



CENTER FOR
HELLENIC
STUDIES
HARVARD UNIVERSITY

CLASSICS@: Issue 3

The Homerizon: Conceptual
Interrogations in Homeric Studies

Rhapsodes, Bards, and Bricoleurs: Homerizing Literary Theory

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The study of Homer has now for at least two centuries been a matter of determining how the Poet could say what he says no less than what he says. The discussion of ways and means, of the production, reception, and transmission of the epic tale, has at times clashed with the study of the poems' content, narrative structure, or their poet's intent. On the battlefield of the Homeric Question, the viewpoints related to the "how" and to the "what" have lined up as opposing camps whose cause and interests reflect the changing concerns of Homeric scholarship while staying at the same time remarkably constant. The Unitarians have been pitted against the Analysts, the Originalists against the Traditionalists, the Scripsists against the Oralists, and most recently Evolution and Intelligent Design have crossed swords in the Homeric arena.

The strife is not so much superimposed on Homer; the strife is Homer. Homer is so unknown and so unknowable as a historical poet that two virtually irreconcilable positions are forced upon the community of Homer's professional readers. The unreachable poet either becomes an entirely transcendental concept, a divine creator outside the scope of any historical research, or he comes to be identified with the poems themselves, with the mechanisms that not only were instrumental in their development but that also sustained their transmission and survival.

The transcendental Homer, who precedes the poems in time as the source from which they spring, is the "first" and the "best," the unsurpassed and unrivalled beginning of Greek literature and of the entire Western literary tradition. In a popular modern incarnation he is the "last," the ultimate oral poet, who happened to be singing around the time that writing became available for the recording of his songs. The transcendental

Homer will typically reveal himself as a larger than life individual, an inventor, or an explosion of genius in a time when art and culture did not yet exist. And he easily transcends poetry. So, for example, for a reader like Quintilian, Homer is the ultimate orator, the inventor and repository of “all the parts of eloquence.”¹ And for Strabo he is the quintessential traveler, the *prôtos heuretês* of geography.² Whether we see him as the founding practitioner of an art or occupation or as the model of morals or wisdom, Homer will serve any reader’s professional interests.

The immanent Homer comes into play when the Homeric question begins to be asked by readers who feel that no informed appreciation of the poems can take place until the critical parameters for such an appreciation have been specified. Historicism challenges hermeneutics and higher criticism (or meta-criticism) poses itself as an obstacle between Homer’s readers and any positive act of interpretation. The immanent Homer is just as protean as the transcendental one and is a function of the properties the critic assigns to the language we call “Homeric” and the text we call “Homer.”

It is not the purpose of this contribution to choose sides between “transcendental” and “immanent” or to recount the history of the Homeric Question by charting the various incarnations of the immanent Homer – though I will discuss a number of key moments in the history of the Homeric Question in, as it happens, chronological order. I wish in these pages to draw attention to the way in which Homeric criticism, the search for an immanent Homer, bears remarkable similarity to a variety of critical positions in the study of language and literature at large in the 20th century.

There is no causal relation; the critical Homerists did not reach their positions through any conscious affinity with modern theory (the various attempts to “apply” modern theory to Homer are not part of this chapter)—indeed, some “immanentists” worked more than a century before the earliest 20th-century theorists in question. Nor is any modern theory based on any conscious familiarity of their proponents with Homer or his Question. But the link between Homer and modern criticism is not gratuitous or coincidental either. The immanentist Homerist and the modern critic share an interest in language and in the conditions under which the literary work is produced, received, and reproduced. They see language, medium, and process not as factors that are external to the work’s meaning, but as an integral part of it. And they both question the notion of the poet or the author as the exclusive source of meaning, the creative force before, and outside, the literary work under study.

¹ Quint. *I. O.* 10.1.46.

² Strabo 1.1.11. At 1.2.29 Strabo refers to Homer’s love of traveling (*to philekdêmon*) – thanks to Larry Kim for this reference.

The Homer scholar and the poststructuralist critic arrive at similar conclusions, as will be argued in more detail below, but their questions are different. The Homerist's starting point is a text whose language, structure, and composition raise questions on authorship and originality. The modern critic, on the other hand, starts from language and literature in general, not from any specific work and its linguistic peculiarities. To the extent that Homeric language is, by common consent, a specialized language use, a *Kunstsprache*, the result of this difference is that immanent Homer can serve as live laboratory for the modern critical positions and theories, a hypothesis turned into reality, or a metaphor turned into observable fact. Just as transcendental Homer becomes a larger than life individual, so immanent Homer is larger than life theory. If Homeric language is concentrated, condensed language, then the concepts used in discussing it become concentrated theory. Theorizing Homer is homerizing theory.

Immanent Homer has been first introduced by Friedrich August Wolf, whose 1795 *Prolegomena ad Homerum* is not only the beginning of the Homeric Question in its modern version but also of Classical Philology as an academic discipline. Wolf's Homer may not be as immanent (a word that is of course not used by Wolf) as some of the Homers to be discussed later, but he is certainly not transcendent either as the poet of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*.³ Instead of being solely and exclusively responsible for the poems, he is the starting point of the process that led to the poems as we have them.

Wolf does not believe in a sudden burst of creation which put the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* into the world in full literary splendor. His reasoning is historicist. A sudden act of creation would have required not only the existence of writing technology, but also the cultural infrastructure for the reception and dissemination of written texts. The latter is even more unimaginable than the former, so that an *a fortiori* reasoning applies: even if Homer could have written and created the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* from the beginning to the end, he would have had no one to read his creations, which would make his creation similar to the building somewhere inland, far away from the shore, of an enormous ship at the very beginning of the age of navigation.⁴

Wolf's Homer is a non-writing author of a written text: a real paradox. How can we get to know such an unknowable person, read an author who didn't write? Wolf's answer is: through the intermediary of the rhapsodes. These professional performers of Homeric poetry are of course familiar to Homerists. Many of us, especially the creationists and transcendentalists among us, see in the rhapsode a kind of mechanical stage in the

³ On Wolf, see Turner 1997: 125-131, who (131) uses the term "immanent" to characterize Wolf's Homer.

⁴ Wolf 1985: 116.

transmission of the poems, someone who recites, repeats, what the divine bard, the *aoidos*, composed and created.

Not so Wolf. For Wolf, the rhapsodes are poets themselves, who are quite capable of modifying the composition they were performing, interpreting it, embellishing it, and adapting it to the circumstances of the moment. These rhapsodes are in fact no less responsible for the poems as we have them, and as the Ancients had them, than the poet himself:

“For all the sentences and words are woven together with such simplicity of thought and language, flow along in such little clauses and short phrases, that it is extremely easy to change, subtract, and add at any point. Finally, it would have been a miracle if those rhapsodes who possessed a more noble inspiration and were themselves poets had not thought that here and there they could say something better, that some things had to be phrased more clearly for the sake of the listeners, and other things had to be brought into coherent form by stringing a number of poems onto one thread. For their greatest concern had to be, not to preserve these poems unadulterated just as the bard had uttered them at first, but rather to be understood and to be heard with pleasure by all.” (Wolf 1985: 111-112)

Wolf stops short of calling the rhapsodes authors in their own right, but his conception is astonishingly modern, even postmodern: he assigns agency to the rhapsodes who received the work in its movement through the ages. In other words, Wolf’s rhapsodes blur the distinction between reception and creation, between quotation and composition. They do not merely recite “the work”; they are the work at work, and in progress. Their reading is a creation, a physically altering the received text. In receiving Homer they become Homer, showing that reading or listening is not the passive condition of being at the receiving end of a transmission, but a creative activity in its own right.

In thinking about Wolf’s rhapsodes, I am reminded of those modern literary theories that downplay the role and importance of the author as a creator, as the ultimate source of meaning, and stress the role and importance of the reader. Some of those theories, such as Hans-Robert Jauss’s, focus on the way in which the meaning of the literary work changes as it is received by readers through the ages;⁵ other theories (Roland Barthes comes to mind) will blur the distinction between author and reader, between writing and reading, presenting the text’s readers as creators in their own right.⁶ But all have in common the idea of reading, of receiving, as a dynamic, active process, rather than as a passive reception.

⁵ Jauss 1974.

⁶ Barthes 1977.

Still, in dynamically and creatively receiving, say, the *Aeneid*, *Hamlet*, or *Madame Bovary*, the reader does not actually, physically change the text; the rewriting is only metaphorical. Wolf's rhapsodes, by contrast, even if they did not write in the literal sense, nor read in our sense, did do a far more drastic reading and rewriting of the *Iliad* they received. They actually, physically, changed the work. These professionals of Homeric performance not only gave us Homer; they also embody modern reception theory, giving living presence to the way in which readers are ultimately responsible for whatever the literary work means and even for the very shape it takes.

The next immanent Homer emerges from the work of someone who has as no other asked what it means for Homer to be non-writing. This is Milman Parry. As is well known, Parry can be credited with the "discovery" of orality. He proposed, on the basis of extensive fieldwork on the Serbo-Croatian *guslari*, that the Homeric poems must have been orally composed by means of elaborate systems of formulas, which enabled the bard to sing the epic song without memorizing it.

Homer the oral poet is a popular concept especially, and perhaps paradoxically, to transcendentalists, who will think of him in this connection as some larger-than-life *guslár*: the ultimate *aoidos*, who represents the culmination of the Greek epic tradition as the last of a long line of singers. Even Parry himself, in his later publications, seems to think in this way, when he equates orality with "creation" as opposed to mere "memory." The consequences for the rhapsodes are considerable: Wolf's active, creative transmitters are now downgraded into passive, artless, reciters:

"It should be added here that an oral poetry practiced by guilds of singers with masters and apprentices would tend to a more faithful keeping of the poems which had won fame, and that one singer might win such a name that his disciples would find their profit in keeping his poetry as nearly without change as they could; but then they are no longer singers but rhapsodes, their task is not that of creation but only of memory, and they are merely keeping from age to age the verse which was first composed by a singer who made his poetry, in the way that we have seen, by an ever varying use of what he had sung and heard others sing." (Parry 1971: 337, emphasis added)

This is a transcendentalist position. The rhapsodes are external to the work of the creative oral singer, the *aoidos*; conversely, the poet is external to the work as it is recited by the rhapsode: he is its creative source and precedes it in time. This Homer, the oral poet, is a maker, not a doer.

Parry's earlier writings, however, give us a different picture, I think. Before he worked with the notions of "orality" and "oral composition," Parry spoke, in his French dissertation of 1928, of tradition. The formulaic diction of the Homeric poems, he said,

could never have been the creation of any single poet. The extension of the formulaic systems – this is an important term – was such that they transcended any individual expressive intent.⁷ The essence of tradition is not the “oral poem,” created by the oral poet and handed down by the rhapsodes, but the system of formulas, the principle that generates the oral poem. The poet, if that is what we call him, cannot have designed it individually. Rather, he is caught up within it; he cannot but speak in formulas⁸ – which means essentially that the formulaic system speaks through him.

This conception, in placing Homer “within” his formulaic language, is anti-transcendentalist, and goes against the grain of a largely transcendentalist, originalist, and creationist discipline which favored individual poetic genius. But rather than focusing on Parry’s detractors, let us look more closely into his notion of tradition.

For Parry, Homer is traditional because he is formulaic; and he is formulaic because he is systematic; and he is systematic because there are systematic differences between the formulas. So, tradition must have something to do with these differences.

For Parry, formulas are less important for what they actually mean than for the way in which they differ from one another. For example, the difference between *polumêtis Odusseus* and *polutlas dios Odusseus* is for Parry not primarily that the one means “much-witted Odysseus” and the other “enduring godlike Odysseus” but that they are of different metrical length, and so fill different slots in the verse. The function of the formula is precisely to fill that slot, and not to express its meaning. So we may say that for Parry the formula is arbitrary with respect to its context.

When I formulate Parry’s model in this way, I come very close to the model of structuralist linguistics that was put forward by Ferdinand de Saussure at the beginning of the 20th century – more precisely speaking, it was put forward by rhapsodes, the editors of his posthumously published *Cours de linguistique générale*, so that we will never know what Saussure himself really said. In any case, Saussure presents us language (*la langue*) as a system of differences, without positive terms: linguistic items mean what they mean because of their being different from other linguistic items, in systematic ways. Language is a system because it creates, in regular and predictable ways, difference within itself. Saussure also calls language a tradition, a system of arbitrary signs that was not created and cannot be modified by any individual speaker.⁹

⁷ E.g., Parry 1971: 18 (“It is obvious that one poet could never have created this entire series of formulae.”).

⁸ Parry 1971: 14 (“without ever thinking of using other words to express the same idea, without ever so much as considering the possibility of utilizing the portion of the line taken up by the epithetic words for the expression of some original idea.”).

⁹ Saussure 1982: 172.

What Parry has given us, working not on language in general but on the specific traditional idiom of an epic tradition, is a stronger, more “systematic,” version of this model, just as Homeric diction systematizes and “strengthens” language. His “singer” takes the place of Saussure’s speaker, and the Homeric formulaic diction takes the place of language in general. Parry’s formulas are doubly arbitrary: first, there is nothing intrinsically in *polumêtis Odusseus* that means “much-witted Odysseus;” so far Saussure. But for Parry this formula is not even used to convey the meaning “much-witted Odysseus;” the phrase is doubly just a name, at two removes from any positive signification.

The system of formulas has been described, within the framework of Parry’s conception, as “the ‘grammar’ of the poetry, a grammar superimposed, as it were, on the grammar of the language concerned.”¹⁰ The structuralist analysis of this poetic grammar as proposed by Parry is an idealized version of the structuralist analysis of the language concerned. Again, Homer has succeeded in boosting a 20th-century theory of language.

But it does not stop here. Homer also boosts the theories that came in the wake of Saussure’s model, which we can capture with the catchword “poststructuralism.” To get to poststructuralism, let us look once more at Parry’s traditional, formulaic Homer. Parry’s Homer is not a poet who has invented his own formulas; he does not speak through his formulas – rather, the formulas speak through him. Homer is inextricably caught in the web of formulas. This formulaic web is Homer.

One doesn’t have to be well-read in modern literary theory to realize that this is what poststructuralist theory is all about. Building on Saussure’s differential system of arbitrary signs, poststructuralist theory, through such essential names as Lacan, Foucault, and Derrida, holds that language does not originate in the subject; rather, the subject originates in language. We are what we are in and through the system of signs that we find ourselves in, and when we speak or write, we cannot but use signs that have been used before. Postmodern speakers are quoters, reciters, rhapsodes.

I am interested in this connection in the notion of *bricolage* that Claude Lévi-Strauss has introduced in his *The Savage Mind (La pensée sauvage)* as a way to talk about mythopoetic thought.¹¹ The *bricoleur* is someone who uses available means to arrive at a practical or intellectual solution; his set of tools “bears no relation to the current project, or indeed to any particular project, but is the contingent result of all the occasions there have been to renew or enrich the stock or to maintain it with the remains of previous constructions or destructions.”¹² He cannot escape from his culture, his language. By

¹⁰ Lord 1960: 36.

¹¹ Lévi-Strauss 1966: 16-36.

¹² Lévi-Strauss 1966: 17.

contrast, there is the engineer, who creates the constitutive elements of his theory, and so stands outside the system, the language, or the culture. Whereas the *bricoleur* uses signs, and is constrained by what these tools always already conventionally mean, the engineer creates concepts, tools tailor-made for the project at hand. In Greek terms, the engineer is a real *poiêtês*, a maker.

In a re-reading of Lévi-Strauss, Jacques Derrida has argued that in using language we cannot but be *bricoleur*.¹³ None of us has the means to invent the means by which we speak, and are what we are. All of us are what we are through and in language. The engineer, the one who creates language and so stands outside of it, can only be a myth, a myth concocted by the *bricoleur*:

“If one calls *bricolage* the necessity of borrowing one’s concepts from the text of a heritage which is more or less coherent or ruined, it must be said that every discourse is *bricoleur*. The engineer, whom Lévi-Strauss opposes to the *bricoleur*, should be the one to construct the totality of his language, syntax, and lexicon. In this sense the engineer is a myth. A subject who supposedly would be the absolute origin of his own discourse and supposedly would construct it “out of nothing,” “out of whole cloth,” would be the creator of the verb, the verb itself. The notion of the engineer who supposedly breaks with all forms of *bricolage* is therefore a theological idea; and since Lévi-Strauss tells us elsewhere that *bricolage* is mythopoetic, the odds are that the engineer is a myth produced by the *bricoleur*.”¹⁴

The *bricoleur* and the engineer are suggestive ways to think about the two Homers that we have met, the immanent and the transcendent Homer. We saw that Wolf’s Homer hides in the rhapsodes, whom we can now think of as *bricoleurs*. In fact, Parry’s Homer, the user of ready-made formulaic tools that are not his own, who hides in and can never escape from the mechanics of formulaic *bricolage*, must be a *bricoleur* himself. If, on the other hand, the rhapsode-*bricoleur* ascribes the formulas, the entire poetic grammar, to some primordial maker called Homer, then Homer must become a myth, the myth of the engineer-poet.

If Derrida’s notion of *bricolage* applies to any discourse, to language in general, then the application of it to Homer can only greatly intensify it, turning the engineer from a mere myth into reality, mythic reality. The immanentist Homerist through whose work this is achieved is Gregory Nagy. Nagy presents us Homer as precisely a myth, a retrojection of the entire tradition, or system, to a mythical founder, or proto-poet. Homer is the personification of the entire epic tradition with all its formulas, all its rhapsodes, all its

¹³ Derrida 1978.

¹⁴ Derrida 1978: 285.

performances. Any rhapsode that sings the *Iliad* becomes Homer, turning the myth into living reality.¹⁵

The engine of Nagy's Homer as the retrojection of an increasingly fixed epic tradition extending over an increasingly large area is Panhellenism, the shading over of the differences between numerous local traditions. The idea of a single, authoritative author as a way to counter the "difference" of a plethora of epichoric traditions can, again, be seen as a boosted version of a concept from contemporary critical theory. In a radical rethinking of the idea of transcendent authorship, Michel Foucault has proposed that instead of being a source, a proliferation of meaning, the author (or rather, the author-function) is a way, quite conversely, to counter the proliferation of meaning, to control it:

"[T]he author is not an indefinite source of significations which fill a work; the author does not precede the works, he is a certain functional principle by which, in our culture, one limits, excludes, and chooses; in short, by which one impedes the free circulation, the free manipulation, the free composition, decomposition, and recomposition of fiction. In fact, if we are accustomed to presenting the author as a genius, as a perpetual surging of invention, it is because, in reality, we make him function in exactly the opposite fashion."¹⁶

Panhellenic Homer, in the combination of his contemporary transcendent understanding with his modern critical explanation, seems like the ideal incarnation of Foucault's idea.¹⁷ The Homer who gave us the *Iliad* in taking away so much else, so much meaning resulting from difference, is, again, the myth become reality, the ideological illusion turned into historical fact.

Once more an anti-transcendentalist's Homer has become high-quality fuel for 20th - century literary theory. Many theorists have argued for "the death of the author," or for the author as a necessary myth; many have said such things about authors who are historically attested, and whose biography we can read; what they say applies *a fortiori* to Homer, the author who is totally absent from any public record, and yet who is totally present as soon as readers start reading or reciting him.

Now, would our protean proto-poet have given up his secret now that he has shown himself as a mythical engineer or the living example of a theoretical construct of "author-function"? I don't think so. A Homer who has told the whole truth and revealed himself completely would be the end of the Homeric Question, that is, the end of Homer himself. We have to go on disagreeing and fighting with each other, as long as Homer is read.

¹⁵ E.g., Nagy 1996: 59-86.

¹⁶ Foucault 1979: 159.

¹⁷ See Bakker 2001.

When we ask the Homeric Question, there is much that divides us, but there is one big and important thing that links us all together: we're all rhapsodes. And so we're all Homer.

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Armstrong, Richard and Dué, Casey, eds, *Classics@* Issue 3. For the full citation for this article please consult www.chs.harvard.edu/publications.sec/classics.ssp.