"Reading" Homer through Oral Tradition

John Miles Foley

For beyond all mortal men the singers have a share of honor and reverence, since the Muse has taught them the pathways, for she loves the singers' tribe. (Odyssey 8.479-81)

Reading Homer today, nearly three millennia after the fact, presents us with some fresh and exciting opportunities alongside some persistent challenges. Not least among the newer developments is the relatively recent discovery that behind our surviving manuscripts lurks a longstanding, textless oral tradition. In other words, before the Iliad or Odyssey assumed any kind of written form—never mind our convenient modern editions and translations—there existed an ancient Greek oral storytelling tradition, an unwritten vehicle for the tales that surround the Trojan War and its aftermath. Words were, as Homer himself often characterizes them, “wingèd” rather than inscribed,

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and non-literate bards (*aoidoi*) performed songs (*aoidai*) from their repertoires before audiences of listeners. In the beginning, then, the epics we cherish as books took shape not as silent texts but rather as audible story-performances.

If the modern (re-)discovery of oral tradition was chiefly the accomplishment of the previous century, then its consequences provide a formidable critical agenda for the twenty-first century. In short, we have come to recognize that Homer's epics circulated in oral tradition for a substantial period before they were recorded, and so now we have before us the exciting and demanding prospect of applying that new understanding to our present-day reading. That the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* stemmed from an oral tradition is beyond doubt, but how does that complex reality affect our grasp of the poems? Do we read Homer's epics differently because of their unwritten heritage? If so, how? As it turns out, these contemporary concerns represent variations on an ancient theme.

### The Homeric Question: Yesterday and Today

The Homeric Question—the puzzle of "Who was Homer?"—has been prominent in one form or another from the ancient world onward. Within a few centuries of the time that many have supposed he lived and practiced his trade, the seventh or eighth century BCE, four or five different city-states were already claiming Homer as a native son. Wide disagreement over the identity of his father and mother, his specific era, and even the poems that he composed (in addition to the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, the only two to survive whole) further muddied the waters. Notwithstanding heroic efforts over subsequent periods to construct a believable biography, today much remains lost in the past, the result of fragmentary evidence and contradictory "lives of Homer."²

The nineteenth and early twentieth centuries sought to answer the Question by formulating a binary theory of authorship. The so-called Analysts argued for composite, layered epics that were pieced together by redactors; by ascribing the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* to multiple individuals, they accounted for perceived inconsistencies that otherwise seemed to defy explanation. At the opposite end of the spectrum lay the Unitarians, who believed in a single master-poet solely responsible for creating both massive poems. During this period, then, scholars and students had first to select between two irreconcilable theories—one or many Homers—and then to interpret the epics from that chosen perspective.

About two decades into the twentieth century another solution arose that effectively reframed the Homeric Question, highlighting neither a single person nor multiple contributors but focusing instead on a continuous, ongoing *oral tradition* behind the poems. Instead of construing the *Iliad* and
Odyssey as either conventionally authored works or pieced-together editions, Milman Parry portrayed them as products of a generations-long process of composition in performance. Think of the Homeric oral tradition as a living inheritance, passed down from one epoch to another and refashioned by each performer, and you have the general idea of what he was advocating.

Parry’s explanation proceeded in three basic steps—textual analysis, comparative anthropology, and fieldwork. Texts came first, as he demonstrated the traditional nature of the epics by showing how the famous noun-epithet names (“wily Odysseus,” “grey-eyed Athena,” “swift-footed Achilles,” and the rest) were part of an elaborate, flexible system for constructing hexameter lines. The poets, he claimed and painstakingly illustrated, used a specialized language for making Homeric verses, a language that provided ready-made solutions to all possible compositional challenges. Parry reasoned that such formulaic phrases or “atoms” of diction amounted to a symptom of a poetry made and re-made over centuries within a coherent tradition.

Next, and as a result of his exposure to comparative accounts of living oral poetries, especially through the agency of Matija Murko, a Slavicist who attended his thesis defense, Parry soon made the leap to recognizing that this kind of traditional composition must also originally have been oral. In two famous articles published in 1930 and 1932, he made the case for Homeric diction as the product of composition in performance, of a long tradition of oral bards who must have sung (not written) ancient Greek epics. According to this hypothesis, our surviving manuscripts stand at the end of centuries of oral performances, in some way serving as fixed epitomes of that ongoing process.

Parry’s third step consisted of on-site fieldwork: testing his hypothesis about Homeric oral tradition in the living laboratory of the Former Yugoslavia, chiefly in what we today call Bosnia. In 1933-35, and in the company of Albert Lord and their native translator and colleague, Nikola Vujnović, he journeyed to six geographical regions in order to experience and record hundreds of oral epic performances by preliterate bards, or guslari. The result of that expedition was first and foremost what Lord described as a “half-ton of epic”: scores of acoustically recorded and dictated performances deposited in the Milman Parry Collection of Oral Literature at Harvard University. Just as crucially, after Parry’s untimely death in 1935 Lord used their collected material to complete the analytical experiment they had traveled to the Balkans to conduct. It soon became apparent that the very same kinds of structures and patterns that Parry had found in the texts of Homer were also highly prominent and functional in the South Slavic oral epic songs. The preliterate performers of epske pjesme, it turned out, employed a similarly specialized language (noun-epithet formulas,
stereotyped scenes, and so forth); in other words, these guslari composed their epic poetry Homerically. The hypothesis of an ancient Greek oral tradition appeared to be proven by analogy.

In subsequent years the so-called “Oral Theory” has expanded enormously from the initial comparison of Homer and the South Slavic epics to include more than 150 different oral traditions from six of the seven continents and from ancient times through the modern day. Among the areas that have been examined from this perspective are dozens of African, Arabic, and central Asian traditions, as well as Native American, African American, Chinese, Japanese, Spanish, Portuguese, and many Germanic tongues. In the past thirty to fifty years we have learned more and more about unwritten forms of verbal art that collectively dwarf all of written literature in both size and variety. Most importantly for our present purposes, the Homeric epics belong to that international and ages-old inventory of originally textless story.

Naturally, much discussion has ensued since Parry and Lord made their initial claims, and many have called for rethinking of their hypotheses along various lines. One early and crucial intervention was the dissolution of the so-called Great Divide, the notion that oral tradition and literacy were two mutually exclusive categories that never mixed in the same person or even the same culture. Subsequent fieldwork from various parts of the world has shown us that this simply isn’t the case, and we have begun to learn about the fascinating ways in which the worlds of orality and literacy combine and interact not only within societies but also within the very same individual.

Another matter needing attention was the relationship between oral performance and the versions of the Iliad and Odyssey that have survived in textual form. Since we can never recover the exact situation in which the poems were recorded, it has proven wiser to allow for multiple possibilities in recording and transmission, as well as for editorial and other kinds of textual evolution over the one and one-half millennia between their possible fixation in the sixth century BCE and the first whole Iliad that has reached us, which stems from the tenth century CE.

Regardless of that lost history, however, the epics as we have them remain at least oral-derived and traditional, and as we shall see they cannot be fully appreciated without taking this heritage into account. It’s simply a matter of what we aim to do with any form of verbal art: to read or interpret the work on its own terms. In the twenty-first century Homeric scholarship has begun to assess the deep implications of oral traditional origins for the Iliad and Odyssey, with fascinating results, and that process will continue. Reading Homer in our time—as problematic as it may seem in so many ways—offers us this new and exciting challenge.
Homer: Author or Legend?

Before exploring what impact the ancient Greek oral epic tradition has on how we read the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* in the twenty-first century, let's spend a moment considering what that heritage tells us about the figure we call Homer. As noted above, uncertainty and contradiction about his identity began in the ancient world, and modern theories about his era, repertoire, and even the meaning of his name abound. But if comparative studies in oral epic tradition reveal anything, it must be that individual authorship—in the sense that we have come to apply that notion in post-medieval literary traditions—is the wrong concept to be pursuing.

An example drawn from South Slavic epic tradition will illustrate the categorical disparity. Early in the twentieth century the scholar-fieldworker Alois Schmaus was conducting *in situ* investigations of the *epske pjesme* in roughly the same region of Bosnia as Parry and Lord worked a couple of decades later. He was told numerous times by many *guslari* about an epic singer who outstripped them all in ability, and who was the source of all of their best songs (whatever poems they happened to rank as such). So Schmaus did what any responsible fieldworker would do: he spared no effort in attempting to locate this paragon, named *Cor* Huso Husovic' (literally, *Cor* means “one-eyed”), so that he could interview and record him. But try as he might, the fieldworker could neither locate the actual person nor assemble any internally consistent biography. One can hear the frustration in Schmaus's own account of trying to establish an authoritative version of the great singer's repertoire: “Even with all conceivable effort, it was impossible for me to learn anything more detailed about the actual songs that Cor Huso typically sang. Everything remembered on that score was generalities” (1938, 134; my translation).

Later on, a *guslar* named Salih Ugljanin would describe *Cor* Huso in similarly grand but decidedly indistinct and sometimes contradictory terms for Parry, Lord, and Vujnović. If we combine what the two fieldwork teams were able to gather about this most celebrated of epic bards, we arrive at something like the following:

Born in the Kolašin region sometime in the first half of the nineteenth century, *Cor* Huso Husovic' was later to become the most famous *guslar* in all of Montenegro and Serbia. Notwithstanding the obscurity of his early years and the severity of his handicap, he was eventually to enjoy an enormous reputation as an itinerant *guslar* who surpassed all others and was the source of their best songs. In addition to his wanderings throughout Montenegro and Serbia, he spent 19 years in various parts of Bosnia, where he reportedly traveled in the never-realized hope that his vision would be restored.
The sources agree that Ćor Huso journeyed everywhere on horseback, fully armed and accompanied by a young guide. His appearance would have been arresting: he wore a red silk coat with sleeves embroidered in the Croatian style, green trousers, black leather boots, a fez, and a great turban, not to mention a long knife hanging from his belt along with two sterling silver pistols. Very tall and stocky, at minimum 120 kg. (more than 260 lb.), with "brimming handfuls" of mustaches, Ćor Huso was literally larger than life, a challenging burden for even the strongest mount, we are told. Curiously, this vivid representation—strictly speaking, more heroic than bardic—conspicuously lacked his own *gusle*; he simply used whatever instrument was available, and prospective audiences were only too ready to provide whatever was needed to induce him to perform. (Foley 1998, 162)

Several aspects of this account are unusual or unprecedented in a real-life context. First, *guslari* were conventionally local rather than itinerant performers, learning to compose epic from a male relative or neighbor and remaining most of their lives in their natal villages. Even if they did travel, their talents would not easily be recognized across diverse ethnic regions. Furthermore, there was no reason for singers of tales to dress heroically, armed to the teeth with the very weapons worn by the larger-than-life heroes in the songs they performed, and certainly no evidence that they ever did. In fact, most *guslari* were poor farmers or woodcutters or butchers with minimal possessions. When one adds anecdotes about Ćor Huso performing for Emperor Franz Jozef and being rewarded with 100 gold napoleons and 100 sheep, as well as singing for five or six hours straight (a physical impossibility given the strain that epic performance places on the vocal cords), we can start to understand that this "best of all *guslari*" was more legend than fact.

Parry, Lord, and Vujnović heard a great deal about this master-singer, who was sometimes and in some regions called Isak or Hasan Čoso rather than Ćor Huso. Depending on the individual singer's story, this Balkan Homer was 120 or more years old, could jump 12 paces at the age of 101, sang so well that males and females were permitted to mix at a Moslem wedding, and was the certain victor in whatever contest of epic singing he entered. But although he boasted a repertoire of songs many times larger than any ever observed during fieldwork, and although he was credited as the source of all the finest ones, none of the *guslari* who sang his praises ever actually met him. Again depending on the informant, the explanation given was that he lived in another village, or was always traveling, or plied his trade a generation or two earlier ("he was not even my father's father," said Stolac singer Ibro Bašić). Indeed, none of the Parry-Lord *guslari* had ever encountered him face-to-face.

If we aggregate all of his often unverifiable, "tall-tale" bio-data, we gain a composite portrait of the master-singer or *Guslar* not as a historical person
but as a legend. Moreover, it is a portrait that, like all legends, morphs to fit the local circumstances: real-life singers used the Guslar to establish their own bardic lineage and prominence, as well as to stamp certain of their songs as the best. The fact that they describe—and even name—the Guslar in mutually inconsistent ways is simply a function of the role such a figure plays for them. In other words, this paragon and forefather amounts most essentially to an anthropomorphization of the poetic tradition itself, a story-based way to talk about the inheritance of oral epic. Call him Cor Huso, Isak, or Hasan Coso—he stands for the body of story that each of his real-life descendants is performing.15 By tracing their practice to the foundational legend of the Guslar, they are in effect providing themselves with the best possible _curriculum vitae_ to establish their own credentials as epic singers.16

If we look at the multiple disparities among the ancient sources that parochially represent his proposed biography, Homer emerges as a cognate kind of legendary figure.17 For one thing, his parentage varies wildly: Telemachos is cited as one possible father, with Apollo and Orpheus mentioned as earlier ancestors, while the role of mothers includes Nestor’s daughter Epikaste. While Smyrna appears to be one of the most popular choices for Homer’s birthplace, we also hear of Chios, Cyme, Ios, Argos, and Athens. In regard to actual chronology, which is always construed as relative dating, various Lives of Homer place him before Hesiod or as a contemporary of Midas, for example. While the name “Homer” is consistently interpreted as “blind” or “captive” (the common noun _homēros_), the first of these attributions probably has more to do with a parallel to Phemios, the blind bard of the _Odyssey_, than with the sightlessness of any real-life figure.18 And as for repertoire, the sources inconsistently add to the canonical _Iliad_ and _Odyssey_ one or more of the following lost or fragmentary poems from the Epic Cycle or elsewhere: the _Thebais_, the _Epigoni_, the _Cypria_, the _Little Iliad_, the _Aethiopis_, the _Nostoi_, and the _Homeric Hymns_. In summary, if we are willing to set aside our default notions about individual authorship that are after all inapposite in oral tradition, Homer looks much more like a legend—a way to anthropomorphize the ancient Greek epic tradition—than a historical figure. If scholars have been unable to establish a standard biography and trace the _Iliad_ and _Odyssey_ to a flesh-and-blood individual, it is, we can conclude, because he simply never existed as such. “Homer” names the epic tradition as an ongoing whole.19

With this conception of Homer in mind, let us now turn to the implications of oral tradition for the structure and artistic achievement of “his” poems. We will start with a short overview of the unique linguistics of oral poetry.
Words Versus "Words"

As primarily people of the book and page (at least for the present cultural moment in the Western world), we approach the act of reading with a number of built-in and usually unexamined assumptions. Arguably the most fundamental of these hidden agendas is the matter of what constitutes a word. This may seem only too obvious a concern: after all, we couldn't get very far in understanding any text—such as the one you're reading now—without subscribing to the signal of white space between letter-sequences as a dependable indicator of word-boundaries. Should any doubt arise, we can always consult a dictionary or lexicon, an agreed-upon Bible of words, to back up our visual discriminations. But what if this visual, lexical definition just didn't get to the bottom of what we were trying to read and understand? What if in certain cases the indivisible atom of communication didn't consist of printed letters circumscribed by white space or enshrined as an entry in a dictionary? Our gold-standard currency for what we mean by reading—the typographical word—might prove less negotiable than we customarily assume. Homer hints at just such a possibility when he uses the singular forms of the ancient Greek terms *epos* and *muthos*, both conventionally translated as "word," to describe a whole speech or a story. Or consider the similar terminology employed by the poet of *Beowulf*, an oral-derived, traditional poem from early medieval England. Mongolian oral epic singers call the same speech- and thought-increment a "mouth-word."

We can observe the same phenomenon—only this time in a living oral tradition—by listening to the South Slavic *guslaric*. Not only do these poets conceive of a "word" (rel') as a larger unit of utterance within their epic performances; they also describe its identity as a composite unit or sound-byte during informal conversations with Parry and Lord's native assistant Nikola Vujnović. Here is an excerpt from the interview with Mujo Kukuruzovic, recorded in 1935 in the region of Stolac, which focuses on the non-textual definition of a rel'.

Nikola Vujnović: This rel' in a song, what is it?

Mujo Kukuruzovic: Well, here, it's this—"miserable captive" (sužanj nevoljnice), as they say, or this—"Ograšćić Alija" [a hero's proper name], or, as they say, "He was lamenting in the ice-cold prison" (Pocnulijo u lednu zindanu).

NV: Is this a rel'?

MK: This is a rel'. . .

NV: Let's consider this: "Mustajbey of the Lika was drinking wine" (Vino pije lički Mustajbeže). Is this a single rel'?
MK: Yes.
NV: But how? It can’t be one: “Mustajbey-of-the-Lika-was-drinking-wine.”
MK: It can’t be one in writing. But here, let’s say we’re at my house and I pick up the gusle [the accompanying instrument]—“Mustajbey of the Lika was drinking wine.” That’s a single reč on the gusle for me.
NV: And the second reč?
MK: And the second reč—“At Ribnik in a drinking tavern” (Na Ribniku u pjanoj mehani)—there.
NV: And the third reč?
MK: Eh, here it is—“Around him thirty chieftains, / All the comrades beamed at one another” (Oko njega trides’ agalara, / Sve je sijo jaran do jarana).
NV: Aha, good!

For Kukuruzović, and for other guslari as well, a “word” had no relation to our typographically defined item; it was a larger, composite unit consisting of not a single but rather multiple written words. In the conversation above we learn that in South Slavic oral epic tradition a “word” can be a phrase, a poetic line, or even multiple poetic lines. In other such exchanges it becomes apparent that the term reč can also designate a speech, a scene, a narrative increment, and even an entire story-performance. Although this taxonomy may at first seem strange, once we consider things from the bards’ point of view it makes perfect sense: a reč is a unit of utterance, a thought-byte, a logical constitutive unit. Anything smaller than a “word”—one of our typographical words, for example—just doesn’t register as a cognitive chunk. As we shall see below, this structural reality has crucially important implications for how we are to understand a work composed in “words” as opposed to words.

Homer’s “Words”

What significance does the guslar’s lesson in the linguistics of oral epic performance have for reading the Iliad and Odyssey? What can the South Slavic singer’s reč tell us about Homer’s characteristic use of epos and muthos? The short answer is clear: scholarship has shown that Homer (and his tradition) employed a similar array of large “words,” or thought-bytes, to compose the ancient Greek epics. In what follows below we will consider the structure and then the idiomatic meaning of these units of expression at three levels: the phrase, the scene, and the story-pattern.

Consider first the smallest level of Homer’s traditional “word”-vocabulary: the single hexameter line. We have long been struck by the noun-epithet names, like “swift-footed Achilles,” if only because of their frequent occurrence. We may even have wondered why they are repeated so often;
indeed, some translators have seen fit to vary the English rendering to avoid what they hear merely as droning repetition. But when we add to their sheer frequency the fact that these and many other phrases constitute significant metrical portions of the Homeric hexameter line, their identity and utility as building blocks within a system come into focus. Such ready-made “words” combine seamlessly with other ready-made “words” to yield whole lines of verse that collectively serve a wide variety of purposes.

For example, one of Odysseus’s standard names—“long-suffering divine Odysseus”—combines with numerous different predicates to portray many different actions throughout the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. Here are four actual combinations:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Multiple actions</th>
<th>Single noun-epithet name</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>But pondered (1 occurrence)</td>
<td>+long-suffering divine Odysseus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>But went through the house (1 occurrence)</td>
<td>+long-suffering divine Odysseus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Again spoke (8 occurrences)</td>
<td>+long-suffering divine Odysseus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Then sat there (1 occurrence)</td>
<td>+long-suffering divine Odysseus</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Moreover, substitution can work both ways, as it were, with numerous different figures metrically eligible to be paired with a single action. Here are six examples of how this process works with a cast of characters and a unique predicate:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Single action</th>
<th>Multiple noun-epithet names</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>And then spoke to him/her</td>
<td>+long-suffering divine Odysseus (3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>And then spoke to him/her</td>
<td>+swift-footed Achilles (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>And then spoke to him/her</td>
<td>+ox-eyed mistress Hera (4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>And then spoke to him/her</td>
<td>+Gerenian horseman Nestor (8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>And then spoke to him/her</td>
<td>+goddess grey-eyed Athena (7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>And then spoke to him/her</td>
<td>+Diomedes of the great war-cry (1)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

If we “do the math” on the possibilities generated by such substitution systems, we can begin to understand the power and productivity of this oral traditional method of composition. At the level of the line, Homer uses a network of “words,” which scholars have called *formulas*, to support the making and re-making of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*.28

But his specialized language includes other kinds of “words” as well, namely stereotyped scenes and story-patterns. The Feast provides a familiar example of the so-called *typical scene*, a unit of expression that recurs with
some consistency but which also allows room for variation according to its individual placement in the overall story and in different stories. In that way the flexible yet stereotyped scene can serve as a malleable traditional pattern to portray a wide variety of feasts, all of them unique to their role in the developing plot(s) but still all instances of the same generic “word.” The key features of the Feast include a host and guest(s), the seating of the guest(s), several core actions associated with feasting, the satisfaction of the guest(s), and some kind of consequent mediation of a pre-existing problem. The most stable and recognizable form of the core actions is the following five-line increment, which appears verbatim six times in the *Odyssey*:

A maidservant brought water for them and poured it from a splendid
and golden pitcher, holding it above a silver basin
for them to wash, and she pulled a polished table before them.
A grave housekeeper brought in the bread and served it to them,
adding many good things to it, generous with her provisions.

Most of the other key elements are more flexible, with the exception of the “satisfaction” feature, which almost always takes a standard form:

[The guests] put their hands to the good things that lay ready before them,
But when they had cast off their desire for eating and drinking, . . .

This five-part sequence of actions constitutes the overall paradigm—or “word”—that Homer shapes to fit the individual feast, primarily in the *Odyssey*, whether it be Telemachos suffering the suitors’ abuse in Book 1, Circe entertaining the captive Odysseus in Book 10, or even Polyphemus perversely practicing cannibalism in Book 9. As we shall see below, it also plays a part in the reuniting of Penelope and Odysseus in Book 23.

Another example of the typical scene in Homer, this one exclusively in the *Iliad*, is the Lament, in which a woman somehow related or close to a fallen hero mourns his demise. A series of three actions constitutes this “word”: an address to the slain hero indicating “you have fallen”; a narrative of their shared personal history and the future consequences for the mourner and others; and a readdress of the hero that includes a final intimacy. Unlike the Feast, the Lament pattern is not tied to particular lines, but remains flexible enough to accommodate a broad variety of mourners and perspectives. Its four principal occurrences are the mourning-songs for Patroklos as intoned by Briseis (Book 19.287-300), and for Hektor as sung by his wife Andromache (24.725-45), his mother Hekabe (24.748-59), and his sister-in-law (and central figure in the Trojan War saga) Helen (24.762-75). It is also the vehicle for Andromache’s highly traditional and yet highly unusual “lament” for the living Hektor in *Iliad* 6, as we shall see later on.
Of the four principal instances, Andromache's mourning-song in the final book of the *Iliad* is the longest and most complex, although it too follows the three-part sequence. After acknowledging Hektor's fall, the signal that cues the onset of the typical scene, she continues with the long and sad litany of what will become of her, their little son Astyanax, and the rest of the Trojans now that their guardian is gone. Among its most poignant features is Andromache's rendering of the second element in the pattern, as she describes the young boy's fate: he will either become a Greek slave or be cast from a tower to his death by some vengeful Greek whose kin Hektor slew in battle. The contrast between these outcomes and his earlier expectations as Hektor's son—the name Astyanax means "city-prince"—is couched in and informed by the familiar narrative frame of the Lament scene. The scene closes with the wife bemoaning the fact that her husband's death out on the battlefield precluded any final intimacy between them, a reflex of the third element in the pattern. Overall, we can see that Homer conveys Andromache's sorrow by traditional convention, not simply in well-chosen words but via a highly idiomatic "word."

The largest species of "word" in Homer's specialized epic language is the traditional tale-type of Return that underlies the *Odyssey*, a story-pattern we can deduce from three sources. First, the comparative evidence: the generic story realized in Odysseus's voyage back to Ithaca and reclaiming of his identity and family is one of the oldest and most common stories we have. It exists in numerous branches of the Indo-European language family and persists into modern times, when it has been collected in dozens of different traditions in many hundreds of versions.32 Most basically, the pattern presents the saga of a hero called off to war who is absent and held captive for an extended period of time, and who then overcomes numerous difficulties on his way back home, where—always in impenetrable disguise and cleverly testing his relatives' and allies' loyalty—he eventually conquers the suitors pursuing his wife or fiancée by initially defeating them in athletic contests and then (if necessary) slaughtering them. The story may, however, follow an alternate route that we might understand as the Agamemnon-Clytaemnestra option: according to this second option the wife or fiancée proves unfaithful, having taken a substitute mate, and the tale tracks off in another direction. Worldwide, the Hollywood ending and the Agamemnon-Clytaemnestra option are about equally common.

Our second piece of evidence for the Return "word" comes from Agamemnon himself, or rather from his ghost, after he listens to Amphimedon's account of the slaying of the suitors by his comrade Odysseus and a small company of confederates:

"O fortunate son of Laertes, Odysseus of many devices,
surely you won yourself a wife endowed with great virtue. How good was proved the heart that is in blameless Penelope, Ikarios’ daughter, and how well she remembered Odysseus, her wedded husband. Thereby the fame of her virtue shall never die away, but the immortals will make for the people of earth a pleasing song for prudent Penelope. Not so did the daughter of Tyndareos (Clytaemnestra) fashion her evil deeds, when she killed her wedded lord, and a song of loathing will be hers among men, to make evil the reputation of womankind, even for one whose acts are virtuous.” (Odyssey 24. 192-202)

Within the very fabric of the poem, a major hero is providing us an overview of the Return story-pattern, acknowledging that the pleasing song about Penelope (the Hollywood ending) stands at odds with the song of loathing about Tyndareos’ daughter Clytaemnestra (the negative option). Agamemnon’s own explanation of the plus-minus structure of the Return Song squares precisely with what we observe about the occurrences of this international tale-type of Indo-European lineage: with the long-lost hero’s homecoming the path forks and can lead in either direction. When we add the third piece of evidence—an epic called the Nostoi (Returns) that was part of the now-lost Epic Cycle about the Trojan War and its aftermath—we can understand that the overall pattern behind the Odyssey is another kind of “word” in Homer’s epic vocabulary.

The Idiomatic Value of Homer’s “Words”

Up to this point we’ve learned that Homeric “words” are structurally different from typographical words, and different as well from those textually discrete items that populate dictionaries and are defined by linguists as root morphemes. “Words” in the Iliad and Odyssey are most fundamentally units of utterance, logical chunks of expression, and they run the gamut from metrically defined parts of lines and whole lines (“formulas”) through “typical scenes” and “story-patterns.” These then are the thought-bytes that constitute Homer’s traditional language, and if we are to read the ancient Greek epics fluently we must be willing to read them on their own terms—by resetting our default cognitive unit from word to “word.”

So far, so good; we’ve located a structural signature in poetry that derives from oral tradition and adduced some examples of how it plays out in the Iliad and Odyssey at each level. But now comes the crucial question: just what difference does that structural signature make to reading Homer in the twen-
ty-first century? To put the same question another way, what is the idiomatic value of these oral traditional “words”? In what follows, I will re-examine the units identified above—formulaic lines and line-parts, typical scenes, and a story-pattern—in order to demonstrate the traditional connotations of each level of “word.” In all cases the idiomatic meanings have been derived in the same way as lexicographers derive definitions for their dictionary entries: by examining all available instances of each “word” in context and then comparing them to determine what special meaning each bears across its actual field of usage. For this purpose I considered every instance of two noun-epithet formulas (“swift-footed Achilles” and “green fear”), including those in which the epithets (here “swift-footed” and “green”) didn’t seem to fit the story situation, as well as each occurrence of the Feast and Lament scenes. Since the story-pattern of Return survives in only a single instance in Homeric epic, I have enlisted the aid of cognate Return epics in other Indo-European languages; these “sister” epics help, along with Agamemnon’s ghost and the Epic Cycle shards, to establish the lost morphology of the Return Song. This was the method used to define Homer’s “words”—a kind of oral traditional lexicography.

At the simplest level, then, we encounter formulas such as the famous noun-epithet combinations, which have troubled generations of readers with their unrelenting repetitiveness and occasional awkwardness. Such sound-bites may be useful, many scholars have observed, but they behave more like lock-step fillers than elevated poetic expression. Just how many times can Homer say “swift-footed Achilles” or “green fear” before these combinations descend into clichés? Milman Parry’s research showed that the ancient Greek oral tradition usually had only a single solution for each metrical challenge, so Homer’s palette of characterization and description would seem extremely limited; in its commitment to tectonics, the tradition appears to have restricted rather than promoted the poet’s creativity. When we add the problem of the frequent inapplicability of the epithet or adjective to the situation at hand—Achilles is called “swift-footed” when running, standing, or lying down, for example—we can begin to glimpse the problem. “Words” at the level of the line certainly promoted composition, providing ready-made language for all conceivable narrative situations, but Homer and his epic tradition must have paid a heavy price—the sacrifice of originality to mechanism. Or so goes the argument, at any rate.

To understand how such formulas work and why they serve as more than simply fillers, we need to recall their structure as whole “words” and inquire into their meaning as composite phrases, that is, as functionally indivisible units of expression. When Homer employs expressions such as “swift-footed Achilles” or “grey-eyed Athena” or “Argos-slaying Hermes,” he is
naming a character by citing a single memorable quality, a tell-tale detail, that refers primarily not to that character's immediate situational identity at any particular point in the story but to his or her larger identity across the epic tradition. The formula serves as an agreed-upon idiom cue for the character's mythic history, somewhat like a trademark musical theme associated with a character in a modern film or a costume that identifies a re-entering actor in a drama even before he or she speaks or is spoken to. Moreover, since the "word" is the entire phrase, and not (as we readers of texts customarily assume) a two-part designation consisting of a noun plus an epithet, the adjectives "swift-footed," "grey-eyed," and "Argos-slaying" simply aren't semantically active by themselves. What matters is not the adjective alone but the noun-adjective combination, and we dismember that unit at our peril. Consider the following parallel. We wouldn't divide one of our words into its component parts—swim to s + w + i + m, for example—and expect each of those parts to make sense, would we? Accordingly, the noun-epithet combinations for people and gods should be understood for what they are: whole-"word" code for summoning the named characters to center-stage in the epic proceedings. That's why it makes no difference whether Achilles happens to be running, standing, or lying down when he's called "swift-footed." What may seem to be a redundant and occasionally awkward filler is in reality an idiomatic signal that cues (and re-cues) the character's entrance and identity.

Just so with the formula "green fear," or chlōron deos, which occurs ten times in the Homeric epics and hymns. In the Odyssey, for example, green fear paralyzes the hero as he watches the shades gather to drink sheep's blood in the underworld (11.43), and his comrades experience the same emotion as they confront the looming whirlpool Charybdis (12.243). Translators have often struggled with how to turn this phrase into English, sometimes rendering "green" as "pallid" or "raw" in an attempt to harmonize the color-value and the emotion within English usage. But if we interpret Homer's language on its own terms rather than impose our own, we will understand "green fear" as a single "word" and inquire what the ten instances taken together can tell us about its idiomatic meaning. And when we collate the occurrences and make that evaluation, we find that the phrase traditionally connotes supernaturally induced fear. Although no lexicon provides any clue to this corporate sense in the literal meaning of either of the parts (chlōron = green and deos = fear), the "word" as a whole implicitly conveys the involvement of a deity. Once again, then, the force of the adjective is muted by its role as a "syllable" in the larger "word." "Green" remains inactive by itself because it lies below the threshold of the overall expressive unit, which cues a type of fear with a particular genesis and set of implications. Homeric audi-
ences, fluent in the traditional language of ancient Greek epic, understood the idiomatic sense of the phrase and enriched their reception of the story accordingly. Twenty-first century readers would profit by doing the same.39

Similarly, “words” at the level of typical scenes offer Homer and his tradition not merely a structural blueprint for constructing epic narrative, but an opportunity to situate individualized events and moments within a traditionally reverberative frame. An audience familiar with the three-part Lament structure, for example, will already have a roadmap in place to guide them through any instance of the pattern, no matter how singular or unusual.40 Because a “word” is most fundamentally a unit of language and expression, it will idiomatically convey its traditional meaning, glossing the specific by adducing the generic, explaining the time-bound by evoking the timeless. Thus, when Briseis begins her mourning-song, the fluent listener must have expected the entire framework: some reflection on the consequences of Patroklos’ death for her as well as some form of final intimacy. The same would have been true of the laments for Hektor, whether by his wife Andromache, his mother Hekabe, or his sister-in-law Helen, whose widely divergent viewpoints are well accommodated and focused by the typical scene. Exactly how the pattern played out in each case—how potential became reality—depended of course on the local, specific needs of the story. Indeed, in well-collected traditions like the South Slavic we can observe variation even among instances of the very same plot event from one performance to another. But the important point for our present concerns is that the Lament “word” presented an opportunity for Homer to mesh traditional and situation-specific meanings, to blend idiom with present usage.

Nowhere is this more apparent than in the brilliant application of the Lament pattern to the strained encounter between Andromache and (the living) Hektor in Book 6 of the Iliad. The moment is a memorable one. Hektor has briefly returned from the battlefield, still armed and stained with gore, and he and his wife engage in a conversation that epitomizes one of the central contradictions of the poem: his kleos-winning (striving after glory in battle) clashes diametrically with Andromache’s responsibilities for the oikos (home and hearth, including the family unit). Because Hektor defends Troy, it survives, at least for a while. But because he will go down in the fight against Achilles, he will by those very same actions leave his wife and child defenseless before the Greek conquerors. During their conversation in Book 6 these mutually exclusive and yet intertwined concerns emerge with special clarity, as neither figure—notwithstanding their history together and their shared commitment to Troy—is able to hear what the other is saying; they communicate at cross purposes. Andromache pleads with her husband to stay
with her, safe within the walls of Troy, for her and their son's sake, while Hektor explains his duty to battle heroically for the community's sake.

To frame this intense exchange Homer utilizes the highly idiomatic frame of the Lament scene. The opening element, "You have fallen" at lines VI.407-10, predicts rather than chronicles his demise, underlining the certainty of his death even more emphatically by enlisting the connotations resident in the typical scene. The second element (VI.410-28), which by convention traces the implications of the hero's death for his loved ones, recounts what will transpire for Andromache: as she observes, "for me it would be far better / to sink into the earth when I have lost you" (VI.410-11). It would be difficult to gainsay her opinion on this point, since, as she explains, she has no father or mother or brothers to support her after Hektor is gone. And the reason for her lack of family? Achilles, the enemy Greek hero who will kill Hektor, was directly implicated in all of their deaths. Poignantly fulfilling the third part of the pattern, the final intimacy, Andromache then emphasizes her past and future losses by addressing her husband as her substitute father, mother, and brother, stressing his vital importance to her in an unforgettable fashion that recalls what has transpired and resonates with what is to come. As Hektor stands before her alive, she is already effectively mourning him—following the traditional framework that transforms an already moving episode into an absorbing and compelling preview of the fate that inevitably awaits them. It is the Lament "word," here intoned long before Hektor's actual demise, that provides this powerful glimpse into a future they cannot escape.

Homer's use of the typical scene of the Feast also has predictive value well beyond its structural usefulness and general contextualization. If we follow the methodology described above of collating instances and drawing comparative conclusions about the idiomatic meaning of "words," we discover that this scene "betokens a ritualistic event leading from an obvious and pre-existing problem to an effort at mediation of that problem" (Foley 1999, 174). That is to say, in addition to serving simply as a convention that supports narrative composition, this "word" contextualizes the existing problematic situation—whatever it may be—and points toward a possible amelioration—whatever that may be. Along with its recognizable generic contribution as a variable framework, then, the Feast also hints at what lies in the future, the next chapter in the story.

That is a significant dimension of its traditional meaning. Two examples of this predictive function must suffice. In Book 1 the feast at Odysseus' home includes all of the features listed above: a host and guest(s), the seating of the guest(s), several core actions associated with feasting, and the satisfaction of the guest(s), as well as both the five-line core involving the maidserv-
vant's provision of water for washing together with the housekeeper's distribution of bread and the two-line coda marking the satisfaction of the guests. The pre-existing problem consists, of course, of the arrogant and destructive behavior of the suitors, who have for years abused the absent Odysseus's hospitality by consuming the Ithacan household as part of their quest to wed Penelope. Telemachos is himself helpless to put a stop to their presumptuous behavior, but after the feast concludes Athena, in disguise as his father's guest-friend Mentes, instills courage into the young man, just as she had promised to do during the prior council of the gods in Book 1. Her advice triggers Telemachos's voyage of discovery, and her encouragement helps prompt his transformation from the boy whom Odysseus left behind to the man who will one day assist his father in taking revenge on the suitors. On a much more modest level, the final feast in the Odyssey, wherein Odysseus and his father Laertes share a humble meal (24.385ff.), signals the climactic mediation that eventually arrives in the form of the Peace of Athena. In fact, Homer uses two of his traditional "words" in conjunction to tell the story of how the uprising by the slain suitors' families was quelled: at the level of the typical scene the Feast cues a mediation to follow, while at the level of the formula Athena causes "green fear" to seize Eupeithes, father of the head suitor Antinous, and the larger company. Both the Telemachos-Athena feast in Book 1 and the Odysseus-Laertes feast in Book 24 can be read literally by reference to our default notion of words, but like Andromache's first lament they reveal their full resonance only after we re-read them from an oral traditional perspective, in terms of their constitutive and reverberative "words."

Finally, by reading the Odyssey with attention to the largest traditional "word," the story-pattern of Return that underlies the entire epic, we can hear more of that oral traditional resonance. Most globally, the background knowledge that an audience familiar with this story would bring to the Odyssey must have informed their general understanding of this particular return tale. They would actively expect the hero to leave Kalypso's island, succeed in winning his way back home to Ithaca notwithstanding serious challenges, test his family's and allies' loyalty while remaining in disguise, defeat the suitors in athletic contests and if necessary in mortal combat, and discover his wife's faithfulness or treachery while revealing his identity through a secret shared only by the two of them. A fluent audience would be able to follow the generic outlines of the roadmap. But exactly how that familiar sequence manifests itself in this particular tale and this particular performance could not be foreseen; details remain the province of the singular realization, as the pattern takes shape via the individual poet's negotiation with the traditional inheritance and (in the original situation) with an audience that is part of the process. The Return "word" generates an outline for
the plot, with suspense deriving not from an unimaginable surprise or a starkly divergent development but from how each of the expectable stages of the story will turn out on this occasion.

That idiomatic context, in which a fluent listener or reader weighs the present, emergent tale against an awareness of the traditional implications of the Return "word," also helps to solve three of the most stubborn dilemmas in Homeric studies. In closing this essay on reading Homer in the twenty-first century, let me explain how interpreting the *Odyssey* as an oral-derived traditional poem in its originative and still active context can productively address each of these quandaries.

First on our agenda is the question of plot sequence. Scholars have long subscribed to the theory that the *Odyssey* and other epics conventionally start *in medias res*, "in the middle of things," rather than from the chronological beginning. Thus we meet Odysseus not as he is called away to the Trojan War or during battle, but rather imprisoned on Kalypso's island and yearning for his homeland. To account for prior events, so goes the "middle" theory, the poem contains a flashback: Books 9-12 fill in the particulars of how he came to the situation with which the epic opens. But by reading the *Odyssey* as the Indo-European return story that it is, we can understand that it starts not in the middle but at the logical beginning. This tale-type, whether in South Slavic, Russian, Albanian, or other traditions, conventionally assumes a well-defined back-story: a hero is summoned away from his wife or fiancée to a joint martial expedition that leads to a decades-long absence and captivity. Idiomatically, the *Odyssey* starts precisely where it should, with the hero in captivity and dependent upon a powerful female for his release. Were it to start anywhere else—at the chronological beginning, for instance—it would be unidiomatic. Moreover, within the Return "word" a flashback isn't compensation for lost narrative, but rather a built-in part of the story-pattern. A fluent audience or reader will thus expect the non-chronological shape of the story as a whole and, in particular, the starting-point (with its assumed back-story) and the flashback. That much is implicit in the Return "word" as a traditional thought-byte.

Second is the matter of Penelope's actions, especially her attitude toward the disguised stranger. When does she really recognize him? Along with Telemachus, don't we wonder why doesn't she overtly acknowledge her husband earlier? Critics have argued over this problem for centuries, each of them trying to probe her psychology and pinpoint a specific moment of veiled recognition, but no consensus has emerged. If, however, we adduce the evidence of how the wife/fiancée *conventionally* behaves in the Return Song, these disagreements fall away. To put it most basically, Penelope behaves as she does because indeterminacy—the ability to actively and persistently avoid
resolving ambiguities—is at the very heart of the Return heroine’s character. As we look across the comparative spectrum, we notice again and again the ultimate centrality of this figure: as the fulcrum in the plot, it is she (and not her mate) who determines how the end-game plays out. Only if she is able to persevere, to refuse closure and keep her options open, is she in a position to participate in the final test of identity and faithfulness that we view in Penelope’s posing the riddle of the olive-tree bed, in turn made possible by her strategy of weaving and covertly unweaving Laertes’s shroud all those years in order to keep the suitors at bay. Hers is a heroism of intelligently delaying decisions, and like her Return Song sisters she maintains that ambivalence to the end, against all odds. Instead of joining Telemachos in criticizing his mother for her refusal to accept the certainty of Odysseus’s return, then, we should be applauding her particular brand of heroic achievement, without which there would be no Ithacan homeland awaiting the long-suffering Odysseus. Reading via the Return “word” helps us to recognize and appreciate her major role in the overall saga.

Third, there is the question of where the *Odyssey* actually ends. Does the curtain simply drop with the last line of Book 24, or does the poem effectively culminate with what the ancient critics designated as its *telos* or “goal” at Book 23, lines 295–96 when Penelope and Odysseus go to their olive-tree bed? Again the broader context of the Indo-European Return Song helps to provide an idiomatic perspective. Briefly stated, both opinions have merit and can be meshed to create a coherent response to the question. By convention this story-pattern reaches its *telos* as a result of the test that proves the wife’s or fiancée’s fidelity—for good or ill. That is, the traditional roadmap leads unerringly, no matter what particular tale it is informing, to revelation of the woman’s heroism (or its lack) via the shared secret, whether that test involves an olive-tree bed, the playing of a musical instrument, or some other knowledge or trademark talent. But while the path of the Return trek effectively ends at that juncture, these epics always include a “post-*telos*” section whose role it is to resolve the loose ends of the particular tale. Telegraphically, we can say that the main generic action of the Return Song ends with the long-separated couple reunited in the bed fashioned from Athena’s tree, while the *Odyssey* as a return epic closes only with the Peace of Athena. This most expansive of “words” thus provides both a generic pathway for the multiform, traditional plot and a more specific postlude section that concludes the singular Return story of Penelope and Odysseus.

Coda

Reading Homer in the twenty-first century presents a real challenge to modern students and scholars, separated as we are by almost three millennia
from the time when the versions of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* that have survived to us were probably put down in writing in ancient Greece. But notwithstanding that enormous displacement in time and cultural space, the newly developed tools associated with studies in comparative oral traditions can open up dimensions of the Homeric epics that have effectively been lost or silenced for many centuries—by helping us to construe the poems on their own terms. During this essay we have briefly surveyed the history of the Homeric Question, the legendary status of Homer, and, perhaps most importantly, the nature of the very "words" that he and his poetic tradition employ to express themselves. Those "words," like the *reći* used by the South Slavic *guslari*, are not at all the same as our words: the thought-bytes of ancient Greek epic are larger, composite units of utterance and meaning that take the form of recurrent phrases, scenes, and story-patterns. And we have further seen that structural usefulness is but one function of these "words"; their idiomatic implications—the special meaning they bear as traditional language—are a crucial feature of Homeric art. As efforts at recovering the richness of that art continue, it is well to remain mindful of the roots of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* in their original medium of oral tradition.45

Notes

1 For a history of the Homeric Question, see Turner (1997) and Fowler (2004b). For introductions to the Homeric poems and to ancient epic in general, see, respectively, Fowler (2004a) and Foley (2005).

2 As Barbara Graziosi observes of the ancient *Lives of Homer*: "Unlike the biographies of other poets and famous personalities, they emphasise the lack of a coherent, unified, and self-consistent version of Homer's life. Rather than presenting us with a continuous narrative, they tend to focus on relatively few specific aspects of the life of Homer, and list a series of contradictory opinions about them, opinions which typically span several centuries" (2002, 9).

3 For the early history and application of this approach in both Homeric studies and elsewhere, see Foley (1988).

4 On the first stage of textual analysis, see espec. Parry (1928).

5 On Murko's influence, see Murko (1990) and Foley (1988, 15-18).


7 For an online overview of the Parry Collection, visit www.chs.harvard.edu/mpc, whose official publication series is SCHS. See further the performance of *The Wedding of Mustajbey's Son Bećirbey* by the guslar Halil Bajgorić, available in Foley (2004) and in electronic, hypertext format at www.oralturion.org/zbm.

Through the mid-1980s more than 2000 books and articles document the broad reach of the so-called Oral-Formulaic Theory; for references, see Foley (1985), with an electronic version including updates through 1992 at www.oraltradition.org. From the early 1990s onward, with the advent of new perspectives as well as more awareness of adjacent methods, it is more accurate to speak more broadly of studies in oral tradition than strictly the Parry-Lord approach; see further Foley (1995, 1999, 2002).

South African praise poetry, composed in performance by literate as well as preliterate poets, offers one illustration of this kind of bridging; see further Kaschula (1995, 2000) and Opland (1983, 1998). Other examples include the oral roots of the Old and New Testaments (see Niditch [1996] and Kelber [1997], respectively) and of many African novels (see Obiechina [1992] and Balogun [1995, 1997]). For description of an ecosystem of various oral genres within a single society, some of them practiced by literate individuals, see the array of oral poetic species from a Serbian village as described and exemplified in Foley (2002, 188-218).

Throughout this essay I advocate an agnostic position on the precise details of the relationship between our texts of the Homeric epics and the oral tradition that informs them. Since we cannot know exactly how the poems reached written form, it seems illogical and unhelpful to cling to any particular theory about that process. By the same token, we cannot ignore the oral-derived, traditional nature of the Homeric language any more than we can afford to ignore the most fundamental medium of any work of art. For views on the nearly universal means by which oral epics are collected and preserved in writing and then print (namely, by the intervention of an outsider to the culture and tradition), see Honko (2000).

In my opinion Gregory Nagy (1996, 90) has offered the most attractive explanation of the etymology of Homer's name, as "he who joins together (homo- plus ar-)," a gloss that speaks to the tectonic nature of the oral poet's craft.

As imaged in a verb commonly used to describe epic performance—*tunati*, "to drive out, impel"—the activity of singing was so strenuous that *guslari* usually paused every 30-40 minutes to rest. Cf. the Anglo-Saxon verb *wrecan*, with approximately the same meaning, which also designates the act of oral performance in that tradition (e.g., *Seafarer*, line 1: "Meag ic be me sylfum sogied wrecan" ("I can drive out a true tale about myself," quoted from Gordon [1966, 33]).

Parry-Lord no. 6598 (unpublished); see Kay (1995, 221).

This is not to say that actual *guslari* named Čor Huso, Isak, or Hasan Čoso didn't ever exist; there may well have been one or more real-life individuals at the basis of this legend. But the larger-than-life details, as well as the contradictory nature of the different accounts, show that what may once have been based in fact had (very productively) morphed into legend.

For a Mongolian parallel to the *Guslar*, see Foley (1998, 173-75). We may also adduce the Anglo-Saxon legendary singer Widsith, whose name etymologically means "wide journey" and who would have had to live multiple centuries in order to visit the courts he is said to have entertained.
17 For summaries of the ancient sources, see Lamberton (1997); also Davison (1963), Turner (1997). For a comparison of the various texts, see Allen (1969, 11-41, espec. the chart between 32 and 33).

18 See note 12 above.

19 This is not to deny the possibility that there was a historical figure named Homer whose actual life was mythologized to serve this legendary purpose, much as a historical Arthur lies at the root of the King Arthur legend and stories. Cp. Nagy’s model of “retrojection” (1990, 79, e. g.), and see further note 2 above.


21 For epos, see espec. the formulaic line “O my child, what word has escaped the barrier of your teeth?” which occurs four times in the Odyssey (said by Zeus to Athena at 1.64 and 5.22, by Eurykleia to the disguised Odysseus at 19.492, and by Eurykleia to Penelope at 23.70); it carries the idiomatic sense of “You should have known better” and frames each instance as chiding by a senior figure. For muthos, see the formulaic line “He/she stood above his/her head and spoke a word to him/her,” which functions as a speech introduction and occurs four times in the Odyssey (4.803, 6.21, 20.32, and 23.4).

22 Cf. the Anglo-Saxon formulaic phrase “and speaks that word” at Beowulf 2046b, which acts as a speech introduction; it recurs in slightly altered form (with tense adjustment, e.g.) throughout the Anglo-Saxon oral-derived poetic corpus.

23 As explained by Dr. Chao Gejin of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences during conversation.

24 For example, the great singer Avdo Medjedović begins his 1935 performance of The Wedding of Smailagić Meljo with the following line: “The first word: “God, help us!” (SCHS, vol. 4, 55, translation mine).

25 For a full discussion of what Vujnović and other singers say about the rět, see Foley (2002, 11-21).

26 On Homeric epos as “tale, story” and muthos as a performance by a speaker, see Martin (1989, espec. 1-42).

27 Without indulging in undue complexities, we can observe that the hexameter line is composed of regular metrical parts defined by regular word-divisions that also turn out to be “word”-divisions. A single line, then, consists of rule-governed sections, and recurrent phrases exist within the poetic tradition to fit those sections. For more detail on the metrical substructure of the Homeric line, see Foley (1990, 52-84).


For a full discussion of the Return story-pattern in the *Odyssey* and comparative oral epic, see Foley (1999, 115-67).

For example, the ancient Greek, South Slavic, Russian, Bulgarian, Albanian, Anglo-Saxon, Middle English, Turkic (central Asian), and Balochi traditions. The South Slavic epic tradition alone accounts for hundreds of collected instances, only a small percentage of which have yet seen formal publication; see espec. SCHS and Kay (1995, 83 e.g., the song-titles beginning with Ropsto, or “Captivity,” dependably identify a Return epic).


I make no assumption about whether the relationship among various comparative instances is the result of historical diffusion or Indo-European genetics, although given the geographical and temporal distances both dynamics must have been operative. The international story-type is of course one of many that have been documented in multiple cultures and eras, but perhaps no others so broadly as the *Odyssey*-story. For another deployment of the Return story-pattern in a different genre from ancient Greece, see the analysis of the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter* in Foley (1995, 136-80).

In discussing systems of formulaic phrases, Parry observed that “the thrift of a system lies in the degree to which it is free of phrases which, having the same metrical value and expressing the same idea, could replace one another” (1971, 276). It should be noted that thrift is a characteristic of some Homeric formulaic language (chiefly the noun-epithet names) but not of the majority of the epic diction. Likewise, it proves not to be a feature of either South Slavic oral epic or Anglo-Saxon oral-derived poetry (Foley 1990, 163-64 and 354, respectively).

The epithet “Argos-slaying” (*Argeiphontés*) provides a classic case of this phenomenon. It is used in the *Homeric Hymn to Hermes* (line 84) to characterize the infant Hermes long before he accomplishes the deed it celebrates, leading some critics to see the application of the noun-epithet phrase as clumsily non-chronological. But the formula names Hermes traditionally as a mythic character; it is the whole “word”—and not its composite “syllables”—that matters.

For a full account and discussion of this phrase, see Foley (1999, 216-18).

Of course, no matter how assiduously we use the tools available to us (searchable digitized versions of Homer, etc.), we can never aspire to the fluency of the ancient audience. But by practicing the kind of traditional lexicography advocated here—effectively by trying to read Homer’s “words” on their own terms—we can certainly do better than default to text-centered dilution of his (and his tradition’s) artistry. A partial victory in learning the traditional language is far preferable to outright surrender. For numerous additional examples of reading Homer’s “words,” see Foley (1999).

41 On the Feast scene in the *Odyssey*, see Foley (1999, 171-87).
42 The phrase *in medias res* is taken from Horace’s *Ars Poetica*, with reference to Aristotle’s comments on plot sequence in his *Poetics*. See further Preminger and Brogan (1993, 580-81).
43 This view from the perspective of oral tradition and specifically the Indo-European Return Song harmonizes with feminist work on the central role of Penelope in the *Odyssey*; see especially Katz (1991) and Felson-Rubin (1994).
44 Note that the reunion of Penelope and Odysseus is the mediation forecasted by the Feast scene at 23.153ff. (see Foley [1999, 185-86]), while the Peace of Athena, as mentioned above, is the mediation cued by the shared meal between Odysseus and Laertes.
45 For a modern hypertext tool that may be useful for application to Homeric studies, see the eEdition of a South Slavic oral epic at www.oralltradition.org/zbm.

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