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"Have We Homer's Iliad?" by Adam Parry

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p. 179 It is, against all hope, our dream come true: we can see and hear Homer sing! There is no doubt that such a dream animated the ardent though precise mind of Parry himself; and I hope it is not wrong to say that almost all of what Lord says in his fascinating book assumes this essential equivalence of the Yugoslav bard with the author of the Iliad.

With this belief Kirk disagrees. He is not alone in doing so: there are those who have objected on general grounds, e. g. Wade-Gery in The Poet of the Iliad (Cambridge, 1952); and there are others who ignore the whole question, speaking of Homer in terms which any validity at all of Parry's and Lord's word would show to be wholly inapplicable to Homer. And Lesky himself in his careful and magisterial survey (op. cit. pp. 53-8) seems to bring up the analogy, only finally to reject it in favor of a Homer who wrote and cross-checked in writing, and was far more like a literary poet than like the minstrel in the Serbian coffee-house.^o

Footnote 6. This does not mean that Lesky rejects Parry's proof of the traditional nature of Homeric diction and much that the study of Yugoslav epic can tell us. He is only aware of the limitation of the proof as I stated it above (n.4).

Footnote 4 (p.178) That the style is traditional and therefore oral (for composition in performance and not dependent on the use of the written word) may be taken as proved: it is not necessarily proved that our Iliad and Odyssey were composed orally. See below, pp. 210 ff., and my forthcoming introduction to The Making of Homeric Verse, and Collected Papers of Milman Parry (Oxford: Clarendon Press)

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p. 180 Parry avoided the old Homeric Question: was the Iliad (to concentrate for the sake of convenience on the greater poem), substantially as we now have it, the product of a single designer, or is our text some sort of composite to which many hands contributed? The proof of the traditional character of Homeric diction seemed to Parry to make this question almost otiose: even if one singer did put together our Iliad, his debt to the tradition was so great that the song could still be said to be a direct manifestation of the tradition and the work of the generations of bards who made and preserved that tradition. The important thing was the style, and above that, the mood, of heroic poetry. This belonged to all bards when the tradition was in its vigor. The particular responsibility for our Iliad was incidental. Such seem to have been Parry's feelings on the question. At any rate, the revelation of how thoroughly the language of the Iliad is controlled by a formula system which it took generations of bards to form, was, as Parry clearly saw, one more hopeless impediment to any analytic solution of the old Homeric Question: the style of both Iliad and Odyssey was so uniform in respect of formula and meter that chronological layers or different hands could not conceivably be detected. Parry therefore contented himself with defining Homer for practical purposes as "either the text of the Iliad and Odyssey or the poet or poets of these poems,"^o and never entering into the question further, except to state that old-fashioned analysis was impossible and to imply that it was irrelevant.

7. Cf. Paul Shorey's review of M. Parry's theses, CP, 23(1928), 305-6.