

Homer as an Oral Tradition

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The Homerist's idea of an oral tradition is necessarily different from that of the students of a living oral tradition. Homer is a text and Homeric orality is a matter of philology. Homerists' notions of oral tradition will thus be mediated by textuality, and Homer's orality can only be accessed through those features that survive the song's transcription.

Regardless of the existence of written texts surrounding an epic tradition, the tradition is an *oral* one if it is *performed* periodically and in more than one locale. The tradition's expansion in place and survival in time, externally manifested in its transformation into writing, is manifested internally in the ideology of epic *kléos*, glory as conferred on a hero by poetry. The hero's *kléos* can become the song's *kléos* in a self-conscious awareness that is particularly clear in Homer. (This is not mere literary sophistication, but a tradition's consciousness of the possibilities of its own medium.)

Performance not only constitutes the dimension of the tradition's persistence through time; it also focuses the researcher's interest on the tradition's textual reflection. Performance is an essential bundling of hermeneutic features of an oral tradition that should inform our study of the tradition as text. As performance, the tradition is a matter of stylized, intensified speech, so that the study of pragmatics and spoken language can be brought to bear on the study of the tradition as text. Two features seem to me of particular importance here:

(1) The poem as cognitive flow. Any text, regardless of its degree of "writteness," is linear and can be processed only in a cognitive flow through time. This processual character is clearest in speech, as it is produced and "decoded" on the spot by speaker and listener(s). This does not change when a speech has a more formal, elevated character, or when the production in performance is in fact the reproduction of a previous discourse. In either case, the processual features of spoken language will be

regularized and stylized. Such stylization is visible in an oral tradition's lines and/or in its metrical/formulaic segments.

(2) The performance as a deictic "now." The performer's cognitive processes, whether seen as speech or as inspired memory, are necessarily a matter of the performance's present. This reality is reflected in the deictic orientation (temporal, spatial) of the poem's performance: temporal deixis tends to be centered on the performer's "now." When the performer's cognitive processes constitute the verbalization of visual aggregates of information, the result is the experience of the epic reality "here and now," in the context of the performance; the Homeric tradition at any rate does not seem to create the illusion (frequent in written narrative) that the tale's reality is observed and experienced "on the spot," in the past of the epic action. The representation of reality, in other words, is theatrical, with the performer and his audience engaging in a pretended version of what Bühler (1990) called *demonstratio ad oculos*.

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