

THE POST-TRADITIONAL HOMER

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Milman Parry's work has had some very positive effects, primarily the renewed interest in oral traditional literature all over the globe, (with special emphasis on the South Slavic tradition); the "oral-formulaic" research particularly illuminated Homer's orality and his technique of creating formulas, themes and scenes; however, it has also had very negative effects on our overall understanding of Homer and his poetry and, consequently, our own Western culture.

Parry's followers are influential and dominate for almost 50 years Homeric studies, especially in the US. It is their insistence on understanding Homeric poetry as traditional poetry, and the individual poet "Homer" as a non-existent "culture hero," that I see as a negative trend.

Instead of collecting oral traditional epics in the field, as Parry, Vujnović and Goleniščev-Kutuzov, and later Lord and Bynum, and after them Zlatan and Marina Čolaković did,^[1] or at least seriously studying them, as Parry and Goleniščev-Kutuzov, and Lord and Bynum did, many Homerists and Slavicists rather quote words of the "founding fathers" of the "Oral Theory" as *ipsissima verba*, and overlook their errors. I see those blunders in the founders' wrong equation: oral = traditional, and in their exaggerated and *passé* notion of "abyss between oral and written."

Indeed, Parry himself wrote extensively of the "traditional style" of the Iliad and Odyssey, and stated that these poems were "composed orally". In conversations with me, Albert Lord claimed that an "oral traditional" Homer is his own term, but that he believed Parry would have agreed with it.^[2] (According to Lord, Parry understood Homer as a traditional poet in his early work; Parry started to think about a "traditional" Homer as being also an "oral" poet only after defending his doctoral thesis in Paris, influenced by Meillet and Matthias Murko (see Parry's Foreword to *Ćor Huso*). This is a surprisingly late moment for a "discovery" of Homer's orality, given that it was well known in European scholarship, and noted already by Josephus in the first century A.D. (c. Ap. 1.2.12).

Thus, in my view, a fundamental misunderstanding was introduced by Parry of what is tradition and traditional, and the relation to orality; and this main fallacy persists in the works of Parry's followers. That is, one can "compose orally," and in a "traditional style," not only traditional epics, but also non-traditional, as well as post-traditional epics. Similarly, one can easily imitate a traditional style.^[3] To state it bluntly, non-traditional epics, composed orally or in writing, and in a "traditional style" are the most common form of epics, present in many national literatures.^[4] The hard task is to find bona fide traditional poems. (It requires a thorough knowledge of a specific tradition, and the proper definition and understanding of the term tradition).

Numerous heroic epics, collected from all over the world, as well as a close study of their style in comparison with the style of Homer's poems,^[5] point to the conclusion that Homer's epics are not traditional. My own collecting experience and study led me to define Homer's Iliad and Odyssey as post-traditional epics, as they abound with innovations and inverted-traditional themes, and were probably conceived as new poems (see Fowler's important study *Homeric Question*).^[6] If traditional and oral (as argued above) are not the same thing, then there is no sufficient reason to take for granted that Homer's poems are traditional, as Parry perhaps, and Lord certainly assumed, as do many of their followers nowadays.

Parry collected many Bosnian traditional epics, but these samples did not provide an analogy for Homer. The only analogy were the poems of Avdo Međedović, especially his epic «The Wedding of Smailagić Meho.»^[7] Međedović learned this particular epic in a non-traditional way from a heavily and improperly edited published source; he lengthened it to its present monumental form, unheard of in Bosnian tradition. The reason for this unusual feat may well have been Parry's particular and handsomely paid request:^[8] apparently Međedović's house had burned down accidentally, and Parry paid for having it rebuilt.

It was a mistake to represent Međedović as a bona fide oral traditional singer, and this poem as a bona fide traditional epic, in order to justify the identification of Homer as an oral traditional "singer of tales."^[9] Some

Homerists accepted this analogy, without due caution; others rejected it, but with weak arguments, as they were unfamiliar with the South Slavic and Bosnian epic tradition. However, and this is the main point, this analogy should have not been either accepted or rejected; it should have been verified, by comparing Međedović's and Homer's epics with the Bosnian existing tradition.

In my essay *The Singer above Tales*,^[10] I have demonstrated that the analogy between Međedović and Homer stands on contrary grounds from those established by Parry's followers. It is valid because both Međedović and Homer were not traditional singers. To be precise, I have shown that Međedović, as a semi-professional post-traditional singer-poet, created his epics in a post-traditional manner, which is a sui generis combination of tradition and innovation. It differs not only considerably, but essentially from the traditional manner. It is established and undeniable fact, as we possess abundant quantity of traditional epics collected in his region (as well as other Bosnian regions) for comparison. As Međedović's epics are the only acceptable analogy to Homer's creation, and are the only heroic epics known to us that somewhat closely resemble Homer's epics in style, technique of epic-making, plot-design, length and content, consequently Homer's epics are more than likely post-traditional as well, and certainly are not traditional.

In my essay mentioned above, I hypothesized that Homer's epics differed from ancient Greek tradition similarly as Međedović's epics differ from the Bosnian tradition. I offered 24 arguments for Homer's and Međedović's post-traditionality. (In my argumentation, I avoided using some of the convincing objections of Homerists opposed to Parry-Lord school, as their work was turned toward rejecting the analogy).

Homerists and Slavicists, and their students as well, have tended to read Parry's writings and the works of his successors instead of closely studying Međedović and the traditional epic lore. Thus, they have missed the crucial starting point for understanding (pre-)Homeric "composition-in-performance." Their attitude reminds one of scholastic scholars, who detested empirical approach. It is frustrating when one takes into account the existence of several fine scholarly audio-video collections, including my own. There is no doubt in my mind that students of Homer can learn more about Homeric epic-making by watching and analyzing documentary filmed performances of Bosnian and other heroic epic traditions, than by reading broadly cycled and often recycled works and ideas of Parry's followers. In addition, there are still a few places in the world, including Montenegro, where the last singers of heroic epics sing their poems. I am afraid that precious time for video-recording is running out.

Contemporary Homerists tend to agree that Homer's style is in a certain degree formulaic and oral, (although they continue to disagree regarding the actual degree), and that he was essentially an oral poet (either if he dictated or if he wrote, as there is no compelling proof given yet by anyone to presume that he did not write). However, the argument that Homer's poems are traditional because they are composed in the "traditional style," is misleading. (It originated, I suppose, from Parry's dubious definition of style as "form of thought"). It is a perilous idea, which consequently led Parry's successors to deny the existence of one of the greatest and surely most influential poets in human history, and drowned Homer into "ancient Greek oral epic tradition." (The same was attempted with Hesiod). It became a barrier to our proper comprehension of the origin and development of ancient Greek culture, and our own culture. My goal in "The Singer above Tales" was to point out the impossibility of Homer as traditional oral poet and, as a logical consequence, the non-existence of such a "Homeric ancient Greek oral tradition," as envisaged by Parry's successors.

Homerists not familiar with "oral tradition" should become aware that it is for them terra incognita. There is no possibility to understand it intuitively, nor solely through reading literature about it. What is tradition, and what is traditional in Homer, and what is not, is the (Homeric) question Homerists have to answer and define, as this is the key question, not whether Homer's poems are oral, taken by dictation or written.^[11] What is "fixed" text and "fixed" plot, and what "to-be-fixed" means, and what is the origin of "fixation," is the (Homeric) question Homerists have to answer today, before trying to establish who and when and how and why "fixed" Homer's poems.

Neither "Homer-The-Singer-of-Tales," (which is the traditional phase Homer undoubtedly transcended), nor "a dictating Homer" (speculating on the origin of the alphabet, and venturing too far in its unproductive search for "Palamedes"), nor "Homer the Culture-Hero," (throwing post-Homerica back into Homerica), provide us with a satisfactory answer to the Homeric Question. Nor does the highly speculative "evolutionary theory," which gave no more than educated guesses about the "gradual process of fixation," or "crystallization," of the Homeric poems.

These models, all of them springing from Parry's ideas and his work in the field,[\[12\]](#) prove only one thing: that their authors apply vague concepts about tradition and traditional heroic epics.

I offer the hypothesis that there was one individual, whom the Greeks decided to call Homer, who "fixed" the texts of his Iliad and Odyssey. (This is not a new answer to the Homeric Question, but rather my attempt to give it back its question mark and its proper deep meaning.)[\[13\]](#) Homer contributed with his fixation, deliberately or unintentionally, to the destruction of his own tradition. Namely, not-to-be-fixed is the essence of tradition. The fixed plot and the fixed text of a poem do not exist in the tradition of heroic epic-making. The fixation appears only when the content and the plot of epic becomes firmly established and thus petrified, when it contains counter-traditional meaning and new or inverted-traditional themes and motifs, and when it is preserved in writing (in order to be non-traditionally learnt by heart and delivered in a non-traditional form of oral performance).[\[14\]](#)

The mythic-historic traditional poems of the siege of Troy and the tragic sacrifice of the substitute became, when "fixed," the Iliad and the poem of Achilles' anger.[\[15\]](#) The author of the Iliad deprived his creation of its traditional mythic-historic content and deep traditional meaning. On the other hand, the Iliad gained by its transformation: its volume, its poetic and many other values, and its productive strength.

One could object that the traditional epic poems also appear as somewhat "fixed."[\[16\]](#) However, they are fixed in a specific way – they are "fixed with" their own traditional limits and content. This is as natural and organic fixation as we know it. Each traditional poem differs from the other and is in the same time similar to the other, as none of them lacks anything given them by nature from time immemorial. The strength of traditional poems lies in their generative ability to produce ever-new poems; the post-traditional poem possesses only its self-reproductive power, as it is an artifact and inorganic.[\[17\]](#)

Homer "fixed" his post-traditional heroic poems using traditional poems and material from other traditional forms of expression, including many inventions from "his own mind," in a different way: his poems, which he created, and perhaps performed in his own and unique improvisational style, became "fixed without." Homer made with his poems an "ox" out of a bull. Homer intervened into the traditional themes, and he inverted the traditional meaning and content, as he questioned it, and he laughed at it, he criticized it, and he situated himself above it. "Homer-The-Singer-above-Tales" placed himself above the world and the characters of gods and heroes the traditional poems portrayed, thus definitely stepping out of his own tradition. (PseudoLonginus noticed it, in his phenomenal *On Sublime*).

Homer's inversion of tradition gave birth not only to his expression of his own *Weltanschauung*, but later on greatly contributed to the formation of Greek religion, geography, mythography, mythology, history, tragedy, philosophy, art, science, education and politics... and gave birth to the Western point of view and to the Western literature. Studying Homer with all of this in mind gives us an insight into the beginnings and the origin of the Western essentially post-traditional and non-traditional culture.

Our culture stands on feeble legs, as it has been built (and continues its progressive building) on post-traditional sand, not on tradition's rich soil, which conservatively and wisely looks at progress as re-egress, and is nostalgically turned backwards, toward the idealized past when everything was necessarily better. Homer did a few things right, and many wrong, when he inverted and betrayed his tradition. At some point during the 8th century BC, a few post-traditional and professional poets, among them Homer and Hesiod, started to question their own heroic and religious tradition, and recognized their limits, as some important changes and ideas took hold in their life and in their society. They have learned of other, much older non-Greek traditions, they traveled wherever they were welcome, and they became well acquainted with various Greek traditions. Some of these poets were very probably able to read and write (both in Greek and in other languages), and they have created their new individual style and ways of creation and performance, built on the imitation of inherited traditional heroic epic singing, and on the improvisation on its themes.

The following influences of Homer and Hesiod on Greek society and its culture are clear:

a) the creation of catalogs and (half-mythic) travelogs became the foundation of geography and maps;

b) the genealogies and the rearranging of old mythic-historic poems into pseudo-historical order, produced proto-history, mythography and the transformation of religion;

c) the depiction of assemblies of gods, presided by Zeus, and joining different stories about the origin of the world and gods, gave rise to well-ordered theogony and cosmogony, leading toward natural sciences and philosophy;

d) the new characterization of gods and heroes and the new critical approach to their deeds and accomplishments developed new ethics, and gave rise to the formation of Cycle epics and tragedy;

e) the gatherings of heroic forefathers, and their mighty joint endeavors, contributed to the rise of pan-Hellenism and to a constitution of a Greek nation and identity...

It seems that all of it started its formation in the Greek and the Western culture, as far as we know, under the extremely powerful influence of Homer's and Hesiod's canonical and fixed texts, possessing firmly fixed content. [18] (What existed before them was probably not recorded in writing, and had mostly been forgotten.) Thus, the question of Homer's (and Hesiod's) traditionality, or post-traditionality, or non-traditionality, is one of the most important questions to answer, not only for Classicists, but also for scholars in humanistic studies in general.

[1] See the list of Parry-Vujnović collection in: *The Index of The Milman Parry Collection 1933-1935, Heroic Songs, Conversations and Stories*, ed. Matthew W. Kay (New York, Garland, 1995); the list of Lord-Bynum Collection from the Sixties in: *Zlatan Čolaković: South Slavic Muslim Epic Songs, Problems of Collecting, Editing and Publishing*, ed. by H. Birnbaum, Th. Eekman, H. McLean and N. Riasanovsky (California Slavic Studies v. 14, Berkeley – Los Angeles – Oxford, 1992; repr. in Čolaković's monograph *Mrtva glava jezik progovara, Almanah: Podgorica*, 2004, which also contains the list of Zlatan and Marina Čolaković Collection from 1989-1990). The list of Lord's Collection from the Fifties is available on the Milman Parry Collection's official web-site, and the list of Čolaković's video-collection from 2005 is published in the thematic issue of "Almanah" 31-32 (Podgorica, 2005), dedicated to Bosnian epics and containing papers from the Symposium "Bosnian Epics in Montenegro, Murat Kurtagić – Avdo Mededović." The list of his 2008 collection is about to be published.

[2] See Zlatan Čolaković and Albert Bates Lord: *Nasljeđe Milmana Parryja (The Legacy of Milman Parry)*, *Almanah* 31-32, Podgorica, 2005, p. 40 (first published in *Latina et Graeca* 26, Zagreb, 1986, 3-16).

[3] I do not suggest that Homer's technique of epic-making should be defined as an "imitation of traditional style," but that this was the case for Hesiod's works is a distinct possibility. We cannot find out with certainty if Homer and Hesiod imitated an existing traditional style, or composed in a traditional style, as we do not possess pre-Homeric texts.

[4] Such transitional epics, namely epics that are written in an oral manner, and sometimes performed in a quasi-traditional style, are easy to recognize and were popular among Southern Slavs (Maja Bošković-Stulli coined the term *pučka književnost* (translated as: «the literature for common folk») for this and similar forms of transitional literature). There are many strong arguments for classifying some epics belonging to the Epic Cycle as transitional texts.

[5] Parry rightly remarked that the proof of oral composition of epics lies in their formulaic style and their relative lack of enjambement, as compared with non-formulaic written epic poetry, which contains a high percentage of enjambement. However, the percentage of enjambement in Homer exceeds by far the percentage of enjambement found in traditional oral heroic poetry. Some similar factors led Foley into defining Homer's poems as oral-derived and transitional texts. Foley's is a false definition, as Homer's epics are oral texts. They should rather be defined as tradition-derived texts, as they ceased to be traditional. In 1948, Lord compared the percentage of enjambement in the poems of Salih Ugljanin, an average traditional oral singer, and Avdo Mededović (whom I define as a post-traditional poet). Lord found that Mededović's texts, both sung and dictated, contained a fair percentage of enjambement, while Ugljanin's did not. Unfortunately, Lord did not draw the necessary conclusions from this important discovery.

[6] The Cambridge Companion to Homer, CUP, Cambridge, 2004). I have translated this essay into Croatian.

[7] See Zlatan Čolaković: The epics of Avdo Međedović, A Critical Edition; Introduction by Robert L. Fowler (Almanah, Podgorica, 2007, 2 volumes). This edition contains five of Međedović's epics. Two additional Međedović's epics were published for the first time in: Mrtva glava jezika progovara (Zlatan Čolaković, Almanah, Podgorica, 2004). In 1974, Lord published his prose translation of «The Wedding of Smailagić Meho» in English, and in 2002 Georg Danek's verse translation appeared in German of Međedović's dictated epic «The Wedding of Vlahinjić Alija.»

[8] Parry generously covered expenses of building a new house for Međedović and his family. Namely, at the time of recording, in the summer of 1935, Međedović and his family were homeless, as their house burned in an accident.

[9] Parry's proposal to write a study on South Slavic epics and Homer, submitted before his death to the editors, and published by Adam Parry in *The Making of Homeric Verse*, indicates that this misrepresentation was first intended by Parry himself. Namely, in that text Parry provided a highly inflated average length of Bosnian epics in the area of Sandžak and Montenegro. Parry was beyond any doubt aware of the true average length of Bosnian traditional oral heroic poems. (See Parry's and Vujnović's conversations with Avdo Međedović, and Parry's Questionnaire from Bijelo Polje, first published in my already mentioned critical edition of Međedović's epics.)

[10] See "Seminari Romani Di Cultura Greca" IX-2, Rome, 2006, 161-187.

[11] Homer might have written his poems and they could still be oral and appear as oral. (They were meant to be learnt by heart and delivered in oral performance). Alternatively, Homer might have dictated his texts, and they could still have characteristics of a written text, or he could have written his texts less than carefully, so that they appear as dictated and unrevised (not to mention mistakes caused by copying and re-copying manuscripts). This is not a paradox. Parry collected many poems by the singers who wrote down their poems. (I did the same). These poems do not differ from their sung versions, unless the singers were semi-literate, and found writing too difficult. They did not recognize advantages of the "new" medium in writing down their texts. I have worked with some singers who were traditional, but who also wrote down their own new poems, never before heard or sung by anyone. They did recognize those advantages, as Homer also might have. There are singers whose poems, although orally delivered, and in singing, possess the qualities of a carefully premeditated written text, when transcribed. Such poets sing in a slower pace, which enables them to make excellent verses, full of internal rhymes and other poetic qualities, and to avoid mistakes.

[12] Albert Lord's statements in his conversation with me, sound-recorded on February 1, 1986 (see the reference in the note 2) seem relevant here, with respect to Janko-Nagy-Powell polemics listed on BMCR's web-site. According to Lord, Nagy's approach to Homer is the closest to Parry's, as well as to his own; Nagy "works more than anyone else within Parry's tradition," and his work represents "a creative development of Parry's theory" (ibid.). To the best of my recollection, Lord did not firmly stick to his own "dictating Homer" theory, presumably taken over from Parry (see Parry's Ćor Huso and Parry's Questionnaire from Bijelo Polje in my critical edition of Međedović's epics).

[13] The view of Homer as a superb poet, who provided within his epics a "redaction" of ancient Greek tradition, using a tradition style mixed with innovations with unmatched individual artistry, existed long before Parry.

[14] The idea that Homer's epics were traditional because they were orally performed, at Panathenaia and elsewhere, is as ridiculous as to state that Bach's music was "traditional," because it had been performed in concert halls and churches for a few centuries.

[15] Neither someone's "anger," nor someone's "homecoming," is the traditional subject matter. Both anger and homecoming are present in traditional heroic poems, and may be important motifs, but the subject matter of the traditional "Iliad" is the siege and the sack of a city and the tragic death of the substitute, or a blameless hero, and of the traditional "Odyssey" the return of a hero temporarily released from the realm of death. (This return is usually

granted only conditionally, upon the hero's voluntary return to the realm of death, after he takes care of some important private or public business in the realm of living).

[16] This is only an appearance, when one reads the transcribed text of the poem. Neither the singer, nor his audience, knows exactly what will be the final product of his singing. The singer in his rapid performance necessarily skips some important parts of the plot and adds some other parts in the moments of inspiration. Experienced collectors have witnessed that the singers are as amazed with their poems, and their own ability to "reproduce" and "revive" them, as is the case with their audience.

[17] One of greatest mistakes Homerists and other scholars make is their false impression of superiority of written and post-traditional poems, like Homer's, over the products of traditional literature. Homer is superior in some aspects, and traditional singers of tales in other aspects. The traditional poet could never make a Homeric poem, and Homer could never make a traditional poem. The fact of the matter is that the tradition is necessarily more potent than any individual post- or non-traditional poet.

[18] The fixed text and content do not include the need for fixed wording. It seems to me that this concept, so simple to grasp to the collectors of epics, is the main obstacle to Homerists, trained primarily to become professional philologists. For them, there exists the sanctity of preserved wording. However, for the singers of epics, this notion is meaningless, as any "word," understood as the unit of meaning and action, may be expressed in many different ways, and in a shorter or longer form.

It is often the case that the same or nearly the same "words," indeed sentences, comprising a whole line, can be found repeated in epics, usually one after another, for various reasons. I guess that prior to Aristarchus' redaction, Homer's texts were longer primarily for they contained such lines, and that many "superfluous" verses excluded by Alexandrian scholars might have not been later additions, but rather a legitimate part of Homer's original.