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Notopoulos, James A., "Studies in Early Greek Oral Poetry", pp. 1-77 in Harvard Studies in Classical Philology, Vol. 68. Cambridge, Harvard, Oxford, 1964.

Homeric Question

p. 49 It is the influence of the Newer Criticism that has led to some of the finest criticism we have of the Greek drama, which is one of the significant achievements of modern classical scholarship. However, the poet, like the god Glaucus, is encrusted with the Homeric Question, and there is some danger that the oral formulaic style will be added. These are relevant but do not constitute the heart of early Greek poetry. A survey shows that the mentality underlying the criticism of early Greek poetry is largely logical, a product of the philologist's training and temperament. It is a by-product of ~~the~~ Alexandrian athetesis, to the extent that as recently as 1930 Jacoby's edition of Hesiod's Theogony is filled with excisions amounting to nearly half the poem. With respect to the Homeric Question, no poetics can rest on it whether we base it on the analysts or the unitarians. Neither side based its literary criticism on an intimate knowledge of the form and mentality of oral poetry. Some of their criteria may turn out to be right but for the wrong reason. For example, layers may be discernible in oral poetry but that is not due to x, y, z poets, but is the result of a bard's working with traditional themes which he weaves into the architecture of his poem. Conversely, the unity of the unitarians may be a subjective one, having no bearing on the unity of a poem produced by oral methods. Much of the Homeric Question is the product of trying to adjust a poem to a preconceived mentality that is an obstacle to understanding older literature. An oral poetics demands a transformation from a bookish mentality to one which apprehends books merely as modes of preservation of oral poetry. Only with that transformation will the mist be clarified.

p. 50 Wolf was wrong in not believing that long oral poems are possible.

p. 57 It is the Alexandrians, however, who developed literary criticism into the kind that has formed the framework for all treatment of early Greek poetry. They were the first to use logical consistency, resulting in their device of anthesis, rejection of spurious lines, passages, episodes, parts of books. This was to lead to the Homeric Question as posed by Wolf.²⁰ Such a road can no longer lead us to an understanding of oral poetry. We must in groping toward an oral poetics by-pass the later quarrels and get as close as possible to the mentality of the audience that listened to Demodocus. It will free our criticism of many errors of the past and guide us to an evaluation of poetry as poetry.

Footnote 20 See Companion to Homer 234-265. [~~by J.A. Davison (London 1962)~~]

p. 60 The word poetics involves creation, and the question has arisen whether or not individual creation is possible in oral poetry. This question must be faced if we are to make a valid search for an oral poetics. Parry's work has solved some of the past problems of Homeric scholarship by showing that they were irrelevant to Homer, but in their place other problems have arisen, hydra-headed. These will continue to be the major problem in classical scholarship in our time. Two main questions arise for our consideration: first, what is the exact status of the Homeric poem between its oral creation by Homer in recitation and the time of Pisisstratus when our sources reveal a written text?³³ The second deals with the consequences of Parry's study of the mechanics involved in oral verse-making.

Footnote 33 A. B. Lord, Singer of Tales 150-157; Companion to Homer 193-197.