those their colleagues have been over-fertile in the invention of. I do not know what analogy there is for this picture except the pseudo-biological concept of a nature who is quick to create but slow to select and

Bowra (1960) uses the assumed fixity of formulae to argue for a Mycenaean antiquity for the hexameter metre—a question on which Webster’s theory of an ancient ‘double-short rhythm’ less precise than the Homeric hexameter seems to me more convincing. Page (1959) in his chapter on ‘Mycenaean relics in the Iliad’ makes great use of the supposedly necessary antiquity (see his note 10 on p. 266) of ‘traditional formulas’. Needless to say, though, Page’s intelligence is too keen and his scholarship too wide to allow him to follow any theory blindfold. ‘Since the emphasis in this section’ he points out (page 267 note 19) ‘falls so heavily on certain formulas which may be of Mycenaean origin, I ought here particularly to stress my belief that these are relatively few in number, and that a very large part of the Homeric formula-vocabulary is of more recent development’.

According to this account the formulas, though they may be comparatively modern, will still be corporate, not private, property. But was there a growing shared stock of formula-vocabulary? A negative answer is suggested (to judge from the report of his article given in AJPh 1959) by Matsumoto’s observation that there are no more formulas common to the Odyssey in Ω—which is the book closest to it in subject-matter if not in time as well—than there are in any other book of the Iliad.
whose final goal of an efficient ecological equilibrium is long in attaining. The other picture is a more human one. It is of poets who build up their own collections of epithets and formulae. Some they will inherit from their teachers, some they will borrow from their colleagues, some—the majority perhaps—they will gradually build up for themselves to suit their own requirements and predilections. But being human and with the excuse that such formulae and stock epithets have only a minimal content of meaning they will not extend their collection more than necessary. Hence the ‘thrift’ of the systems. The analogy for this picture is, if I am to believe my own reading of Lord, to be found in Yugoslav poetry where thrift can be observed after all, provided one confines one’s attention to the work of a single singer! It does not appear if one reads through collections ‘from many different singers from different regions and from different times’ (Lord 1960, 144—see also 53). In face of this it seems hard to maintain that the thrift of a system is by itself proof of its antiquity.

But the length of a system is another matter altogether. It is easy to see how an equipment of formulae complete enough to meet the demands of every emergency might exceed the creative capacity of any individual singer. To calculate the amount needed we would have to list all the main characters, human and divine, in the Iliad (and the whole Trojan cycle including the Odyssey if we believe that Homer was accustomed to singing of these subjects too), and all the main objects mentioned, both in the singular and in the plural, multiply by four to allow for the grammatical cases, and then by another five at least to allow for the main metrical divisions of the hexameter. The resulting total must now be multiplied by between two and three since phrases that begin with a vowel, a consonant, or a double consonant (or end with a vowel or consonant) have different metrical values in use. We must now add another large number to represent the different formulae needed to handle the main verbal ideas in their various moods, tenses, and numbers, and we shall arrive at the conclusion that an oral poet requires a very high working capital indeed if his systems are to be complete. But are they complete? Certainly not outside Homer, according to the statement of Parry’s already quoted, and in Homer only relatively so. But the proportion of completeness is important, since it is again on our estimate of probability that we must judge whether great antiquity is needed for the creation of the actual systems we find. We must therefore pause to examine the evidence in detail.

Figure 1 reproduces the table published by Parry in Harvard Studies xli to illustrate the length that a Homeric system can attain, and described by him as ‘one of the most striking cases in Homer’. It must therefore be considered a favourable example of a long system. It gives the nominative-case formulae of the eighteen main gods and heroes (whose names are capable of being fitted into the end of a hexameter) in the three most frequent
metrical units. The figures tell the total of the occurrences in both *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. The metrical doublets are bracketed.

**Figure 1**

Milman Parry’s table to illustrate the length of a Homeric system of formulae. From *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology*, xli, page 88. (By courtesy of Harvard University Press.)

<table>
<thead>
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<th>Metrical Units</th>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Metrical Units</th>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Πράμας θεουκός</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Φαλάμιος Ἀλα</td>
<td>6</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Ἰλαμίος Ἀλα</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>δῆ 'Ἀφροδίτη</td>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Φαῖξῆς 'Αττίλλων</td>
<td>33</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Κασίμας Μενέλαος</td>
<td>12</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Πτητά Νέστωρ</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>'Αλέκαρδος θεουκός</td>
<td>10</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

10
The table allows 162 theoretical possibilities, but in practice the figure must be reduced by 17 because of some metrical barriers. For instance no adjective could ever be found for Πρίμως or for 'Αγαμέμνων by which the last two feet and the last two feet only would be filled. There is thus room for 145 formulae. How much of it is occupied?

The answer is less than half. Only 66 places are filled (for though there are 72 phrases, six of them are metrical duplicates). But even this number must be reduced. Fourteen phrases occur only once, and it would be a serious begging of the question to assume them to have been traditional formulae. There are thus 52 metrically different formulae, which is little over a third of what a complete equipage would require.

But our aim is to assess the creative effort required to assemble this stock, and for this we must clearly subtract what are in effect the same goods under a different label or in a different size. Nine of the 52 formulae consist merely of part of a longer one (e.g. <θεά> λευκόλενος Ἡρη, <γέρον> Πρίμως θεοσφής and on five occasions the same epithet is re-used for another character whose name happens to scan in the same way (δίος, φαίδως, ὑβριμος, βοὴν ἀγαθός, θεοσφής). Thus the number of genuinely different formulae is only 38, or just over two a head for these 18 characters.

Now I do not see any way of putting a precise meaning to these figures, or of finding a calculus to measure in bardic generations any particular percentage of total formulaic coverage for characters of different importance in Trojan story. It is of course highly probable that a large number of the formulae used by a singer will be traditional, just because formulae have small meaning-content and therefore the singer will not bother to change them unless what meaning there is in a particular formula is for some reason unacceptable to him. But what we are, in my view, not justified in arguing is that even if an epithet qualifies a particular noun only once it can be called a formula (so long as it does not infringe the 'law of economy'), and that if it is a formula it must be traditional. For instance ἐσθόλος Ὀδυσσεύς is used three times (in the body of the same phrase) in

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6 I have tried to show in AJPh 81, 1960, pp. 130ff. that some of the stock-epithets not found in the Odyssey were dropped because of their meaning. It is unfashionable to assume that meaning was felt in these fixed phrases. But the willingness of a poet and his audience to tolerate an adjective when it is contextually irrelevant (e.g. 'swift-footed Achilles' in his tent) does not justify us in supposing that an epithet will continue in use if its meaning has become conceptually unwelcome.

7 The principle that if a formula adds to the length of a system without infringing its economy it 'must be' traditional is stated by Parry (1930, 87 note 2). It is accepted by Page (1959, 266 note 10). A practical consequence of our beliefs on this matter can be seen in Page's comment on A 157 (ibid. 268, note 27) δῆλον εὐρυό ό τε ηχήσασα 'there is no duplicate, and the whole line has a traditional ring'. To me, though, it has a personal ring and belongs to the poet of the similes, whom I should call Homer. Both noun-epithet combinations are unique, and the word σκόνεντα only elsewhere occurs in the Iliad in the similes (E 525, A 63, M 157).
the *Odyssey* and never in the *Iliad*. Parry would have us believe that this is accidental and that we may be sure the phrase would have been in the memory of the poet of the *Iliad*, because it helps to complete the formulaic system of Odysseus. But if, as I hope to have made clear, formulaic systems are in fact far from being complete, this argument loses all force. We are free to draw the natural conclusion that δυστομένος 'Οδυσσεύς was a phrase made up by the *Odyssey*. This is perhaps a little matter. More important is the phrase πτοσιπορθός 'Οδυσσεύς. If we must conclude that this is traditional, we shall be forced to defy Chantraine⁸ and assume a comparatively high antiquity for the definite article which precedes it on its two appearances in the *Iliad* (B 278, K 363).

**The extent of Homeric formulae**

We may now consider the remaining one of our three doctrines—that not only is almost everything in the Homeric diction traditional, but that we possess a mere fraction of the total number of verses that Homer must have composed during his lifetime. The belief invites us to suppose that almost every phrase Homer uses he had used before even though the evidence for a second usage does not survive. It is manifest that there can be no proof of this theorem one way or the other. We must again consider probabilities, and we may begin with the phrase ὁκύς 'Αχιλλεύς. We may first note that the phrase fits perfectly into the ‘economy’ of the ‘system’, being the only counterpart to δύος 'Αχιλλεύς for the last two feet of the line. Therefore traditional, Parry would have us say. But two things may make us suspicious. The first is the comparative frequency of the phrases. δύος 'Αχιλλεύς occurs 54 times, ὁκύς 'Αχιλλεύς only five—odd behaviour for equal yokefellows. The other is the pattern of occurrences. ὁκύς 'Αχιλλεύς occurs only in the last four books of the *Iliad*. Why not elsewhere? Did the singer never have an occasion when it might have been useful? Surely he did—otherwise the whole theory of the difficulty of hexametric composition on which the formulaic theory rests is in danger. We must suppose then that the phrase just did not come to his mind. But on what ground then can we assume that it nevertheless really existed after all? Only on the ground of dogma.

Let us take another instance. χρυσές Ἀφροδίτη is found only once (X 470). Was it or was it not a familiar formula? I think we can prove that it was not, and, further, that the poet of the *Iliad* had no other formula of this particular length available to him. If we look at Γ 389 we shall find, τῆ μὲν ἐξεισαμένη προσεφόνει δὶ Ἀφροδίτη and soon afterwards in line 413: τῆν δὲ χολωσαμένη προσεφόνει δὶ Ἀφροδίτη. Now if one examines the usage of προσεφόνεις(ν) in the *Iliad* one will find that it comes like

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⁸ Chantraine *Grammaire homérique* vol. 1 para. 245.
this—after the caesura and before its own grammatical subject—some half dozen times. The subjects that follow it are: θεῖος "Οντρος (B 22), νήδμως Ὄπνος (Ξ 242), δι "Ἀφροδίτη (Γ 389, 413), ψαθίζως υλός (Φ 152), Τεόκρως ἀμανιν (Θ 292). If a quiz-master were now to ask us, ‘What do these subjects have in common?’ we should answer at once that they have a common lack. None of them is equipped with an epithet to enable it to stretch across the previous half foot. And the significance of that? It is that none of these subjects can be used after προσέφης, the normal word for replying. Beyond this we cannot go with certainty since we can never know reasons. It looks as if in these unimportant lines the singer preferred to use the less appropriate verb προσεφάνει than to invent a new epithet. In any case it must be totally wrong to assume, as Parry does, that χρυσέη Ἀφροδίτη was a potential way of putting the goddess into the nominative case, present in the tradition and liable for frequent service.

One may add that the verse in which χρυσέη Ἀφροδίτη appears and its two successors can well be suspected of more than customary ‘lateness’. They describe Aphrodite’s wedding present of a mantilla to Andromache, which is in itself of a somewhat unhomeric prettiness, and they contain not only the unusual hiatus of this phrase but also the only instance of the separation of the epithet κοπεδαίολος from its noun Ἐκτωρ to be found in the Iliad. But if the verses are due to a different singer, this will only confirm what we have already seen to be likely that each singer has his own way with formulae.

But we have so far been merely sniping. Is there any way in which we can launch a major attack on this most important and crucial problem of how far within the general limits of oral style the diction of any one singer may be due to routine and how far to individual choice? An intensive study of the formulaic systems of the Homeric hymns might be useful in this respect, especially if it were conducted simultaneously with a study of Hesiodic epic. This has not yet been done. Nor indeed has even a proper comparative study between the Iliad and the Odyssey in respect of formulaic usage been carried out. Less ambitious than either of these projects would be the examination within the Iliad itself of the usage of the similes. It is generally agreed not only that the Homeric simile in its developed form is unique in a literary sense but also that the similes belong to the same late linguistic layer of the poem (if we may properly talk of the stratification of the Iliad as if it were an archaeological site).  

9 Kirk, too, points out the lack of published analyses of post-Homeric formulae (Kirk 1962, 68). The language of the Iliad similes has been most recently studied by Shipp, who gives also an admirably clear and brief account of their literary development (Shipp 79–85). For other discussions of the similes see Webster (1958, 220, 223f. with refs. in 225 note 3), Jachmann (1958, 267–338), Kirk (1962, 202f., 346), Coffey (1957, and apud Hainsworth 1961 where he talks of the ‘personal invention’ they contain).
**Formulae in the Iliad similes**

Now a thoroughgoing investigation of the formulaic structure of the similes would require at least an article to itself, perhaps a whole book. But we may be able to arrive at some preliminary results if we confine our gaze to the noun-epithet combinations. Counting 184 different similes totalling 665 lines (about the average length of a book of the Iliad) we shall find that they contain 379 different noun-epithet combinations. These will be our candidates for the status and degree of ‘formula’.\(^{10}\) We shall now ask those candidates to step forward who can claim at least one appearance in the main body of the Iliad. We count 53 of them. If we now ask the names of those who make at least three appearances in the body of the Iliad we shall be left with 27, of whom all but two figure in the Odyssey as well:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>άλός</th>
<th>πολίης</th>
<th>Κρόνον πάις</th>
<th>διήρρειος ποσταιμό</th>
<th>(not Odyssey)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>πολιής άλός</td>
<td>κρατερόν μένος</td>
<td>άκάματον πύρ</td>
<td>(not Odyssey)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>χλωρόν δέος</td>
<td>ίφια μήλα</td>
<td>θεσπιδώς πύρ</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Δίος μεγάλιοι</td>
<td>θοί ἐν νη</td>
<td>πυρός αἰθομένον</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ἀλκίμον ὦτρ</td>
<td>αἰπύς ὀλέθρος</td>
<td>νήπια τέκνα</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(not Odyssey)</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>μητίετα Ζεῦς</td>
<td>εἰς οὐρανὸν εὐρὺν</td>
<td>φίλος υῖός</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ἤχῳ θεσπεσίτη</td>
<td>τρῆμονα τέλειαν</td>
<td>ἡξίε χαλκῷ</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>πολυφωλοσίμοιο</td>
<td>ἐπὶ σύνοπα πόντον</td>
<td>θρασειάων ἀπὸ χειρῶν</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>θαλάσσης</td>
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<tr>
<td>θυρὸς ἄγηνωρ</td>
<td>διήπτεσος ποσταιμό</td>
<td>ἐπὶ χθονὶ πουλοβοτείρῃ</td>
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</table>

Since these phrases occur outside the similes, they may be considered as candidates for the degree not merely of ‘formula’ but of ‘traditional formula’. They are a varied assortment. Most have what we may call a lowest common denominator of meaning, informing us that the sea is grey, the sky broad, and bronze sharp. Others, though, seem to pass beyond meaning altogether. What semantic purpose did an Ionian singer have for calling sheep ἰφί, a river ἵππος, or fire διήπτεσος? These must surely be fossil phrases of high antiquity.\(^{11}\) A few appear modern, such as the phrase Κρόνον πάις ἄγικολομήτεω.\(^{12}\)

However the most interesting thing about the list is not its internal variety but its total brevity. Only 27 noun-epithet combinations out of a population of 379 that can be classed as likely to be traditional formulae. Even if we

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\(^{10}\) What makes a ‘formula’, in Parry’s definition of the term, is not its semantic but its metrical value. Therefore only combinations that occur in the same position in the verse and in metrically equivalent grammatical cases can be counted as identical.

\(^{11}\) Russian singers can be totally ignorant of the meaning of traditional phrases in their repertoire according to an interesting quotation from Rambaud La Russie épique Paris 1876, quoted by Parry 1932, 11 note 3.

\(^{12}\) Shipp 125–6.
allow them to be rejoined by the 26 others which occur in the main body of the *Iliad* a small number of times we can still only bring the total proportion to 15 per cent.

Can we draw any conclusion from this percentage? I think so. Admittedly noun-epithet combinations constitute only a single class of formulae. But it is an important class. And it provided the poet of the similes with a negligible stock of formulae. For where would this stock have been kept except in the heroic epic which the body of the *Iliad* exemplifies? Nobody imagines that there was a large mass of Homeric poetry about lions and shepherds and forest fires and wasps and bees and acrobats available for the poet to draw on. Even if it is true that the subject-matter of the similes correlates well with the subject-matter of Greek fable, as has recently been stated, there is still no suggestion that the fables existed in an oral tradition of hexameter verse. So it looks strongly as if the Homeric poet—if he had the wish and the talent—*could* compose without the prop of traditional formulae.

But, the traditionalist may here interpose, similes—even developed similes—may predate our present *Iliad*. They may have built up their own private stock of formulae over many generations. What you should tell us, he will say, is how many times formulae repeat themselves within the body of the similes. So let us address ourselves once more to our full congregation of 379 noun-epithet combinations, and invite all those who can claim more than one appearance within the similes to reveal themselves. It will not surprise us that those who step forward are among the most anaemic looking of the candidates with little to tell us of greater interest than that promontories jut, birds fly, and deer have horns. We shall perhaps be surprised that there are only two that we have seen before. But the most impressive thing, once again, will be the smallness of the group. They will number 30, just 8 per cent of the total.

To summarise our calculations: 85 per cent of the noun-epithet combinations are unique to the similes; of these 8 per cent occur more than once within the similes; and if we now throw the doors wide and admit candidates who appear in the *Odyssey* on the charitable assumption that they have won their way into the later poem because they are true ‘formulae’ and not because of direct copying, we shall find that we have only accepted another 28, and that the proportion of unique combinations remains above 70 per cent. The balance sheet is as follows:

---


14 μέγα κόμα and ἑρακτόν ἀπὸ χειρόν are the only two noun-epithet combinations that are both repeated within the body of the similes and found in the main body of the *Iliad*. 

15
Occurring
mice
more
Combinations only in the
Iliad
similes
Iliad
Total
similes
.
Combinations unique to
the Iliad similes ..
Combinations shared
with body of Iliad ..
Combinations shared
with body of Iliad and
Odyssey ..
Combination shared
with Odyssey ..
Total combinations ..
270
18
33
28
349
23
—
2
5
30
293
18
35
33
379

FIGURE 2
Noun-epithet combinations in the similes of the Iliad.

Now if a massive stock of traditional formulae was not necessary for the
composition of the similes, there is no reason to think it necessary else­
where. We need not therefore suppose that if a phrase occurs twice in the
whole Iliad that it must therefore have been a traditional formula. Acceptance
of Parry’s doctrine has to a large extent depended on this supposition. His
analysis of the first 25 lines of the Iliad (Parry 1930, 118) counts 30 formulae.
But if one recounts, granting admission only to those phrases which recur
elsewhere in the Iliad more than once, the number will be reduced to 12,
a far less impressive total. Our conclusion that a Homeric poet did not have
to rely on formulae to make his verses begins to look more secure. And to
our great comfort we shall find it confirmed for Yugoslav poets by Lord,
who tells us (1960, 95) that ‘the notion that a singer has a common stock
or index of formulas from which he draws’ is ‘a false concept’. Instead
Lord stresses the importance of ‘formulaic systems’, such as

\[
\begin{align*}
\tau\delta\zeta\nu & \quad (O 443) \\
\varepsilon\gamma\gamma\zeta & \quad (P 604) \\
\kappa\acute{\alpha}p\rho & \quad (T 251) \\
\text{or} & \quad (\gamma 443) \\
o\acute{i}n & \quad (o 148) \\
\varphi\acute{a}r\rho & \quad (\Theta 221) \\
\end{align*}
\]

This seems a much more satisfactory way of looking at Homeric versifica-

\[\chi\epsilon\lambda\iota\nu_{15}\]

15 Lord 1960, 293. He also shows how A 9 \(\beta\alpha\sigma\lambda\mu\epsilon\tau\mathfrak{f} \chi\omega\lambda\omega\theta\epsilon\zeta\) and A 10 \(\nu\nu\theta\nu\nu\nu\nu \\text{άν} \sigma\tau\rho\alpha\nu\nu \\text{δρος κακή} \) fit into formulaic patterns. This is much more convincing than Parry’s earlier attempt to make, say, A 3 into a formula because it occurs almost word for word once elsewhere in the whole poem. But it is less certain how far the possession of a flexible formulaic style of this type makes Homeric composition distinctive. See next note.
tion—even if there is a mischievous temptation to compare the similar 'system' in Vergil,

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Reference</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tela</td>
<td>(Aen. V 514, XI 559)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sceptra</td>
<td>(Aen. I 57)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lora</td>
<td>(Aen. I 477)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arduus</td>
<td>(Aen. VII 784)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vertitum</td>
<td>(Aen. VIII 299)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>arma</td>
<td>(Aen. IV 60)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

and conclude that in hexameter poetry the gulf fixed between 'oral' and 'written' is not of infinite width.16

Our argument so far has vindicated for the Homeric bard a greater measure of freedom in versification. Can we now do the same for his freedom to create? Let us take another glimpse at our similes. In classifying the noun-epithet combinations we have until now operated rigorously within Parry's definition of a formula as 'a group of words which is regularly employed under the same metrical conditions to express a given essential idea'. This was necessary since we wanted to find out how many might be traditional formulae. But now we have a different aim. We want to assess the originality or otherwise of the ideas in them and we shall therefore have to adopt a different classification. Metrical position is unimportant. What we shall ask is how many different adjectives are used with different nouns. According to my count (I have no faith in its exact accuracy) there are 342 such different partnerings, of which 100 are found elsewhere in the Iliad. Thus no less than 242, that is 70 per cent of the total, noun-epithet pairs are unique to the similes.17

16 Comparison with Vergil is not entirely frivolous. Parry proved—what perhaps no sane person had ever doubted—that Homeric repetitions were quite different from repetitions in later authors. But once we abandon repeated formulas and begin talking about formulaic systems, we can no longer take it as proved that there is a difference in kind between Homer and others.

An analysis of the exordium to the Aeneid in Parry style would reap a rich harvest from the first phrase alone. \textit{Arma virum/-i/-ol-os} occurs 11 times elsewhere in the Aeneid, and on four of these occasions it occupies the first one and a half feet of the verse (I 119, II 668, IX 57, XI 747). The rhythmic pattern is repeated precisely in \textit{Arma virumque feros} (XI 747), the verb-choice 'evidently deriving' from the formula \textit{Arma ferunt . . .} (Geor. I 511 = Aen. IX 133, XII 586) and in \textit{Arma deosque parant}, which is itself 'evidently' dependent on the formula \textit{Arma parent} (IV 290, cf. \textit{Arma parate} XI 18). For the semantic pattern compare IX 477 . . . \textit{arma virum . . . canebat}.

Are we sure that our 'proofs' of the formulaic nature of Homeric composition are stronger than this?

17 Some recur in the Odyssey, but mostly in circumstances that make one suspect borrowing. They are irrelevant to our present purpose since nobody supposes the Odyssey to have been composed before the Iliad.

The chorizontist position is now in fashion. Lesky (1959) in discussing Webster's book says that the further modern literary analysis of the outlook of the two poems penetrates, the stronger becomes the presumption of separate authorship. See also his remarks on Treu. Davison (in Wace and Stubbings 265 note 71) affirms the strength of the arguments for separate authorship put forward by Heubeck, Puge, and Schadewalt.
The originality of the similes

Now there are good literary and good linguistic grounds for saying that there can be no long traditional history behind the similes. This conclusion is supported, so far as it can be, by archaeological considerations. We have just seen that there is nothing in the formulaic structure of the verse in the similes (so far as we have examined it) that forces us to assume a gradual creation over many generations. We now see that the substance of the similes (so far as it has come under our microscope) is for over two-thirds of its extent unique. Are there any objective grounds left for denying a personal creativeness to the composer of the similes? If we want encouragement we may turn to our literary judgment. It is the noun-epithet pairs of this last group through which

The form and pressure of high thoughts will burst.

Not through all of course. Some just tell us that an oak is a tall one or that shepherds live in the country. But in the majority of them one may fancy that one is listening to the voice of Homer

It learns the storm-cloud's thunderous melody,

Now roars, now murmurs with the changing sea...

Particularly noticeable are the compound adjectives, many of them splendid—

- ὥς δ' ὁ τ' ἐν αἰγιαλῷ πολυηχέτ... (Δ 422)
- ἀνέμοιο πολυπλάγκτοι... (Δ 308)
- κόκυκνον δυσλυχοδέρνον... (Β 460 = Ο 692)
- λαοφόρον καθ' δόν... (Ο 682)
- ίοεὶδα πόντον... (Δ 298)
- ποταμὸς χειμάρροος... (Ν 138; Δ 452, Ε 87, Λ 492)
- ἀπαλοτρεφέος στάλοι... (Φ 363)

—to cite but a few. There are 65 of these compound adjectives of which 54 occur in combinations unique to the similes. Characteristic too are the double adjectives—

- ἵρηκτι... ὅκεῖ ὑπσοσφόνω (Ο 237)
- γονὴ χερνίττως ἀληθῆς (Μ 433)
- κύμα... λάβρων ύπο νεφών ἀνεμοτρέφες (Ο 624)
- δρύες οὐρεσίν ὑψικάρηνοι

- βίζησιν μεγάλησιν διηγεῖσθαι ἀρατύται (Μ 132-4)

of which there are 15 altogether, 14 being in the same ‘similes only’ group. It is unfashionably eighteenth-century to appreciate Homer by quoting Horace, but I cannot believe that Homer, or any creative singer of tales, is excluded from the declaration of poetic rights

licuit semperque licebit

signatum praesente nota producere nomen,

however difficult it may be for us to recognise each individual issue.

18 See for instance Bowra Tradition and Design in the Iliad pp. 119-121.
Conclusion

But to quote Horace is not to align oneself with those mythical scholars who ‘shun experience for the theoretical’ (Lord 1960, 134). Homer must have belonged to a tradition of professional bards; he was perhaps illiterate; he could certainly create verse ex tempore. These things one cannot deny. But there are difficulties in the theory as it is currently presented. Lord’s account of the survival of Homer’s poetry as a result of a personal dictation by the poet to a collector inspired by middle eastern example is, as Combellack suggests, faintly absurd (μὴν ἐξαίτε, θεά—‘you got that?’). But more than this it fails to account for the good variants in our texts of Homer, the problem of which provided Parry (as Wolf previously) with one of his main starting points. In the second place there has been much exaggeration of the ‘length and thrift’ of the formular systems of Greek epic, and particularly of the time-span needed for their creation. This is important in considering the probable truth of Homer to history. If it is true that the growth of formulae is comparable to that of stalactites, we will be much more ready to believe in Homer as a reporter of Mycenaean facts. If it is not true we shall be tempted to cry with Jachmann ‘Wirklichkeitsfanatismus!’, and to wonder whether it is any more complimentary to Homer than it is to Aristotle to praise a poet for his good history. Linked with the question of the age of the formulae is the question of their extent. Did Homer have in the index of his mind a store of formulae vastly greater than we can imagine from the Iliad alone, and is the surviving Iliad a mere fraction of the poetry that Homer must have sung in his lifetime? Or was it his life’s work? Did he build brick by brick, or in pre-fabricated sections? Is what makes an oral poet great that he knows more formulae or that he uses fewer? The general view of the authorities quoted by Parry is that in

19 Combellack CPh 56, 1961, 181.
20 Instances of belief in Homer are numerous. An amusing one relevant to our purpose since it is founded on the necessary antiquity of formula-systems that exhibit thrift is the assertion of Hector’s historicity as a real Trojan by Page (248E.). But this is not enough for Webster, reviewing in JHS 80, 1960, 199. ‘Hector himself has a great shield as he runs back to Troy. Hector therefore as well as Ajax was in poetry in the fifteenth century.’ All because of two lines (Z 117–8) not intimately connected to Hector by metrical considerations (the second does not even describe a body-shield) which report that the leather knocked against his neck and ankles. So—somebody called Hector once barked his shins in the Troad in the 15th century B.C., and this piece of information has been faithfully transmitted through the centuries as a ‘precious element of older battle poetry’? Disbelievers may prefer Schachermeyer (AAHG 11, 1958, 204) who reminds us that Homeric poets may archaisce, and Lesky (1959, 134–7) who assures us that old epithets may be transferred to new contexts.
21 Lord (1960, 151) says that Homer ‘was not a two-song man’, implying that he can be credited with the Iliad and Odyssey and much beside. This follows Parry (1930, 134). But nothing could be more dubious than the legitimacy of arguing from experience of run-of-the-mill singers in one tradition in a stage of decline to a conclusion about a particularly famous singer in a different tradition in a period of creativity. On this see Kirk 1960.
the oral tradition to poeticise is to rearrange: 'Les poésies des guslars sont une juxtaposition de clichés... Seul leur ordre peut varier. Un bon guslar est celui qui joue de ses clichés comme nous avec les cartes...'. This account, which is clearly overstressed, succeeded a belief—natural at first—that oral poetry was what it professed to be, recitation from memory. 'On a longtemps cru que les chanteurs ne modifient pas les poèmes...'. Just as the playing card theory allowed more freedom and flexibility than this, so does Lord’s statement of how the guslars work allow more still: The singer, he says (Lord 1960, 36), ‘does not “memorise” formulas, any more than we as children “memorise” language... the really significant element in the process’ he continues (page 37) ‘is rather the setting up of various patterns that make adjustment of phrase and creation of phrase by analogy possible’. Lord does not believe a singer could be made on so mechanical a plan as is demanded by the theory of juxtaposition of fixed units, and in fact his whole description of the training of a guslar is based on the analogy of the learning of ordinary language. Of fixed formulas he says (page 34), ‘the most stable formulae will be those for the most common ideas of the poetry’, and even suggests that their frequent use is a sign of decay when their meaning has become ‘vestigial, connotative rather than denotative’ (page 65).

We cannot at once transfer this verdict to Homer. As all good critics from Aristarchus to Parry have stressed, Homer’s only interpreter must be himself. The most superficial reading of Homeric epic shows that it is tolerant of repetitions. Parry suggested that it was composed entirely of them. But his best evidence came from the lines of least meaning where a simple thing-to-be-said, such as ‘he answered’, had to be expanded to fill a whole hexameter. Passages of high meaning-content (if we may judge from our partial analysis of the similes) show a high degree of originality of diction. There may be every stage of gradation in between. If so the language of Homeric verse, like that of Yugoslavian, may be closely analogous to ordinary speech. Lectures and harangues are more tolerant of clichés than written articles. At their worst they may contain little else; at their best they may dispense almost completely with the safeties of routine expression. The trouble is that we really know very little about the ex tempore composition of prose in our own language, and this ignorance should make us modest in pronouncing on the process of ex tempore verse composition in somebody else’s. The only way to a more exact understanding of these matters lies through combinatory analysis of daunting

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23 Mathias Murko La poésie populaire épique en Yougoslavie au début du XXe siècle Paris 1929 p. 16, quoted by Parry 1932 15 note 3.
24 That Parry’s samples are inadequate is also pointed out by Hainsworth (1961), who nevertheless accepts the existence of a large shared stock of formulae.
complexity. It is possible that electronic computers may come to the rescue, and, if the line of thought that I have been suggesting turns out to be correct, they will have the paradoxical result of restoring to Homer both his humanity and his ‘invention’, which were attributed to him as a matter of course by all his readers before the time of the romantics.

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