

Beye, Charles Rowan, The Iliad, the Odyssey, and the Epic Tradition (Garden City, N. Y. Anchor Books, Doubleday & Co., Inc) 1966

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p. 1 It is a paradox that the Old Testament and the Homeric epics, which are the most prominent and influential works of literature in the Western world, have such obscure authorship. Perhaps this is some sort of final justification of New Criticism because we are left with almost nothing but the texts themselves to consider. Greek historical thinking always insisted upon ascribing every act, no matter how general or sweeping, to the creation of a single person, and their tradition commonly maintained that the Iliad and Odyssey were composed by a certain Homer, a blind singer of poetry from the island of Chios, who lived at the latest in the ninth century B.C.

p. 3 Virgil was literate, a writer who spent ten years slowly fashioning his lines, often no more than a few a day. . . .

p. 3 Any scholarly and critical understanding of Homer today depends upon theories of oral poetry. These theories more or less inspire our notions of the poet's manner of composition. They also help to supply at best a tricky and unreliable index or gauge to the degree of originality in the poems. . . . We shall never know whether or not such a war was ever actually fought, or whether Helen was ever first cause . . . , but the archaeological investigations begun by Schliemann at Troy and Mycenae in the latter part of the nineteenth century and continued there and elsewhere to this day make it abundantly clear that at least the world of Homer's Achaians whom we call Mycenaeans did in fact exist. The epic then is not a fairy tale, nor altogether fiction. Somehow the saga tradition which had origins in fact had the means to maintain itself beyond the collapse and disappearance of this Achaian or Mycenaean world in the eleventh century B.C. into a time when a Homer spoke, even to the moment when what he spoke was written down. This writing is important since

p. 4/ what we have is only the written text which represents a process and mentality scarcely earlier than three hundred years after the Achaians were gone.

One is faced, then, with the existence of these two lengthy epics describing or at least alluding to a world which ended in the eleventh century together with the fact that there was no system of writing or any system capable of transmitting these epics to the time of the making up of the texts we know. Some sort of oral tradition is the obvious solution, yet until this century few

p. 5/ scholars could believe that it was possible to carry in the head, not to mention pass on, something like the Iliad, which is roughly fifteen and a half thousand lines long.

p. 6 This theory of the creation of Greek formulaic poetry is, of course, an article of faith. It is, however, based on many accurate and penetrating observations of epic fact. The alternative is to believe that a series of ballads narrating short episodes were finally made into lengthy epics, our Iliad and Odyssey, when the discovery of writing removed the burden from memory. This is the basis upon which nineteenth-century criticism rested. Analogies of a sort were to hand; the Finnish epic Kalevala came about in this way, and Teutonic saga tradition revealed the same form. The Iliad and Odyssey, however, are each so obviously integral wholes, and so far superior to these other epics that this alternative theory is repellent, especially in view of the possibility of generations of memories, which retained phrases, motifs, and legends.