

*Oral Tradition*, 1/2 (1986): 381-97

**Exploring the Literate Blindspot:  
Alexander Pope's *Homer*  
In Light of Milman Parry**

**Elizabeth A. Hoffman**

I.

The lasting popularity of Alexander Pope's *Homer* testifies to the poetic genius he brought to his role as translator. In his introduction to the Twickenham Edition texts, Maynard Mack cites the "demand for new editions throughout Pope's lifetime and for a century after" as evidence of popular acclaim, despite less consistently positive critical response (*Twickenham* 7:xlii). The same genius which guaranteed the success of Pope's translation also informed his keen powers of observation as critic, and his prolonged contact with the Greek text during the translation process, from 1713 to 1726, produced insights that have yet to be fully explored.

The modern clarification of the distinctions between orality and literacy has provided a retrospective vantage point from which to observe the conceptual limitations of the literate mind throughout the age of literacy. A reading of Pope's preface to his 1715 edition of the *Iliad* shows him making a series of distinctions between oral and literate modes of composition hardly to be found wanting by twentieth-century standards. Even as he delineates the two categories, however, he remains unable to put a name to them: one involves active, participatory communication for "Hearers," the other passive, impersonal composition for readers. Standing on the brink of discoveries first clearly articulated by Milman Parry and Albert Lord in the early decades of this century, Pope, as well as the two centuries of Homeric scholars who followed him, remained unable to penetrate to the heart of the Homeric Question.

Why it became possible to overcome the literate fixation on the text only in the “electronic age” of the twentieth century (McLuhan 1962:1), after the advent of what Walter Ong has termed “secondary orality” (1982:135-38), is a question currently receiving considerable scholarly attention. Pope’s case serves to define further the historical dimensions of this literate blindspot, as well as to shed light on some of the problems facing students of orality-literacy today.

## II.

Pope is at one with his age in assuming the existence of an original text of Homer’s work. Among the illustrations for his subscribers’ quarto edition of the *Iliad* is an engraving of a third century B.C. relief, “The Apotheosis of Homer,” by Archelaus of Prienne (Pinkwart 1965:15-18). In describing this engraving, “that which of all the Remains [of Homer] has been of late the chief amusement of the Learned,” Pope pays meticulous attention to detail:

We see there a Temple hung with its Veil where Homer is placed on a Seat . . . supported on each side with figures representing the *Iliad* and the *Odysses* . . . Behind, is Time waiting upon him, and a Figure with Turrets on his Head, which signifies the World, crowning him with the Laurel. Before him is an Altar, at which all the Arts are sacrificing to him as their Deity. On one side of the Altar stands a Boy, representing Mythology, on the other, a Woman, representing History; after her is Poetry bringing the Sacred Fire; and in a long following Train, Tragedy, Comedy, Nature, Virtue, Memory, Rhetorick and Wisdom, in all their proper Attitudes.

(*Twickenham* 7:55)

Pope overlooks neither the footstool under Homer’s feet “as he has described in the seats of his Gods,” nor the little mice beside it “in Allusion to the *Batrachomyomachia*” (*Twickenham* 7:55). Only the furled manuscript clasped in Homer’s right hand escapes his notice. Today, it is impossible to ignore a text in the hand of an oral poet, but for Pope and his contemporaries this manuscript was intrinsic to the creative process and no more worthy of comment



Archelaus of Prienne, "The Apotheosis of Homer"  
(Pinkwart 1965, reproduced by permission)

than the hand that held it. Made conspicuous by its absence in this otherwise exhaustive description, the manuscript testifies to the rigidity with which the literate mind, for well over two thousand years after the initial spread of alphabetic literacy, identified the writing surface as the definitive expression of all creative thought.

There were, of course, glimmerings of the truth. Pope himself, drawing on the work of ancient historians, refers to an age before Homer when “History was transmitted by Oral Tradition” (*Twickenham* 7:75), and Robert Wood, later in the eighteenth century, talked of the “power of unlettered memory” in his *Essay on the Original Genius of Homer* (Wood 1775:259; described in A. Parry 1971b:xiii). But not for another century and a half would these moments of insight coalesce into a comprehensive picture of composition-in-performance.

To a certain extent, the limitations of the “pre-Parry” literate mind were counterbalanced for the Augustans by surviving remnants of earlier, more heavily oral times. Living at the highpoint of a rhetorical tradition with roots stretching back to the days of the ancient Greek *rhētor*, Pope approached the task of translation still able to “hear” Homer’s poetry. The technology of print, which would tremendously reinforce the centrality of the written text already fostered by the manuscript age, was not completely internalized in the early eighteenth century, and, as Pope’s own work will show, it was still encountering opposition. H. J. Chaytor has defined the dynamic between medieval and modern man in relation to the faculties of hearing and seeing:

Of the few [in medieval times] who could read, few were habitual readers; in any case, the ordinary man of our own times probably sees more printed and written matter in a week than the medieval scholar saw in a year. Nothing is more alien to medievalism than the modern reader . . . pausing to gather the argument of a page in a few swift glances. Nor is anything more alien to modernity than the capacious medieval memory which, untrammelled by the associations of print, could . . . retain in memory and reproduce lengthy epic and elaborate lyric poems . . . Literature in its early days was produced very largely for public recitation; hence, it was rhetorical rather than literary in character, and rules of rhetoric governed its composition.

(1945:10)

The practice of reading aloud to groups would continue well into the eighteenth century and beyond, but the silent reading that ultimately took precedence made steady headway (Saenger 1982:383-88). Today, "hearing and sight, once disconnected, have become inseparable; when we hear a speaker, the effect of his words is transmitted from the auditory to the visualizing capacity" (Chaytor 1945:7).

The Augustans were somewhat at the midpoint of this process in which audial and visual ultimately became merged. Pope's ability to "hear" Homer, something twentieth-century Homeric scholars are painstakingly trying to approximate, was his birthright as the last major proponent of the English heroic epic. Had he approached the task of translation in the latter half of the eighteenth century, Pope's "hearing" might have been seriously impaired; almost certainly, to our loss, he would have chosen some format other than the heroic couplet, with its medieval echoes. While the closed heroic couplet imposed certain limitations on Pope, as Mack enumerates, it also conferred significant benefits:

the pentameter couplet bristled with oral and metrical conventions, as did the Homeric hexameter, and in its "epic" formulations had grown used to bearing on its back a whole thesaurus of special figures and locutions. Though neither the conventions nor the locutions were very close to Homer's, they did, and still do, convey a sense of a "made" language, a cunning artifice of meaning and sound, sound often tailored to fortify meaning, which is at its best a possible counterpart to, even if it is not an accurate reflection of, the "made" language of Homer.

(*Twickenham* 7:1xiii)

The Romantic Movement, in its search for Homeric simplicity, would later attack Pope's poetic diction as symptomatic of the new and complex, but during his lifetime an elevated style was still to be admired. Parry called the Augustan age "the one time in English literature when poets used a diction which was at all fixed," and compared it with the traditional language of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. The example of fixed diction in English poetry, he explains, shows that "what [Homer's] words and phrases lost in meaning they gained in a kind of charm which pleased the poet and his hearers":

The making of this diction was due to countless poets and to many generations who in time had found the heroic word and phrase for every thought . . . . And those parts of the diction which did not carry the story itself, since their meaning was not needed for understanding, lost that meaning, but became, as it were, a familiar music of which the mind is pleasantly aware, but which it knows so well that it makes no effort to follow it.

(M. Parry 1933:41-42).

Mack's assessment of the traditional aspects of Pope's translation complements Parry's views:

Pope's two translations at their best become echo chambers, wherein . . . one may hear reverberations from the whole literary culture of the West . . . . we confront a method of generalization via metaphorical allusion that is both Pope's greatest difference from Homer and a paramount factor in the success with which he often truly makes one feel timeless. . . .

(*Twickenham* 7:1xiii-lix)

Pope was neither to benefit from nor to contend with the upsurge of classical scholarship or the changing attitudes towards poetic diction after his death. In his preface to the *Iliad* and in related documents, therefore, we possess an expression of direct empathic response, from giant of the residually oral Augustan epic to giant of the oral epic past (Brower and Bond 1965:13).

### III.

As noted above, although Pope talks of an age in which history was transmitted by "Oral Tradition," he believed that period to have greatly preceded Homer. For the purposes of the modern student of oral tradition, however, he generously mitigates this misapprehension by contrasting Homer with Virgil, whose hexameters reflect two hundred years of Roman literacy. While Pope acknowledges that both poets share the ability to bring about "the Correspondence of their Sounds to what they signify'd," he also states unequivocally that Homer has "not only the richest Head but the finest Ear in the World," something discernible by "whoever will but consult the Tune of his Verses even without

understanding them" (*Twickenham* 7:11). In his comparisons of the *Iliad* and the *Aeneid*, he calls attention to characteristics of oral poetry now known to hold true across geographical, cultural, and historical boundaries: it is participatory for both narrator and audience; it focuses on actions rather than analysis; its subject matter, largely agonistic, comes from the human life world (Ong 1982:36-49; Foley 1985). "What he writes," Pope says of Homer,

is of the most animated Nature imaginable; everything moves, everything lives, and is put in Action. If a Council be call'd, or a Battle fought, you are not coldly inform'd of what was said or done as from a third Person; the Reader is hurried out of himself by the Force of the Poet's imagination, and turns in one place to a *Hearer*, in another to a *Spectator* . . .

*(Twickenham* 7:4; emphasis added)

On the other hand, in Virgil,

the dramatic part is less in proportion to the Narrative; and the Speeches often consist of general Reflections or Thoughts, which might be equally just in any Person's Mouth upon the same Occasion . . . we oft'ner think of the Author himself when *we read Virgil*, than when *we are engag'd in Homer*: all of which are the effects of a colder Invention, that interests us less in the Action describ'd: *Homer makes us hearers*, and *Virgil leaves us readers*.

*(Twickenham* 7:8; emphasis added)

The stress placed on the role of the "Hearer" in relation to Homer's work, while never more explicit than here, indicates that Pope's insight into the nature of Greek epic far exceeded the received views of his time. The transcribed words of the oral poet retain the ability to "make" even eighteenth-century readers, Pope and his peers, into hearers. Both the poet and his audience participate in each performance, a direct, interpersonal, and active process which "hurries" the reader "out of himself." The reader of Virgil, on the other hand, is "left" in that condition: passive recipient of a one-way communication facilitated only by the writing surface.

Pope was well aware that his ability to appreciate the sound of Homer was rapidly becoming a lost art, and he indicates as much in his preface: "Homer (as has been said) is perpetually

applying the Sound to the Sense, and varying it on every new Subject. Few Readers have the Ear to be Judges of it, but those who have will see I have endeavor'd at this Beauty." (*Twickenham* 7:20-21). While his concern with the relation between sound and sense considerably predates his work on Homer, Pope does not expand it to encompass the active role of the "Hearer" until he is well advanced in the work of translating the *Iliad*. Earlier, in a 1710 letter to Henry Cromwell, and possibly as early as 1706 (Sherburn 1956, vol. 1:106n), he outlines his views:

It is not enough that nothing offends the Ear . . . but a good Poet will adapt the very Sounds, as well as Words, to the Things he treats of . . . This is evident ev'ry where in Homer and Virgill, and no where else that I know of to any observable degree . . . [This] is what very few observe in Practise, and is undoubtedly a wonderful force in imprinting the Image on the Reader.

(*Ibid.*:107-8)

In 1711, we encounter the same doctrine, in verse, in the "Essay on Criticism":

'Tis not enough no Harshness gives Offence,  
The *Sound* must seem an *Eccho* to the *Sense* (364-65).

But only as he prepares a preface for the first four books of the *Iliad*, after experiencing the intimacy with his author consequent on the long and intense process of translation, does Pope replace the earlier, more passive view of readers—on whom the poet's successful linking of sound and sense is a "force in imprinting the Image"—with the phrase in his preface implying, for at least some readers, active participation as "Hearers": "Few Readers have the Ear to be Judges of it, but those who have will see that I have endeavor'd . . ." Whether or not Pope achieved an increased sensitivity to the auditory aspects of Homer's poetry as a direct result of his work as translator, he clearly made a conscious decision to consider the reader as "Hearer" in the "sound and sense" passage of the preface, a passage which in all other respects parallels the earlier treatments of "sound and sense" in his correspondence and the "Essay on Criticism."

It is fascinating, in this context, to consider how tightly bound to his production the oral performer becomes: Homer is so inextricably present in his work that Pope, analyzing a printed version of the poem two thousand years after its composition, can



be exquisitely aware of the active presence of the poet. The verses, he says, “flow with so much ease, as to make one imagine *Homer* had no other care than to transcribe as fast as the *Muses* dictated,” whereas Virgil was forced to use “the utmost Diligence in working up a more intractable Language to whatsoever Graces it was capable of” (*Twickenham* 7:11). As Albert Lord has defined it, oral composition is a fluid process of “creation and recreation in performance” (1960:9), a direct expression of the creative act unhindered by intermediate translation to textual form—a process easily compatible, in effect, with Pope’s fanciful reference to “dictating Muses.” For the literate poet, on the other hand, composition is laborious, and no one who has ever put pen to paper (or finger to key) can avoid identifying with Pope’s image of Virgil “working up” his “more intractable language”—language as broken up into arbitrarily designated component parts and attached by means of an implement to the writing surface. Through his choice of images, Pope attributes to Virgil a mode of composition similar to his own, while remaining baffled by the nature of the corresponding process in Homer.

The catch-all metaphor of the “dictating Muses” complements the contextual setting for the manuscript which remained unnoticed in Pope’s description of “The Apotheosis of Homer.” Both Archelaus’ semi-divinity and Pope’s frenzied transcriber presuppose an ultimate textual form for their creative effusions, but in each case the very profusion and variety of creative output defies any attempt to explain the technical aspects of this implied conversion to text. Reflected in these images is the long-standing bewilderment with which Homeric scholars, long before and after Pope, attempted to explain the difference between Homer and later poets. They inevitably confronted their inability to do very little more than state the obvious: there was “something different” about Homer (A. Parry 1971b:xix).

Parry and Lord would later provide the definitive explanation for such extremes of difference in the work of the two classical giants, by showing that all distinctive features of Homeric poetry can be traced to the traditional, cumulative nature of oral poetry and its economy of composition: “the dependence of the choice of words and word-forms on the shape of the hexameter line” (A. Parry 1971b:xix). Even in the absence of any such epistemological tools with which to distinguish the oral world of Homer from the later literate age, however, Pope successfully contrasts the

immediacy of composition-in-performance with the distancing effect of composition-in-writing:

*Homer* seems like his own *Jupiter* in his Terrors, shaking *Olympus*, scattering the Lightnings, and firing the Heavens; *Virgil* like the same Power in his Benevolence, counselling with the Gods, laying Plans for Empires, and regularly ordering his whole Creation.

(*Twickenham* 7:12)

Another aspect of oral poetry that rises near the surface in Pope's preface to the *Iliad* concerns its role as compendium for the accumulated knowledge of a culture. The song of the oral poet is not limited by his own store of personal wisdom, however great, but represents the wisdom of society as refined, developed, and handed down over centuries. In a 1708 letter, written well before he could have conceived any practical plan for translating Homer, Pope puzzles over "that noble simplicity, which runs through all [Homer's] works; (and yet his diction, contrary to what one would imagine consistent with simplicity, is at the same time very copious) . . ." (Sherburn 1956, vol. 1:44). When this thought is reformulated for Pope's postscript to the *Odyssey*, in 1725, it displays a considerable advance in understanding, and yet a certain note of puzzlement over the many ways in which Homer seems to step outside his role as poet remains:

*Homer* seems to have taken upon him the character of an Historian, Antiquary, Divine, and Professor of Arts and Sciences; as well as a Poet. In one or other of these characters he descends into many particularities, which as a Poet only perhaps he would have avoided.

(*Twickenham* 10:390)

All subsequent attempts to approximate this scope, Pope asserts in the *Iliad* preface, fall far short of the mark:

It is certain there is not near that Number of Images and Descriptions in any Epic Poet; tho every one has assisted himself with a great Quantity out of him: And it is evident of *Virgil* especially, that he has scarce any Comparisons which are not drawn from his Master.

(*Twickenham* 10:390)

*Virgil* is shown to possess further limitations:

for want of so warm a Genius, [he] aided himself by taking in a more extensive Subject, as well as a greater

Length of Time, and contracting the Design of both Homer's Poems into one, which is yet but a fourth part as large as his.

(*Twickenham* 7:5-6)

While some of Pope's views on the primacy of Homer can be attributed to the doctrine of primitivism, which assumed a progressive loss of perfection following Adam's fall, he also attributes epic poetry's severe diminution in scope after Homer to a more immediate cause, which he characterizes as a change in the "Mode of Learning":

For when the Mode of Learning chang'd in the following Ages and Science was deliver'd in a plainer manner, it then became as reasonable in the more modern Poets to lay it (Invention) aside, as it was in Homer to make use of it. And perhaps it was no unhappy Circumstance for Virgil that *there was not in his Time that Demand upon him* of so great an Invention ... .

(*Twickenham* 17:6-7; emphasis added)

In fact, a major intellectual reorientation had taken place between the ages of Homer and Virgil, coincident with the rise of alphabetic literacy. Ong characterizes this shift as a process through which "deeply interiorized alphabetic literacy first clashed head-on with orality" (1983:79), and even Plato reacted to the new technology of writing in much the same way as many people today react to computers, by warning that it would be destructive of memory. Discussing the "propriety and impropriety" of writing, Plato recounts a story of Socrates about an Egyptian king who rejected the new invention of letters, telling their inventor that

. . . this invention will produce forgetfulness in the minds of those who learn to use it, because they will not practise their memory. Their trust in writing, produced by external characters which are no part of themselves, will discourage the use of their own memory within them.

(*Phaedrus* 274c-75a)

Plato recognized the latent power of the written word, but could hardly have foreseen the ruthless efficiency with which the spread of alphabetic literacy would displace the previous means of storing and transmitting ideas, even to the point of eliminating it from popular memory. Pope's description of "The Apotheosis of Homer"

brings this efficiency into striking relief: the set of assumptions informing his discussion of the sculpture, preventing him from “seeing” the manuscript, had already become entrenched over two thousand years earlier, long enough before the lifetime of the sculptor Archelaus—who lived not two centuries after Plato—for the artist to consider a manuscript as highly appropriate to his composition. In the mind of Archelaus, Homer was literate.

Plato stated the dangers to memory inherent in the new technology, and Pope, deriving from his study of Homer an intuitive sensitivity to the nature of oral poetry, seizes upon the result: the age of literacy no longer demanded of the poet the kind of “invention” out of which he could produce that

vast Comprehension of Images of every sort, where we see each  
Circumstance of art and Individual of Nature summoned together  
by the Extent and Fecundity of his Imagination, to which all things,  
in their various Views, presented themselves in an Instant, and had  
their Impressions taken off to Perfection at a Heat ...

*(Twickenham 7:9)*

An imagination capable of taking in the world “in an instant,” and of bringing its impressions to perfection “at a heat,” is once again consistent with the fanciful “dictating Muses” while remaining quite at odds with a poet laboriously “working up” his material—a poet no longer able to draw on a memorized store of epic formulas developed and passed on over generations.

#### IV.

As Chaytor’s analysis of differences between medieval and modern readers illustrates, responses to auditory and visual stimuli were separate functions in the Augustan age to a much greater extent than they are today. Pope stood not only at the end of the long tradition of the *rhētor*, but at the beginning of one in which the reader—the silent reader—would become a significant factor in Western literary life. How else are we to explain his sensitivity not only to the active and participatory nature of orality, but to its opposite as well: the passive and minimally participatory nature of full-blown literacy. Even Pope’s comments on “Homer’s Repetitions” belie to some extent these divided sympathies: while his insights are applauded today (*Twickenham*

7:lxii-lxiv; Brower and Bond 1965:25ff), his tone is simultaneously defensive and apologetic as he strives to preserve the beauty of the original without striking too sour a note in the ears of his readers:

Upon the whole, it will be necessary to avoid that perpetual Repetition of the same Epithets . . . I hope it is not impossible to have such a Regard to these, as neither to lose so known a Mark of the Author on the one hand, nor to offend the Reader too much on the other.

(*Twickenham* 7:20)

Pope's overriding concern to do no disservice to Homer as he recasts him in a form acceptable to contemporary tastes is evident throughout his correspondence and critical commentary. He "did not court the candor, but dared the judgement of his reader," says Samuel Johnson:

he examined lines and words with minute and punctilious observation, and retouched every part with indefatigable diligence, till he had nothing left to be forgiven.

(1905, vol. 3:221)

Such exhaustive attention to detail, while productive of remarkable depth of understanding, inevitably placed him under great pressure. "What terrible moments does one feel after one has engaged for a long work," Pope said to Joseph Spence in 1739,

I wished anybody would hang me, a hundred times. It sat so heavily on my mind at first that I often used to dream of it, and so do sometimes still.

(Spence 1966, vol. 1:84)

As late as the year before his death he continued to dream "of being engaged in that translation and got about halfway through it, and being embarrassed and under dreads of never completing it" (*Ibid.*, vol. 1:83). In November of 1725, with the long-awaited end of the project in sight (the final volumes appeared in the following June), Pope wrote in reaction to negative responses from critics he had worked so hard to please:

When I translate again I will be hanged; nay I will do something to deserve to be hanged . . . rather than drudge for such a world as is no judge of your labour. I'll sooner write something to anger it, than to please it.

(Sherburn 1956, vol. 2:341)

“The Dunciad Variorum,” published in 1727, was an apparent fulfillment of this threat, with its iconoclastic opening couplet:

Books and the man I sing, the first who brings  
The Smithfield Muses to the ears of Kings.

These lines were changed in the later version, “The Dunciad, in Four Books,” but the poem retained its focus on printed matter as an intrusive and levelling force. In *The Gutenberg Galaxy*, McLuhan interprets Pope’s “Dunciad” not only as a parody expressing generalized anger, but as a very specific comment on the effects of the expansion of printing, and he cites Pope’s notes to the poem, written in the persona of Martinus Scriblerus:

We shall next declare the occasion and the cause which moved our poet to this particular work. He lived in those days when (after providence had permitted the Invention of Printing as a scourge for the Sins of the learned) Paper also became so cheap, and printers so numerous, that the deluge of authors cover’d the land: Whereby not only the peace of the honest unwriting subject was daily molested, but unmerciful demands were made of his applause, yea of his money, by such as would neither earn the one, or deserve the other; At the same time, the Liberty of the Press was so unlimited that it grew dangerous to refuse them either: For they would forthwith publish slanders unpunish’d... sculking under the wings of an Act of Parliament . . . .

(*Twickenham* 5:49)

On emerging from the world of Homer which he had inhabited for over twelve years as translator, Pope perceives his own world threatened by the inroads of print technology. “I mean no more translations,” he wrote to Swift in 1725, “but something domestic, fit for my own country, and for my own time” (Sherburn 1956, vol. 2:321-22). Abandoning, for the moment, the banner of “unity of sound and sense” so integral to his outlook as translator, he now decries in the “Dunciad” the “separation of words from their functions” (McLuhan 1962:258). His heroine, Dulness, proposes an exercise “in hearing.” The works of two “voluminous Authors” are to be read without stop, “one in verse, and the other in prose,” and the inevitable result is that the audience falls fast asleep (*Twickenham* 5:295). “Pope is telling the English world what Cervantes had told the Spanish world and Rabelais the French

world concerning print," says McLuhan. "It is delirium. It is a transforming and metamorphosing drug that has the power of imposing its assumptions upon every level of consciousness" (1962:259-60).

Pope's objections to the new technology of print are similar in focus to Plato's objections to writing. The printing press, in Pope's view, has brought chaos to the land, and by the time he adds Book IV to the second "Dunciad," the harmonious and balanced tableau we recall from "The Apotheosis of Homer" is in ruins: Dulness now occupies the throne, while

Beneath her foot-stool *Science* groans in Chains,  
And *Wit* dreads Exile, Penalties and Pains.  
There foam'd rebellious *Logic* gagg'd and bound,  
There, stript fair *Rhet'ric* languish'd on the ground;  
His blunted Arms by *Sophistry* are born,  
And shameless *Billingsgate* her Robes adorn.

(IV:21-26)

The speaking arts, along with the intelligence that informed them, are vanquished and enslaved: logic is voiceless and disarmed, rhetoric reduced to the level of a screaming fishwife. When the readers whom the transcribed text of Homer could "hurry out of themselves" and make into "Hearers" are forced to listen to a modern printed work read aloud, they lose consciousness: the Muses are dead. In the revised "Dunciad," Pope's last work, the poet who did so much to bring his world, and ours, in contact with a former way of being, now bends his genius to the task of holding off the damaging onslaughts of a new one.

## V.

If Parry's assessment of Augustan diction is correct, one reason why Pope's *Homer* continues to command an audience—even though demand has considerably declined since the first triumphant century—rests in its being the last retelling of Homer in English able to echo something of the form and music of the original. We stand on the brink of the electronic age as Pope stood on the brink of the typographic, and whereas his sensitivity to the auditory came from the past ours comes from the future—the secondary orality which once again, like the primary orality of Homer, allows the storing and transmission of ideas

without intermediate translation to text.

Further study of the opposing pressures of aural and visual in Pope's age may well provide continuing insights into the corresponding pressures of our own. During the more single-mindedly visual nineteenth century, the manuscript in Homer's hand, figuratively speaking, attracted enough attention to become the subject of considerable speculation. By the early twentieth century, the intuitive recognition of the obvious, after trembling on the brink of conscious expression for centuries (in statements such as Pope's "Homer had no other care than to transcribe as fast as the Muses dictated"), virtually burst into public awareness. Science had spearheaded an assault on the fixed text, and Parry's exhaustive research into the formulaic nature of Homeric poetry, which Pope could do no more than touch on, had prepared him more than anyone else to carry the battle through to its conclusion. As Ong summarizes, "although Parry's work has been attacked and revised in some of its details, the few totally unreceptive reactions to his work have mostly by now simply been put aside as products of the unreflective chirographic-typographic mentality which at first blocked any real comprehension of what Parry was saying and which his work itself has now rendered obsolete" (1983:27).

If the key to the Homeric Question was lost in the transition from orality to literacy in the fourth century, as "The Apotheosis of Homer" testifies, and if Pope made his insightful statements at the close of the rhetorical tradition and amidst the initial inroads of print technology, then it follows logically that its resolution should occur during a third cognitive transition: the initial clash between typographic culture and the secondary orality of the new electronic age, which has brought with it a technology able to record any number of "dictating Muses."

Washington University

### References

Brower and Bond 1985

Reuben A. Brower and W. B. Bond, eds. *The Iliad of Homer*. New York: Macmillan.



- Chaytor 1945  
Henry J. Chaytor. *From Script to Print*. Cambridge: Heffer.
- Foley 1985  
John Miles Foley. *Oral-Formulaic Theory and Research: An Introduction and Annotated Bibliography*. New York: Garland Publishing.
- Johnson 1905  
Samuel Johnson. *Lives of the English Poets*. 3 vols. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Lord 1960  
Albert B. Lord. *The Singer of Tales*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. Rpt. New York: Atheneum, 1968 et seq.
- McLuhan 1962  
Marshall McLuhan. *The Gutenberg Galaxy: The Making of Typographic Man*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Ong 1982  
Walter J. Ong. *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word*. London and New York: Methuen.
- A. Parry 1971a  
Adam Parry, ed. *The Making of Homeric Verse: The Collected Papers of Milman Parry*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- A. Parry 1971b  
\_\_\_\_\_. "Introduction" to A. Parry 1971a: pp. ix-lxii.
- M. Parry 1933  
Milman Parry. "The Traditional Metaphor in Homer." *Classical Philology*, 28:30-43. Rpt. in A. Parry 1971a:365-75.
- Pinkwart 1965  
Doris Pinkwart. *Das Relief des Archelaos von Prienne und die "Musen des Philoskos."* Kallmunz: Lasseben.
- Phaedrus  
Plato. *Euthyphro, Apology, Crito, Phaedo, Phaedrus*. Trans. by Harold North Fowler. Loeb Classical Library. London: Heinemann.
- Saenger 1982  
Paul Saenger. "Silent Reading: Its Impact in Late Medieval Script and Society." *Viator*, 13:367-414.
- Spence 1966  
Joseph Spence. *Anecdotes, Observations and Characters of Books and Men, Collected from Conversation*. Ed. by J. M. Osborn. 2 vols. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Sherburn 1956  
George Sherburn, ed. *The Correspondence of Alexander Pope*. 5 vols. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Twickenham  
*The Twickenham Edition of the Poems of Alexander Pope*. Ed. by John Butt. 11 vols. London: Methuen. 1939-67.
- Wood 1775  
Robert Wood. *Essay on the Original Genius of Homer*. London: Hughs.