

Lesky, Albin, A History of Greek Literature (Bern: A. Francke) 1957/58 ; Methune & Co. Ltd. , 1966

p. 37 Certainly we have to postulate many centuries of epic poetry before Homer, and we must think of this poetry as 'oral composition' of the type whose techniques we have outlined above.¹ We now have a clearer idea of the broad mass of material on which Homeric poetry is based; and our new knowledge does nothing to support the conception of written earlier forms rehandled by compilers. The form in which we have to put the Homeric question today is, 'What is the connection between the epics as we have them and oral composition?' A few moments' consideration of the techniques of oral composition will show that they are all present in the Iliad and Odyssey. The most striking technical feature - the use of repetitive formulae - is particularly strongly marked in Homer. Difficulties of metre may be partly responsible.

How shall we answer this question? Shall we say that the Homeric poems belong solidly in this context of poetry orally conceived and orally transmitted? Some of Parry's school seem inclined to draw this conclusion. Pure oral poetry, however, is never repeated twice in the same form²; thus they have to explain the fixity of the text by supposing that an oral performance gained such striking success that an immediate transcript was made. This is a new approach and a dangerous one, leading to the misinterpretation of great poetry.

Admittedly the length of the Iliad is no argument against this view. Among oral heroic poems we find such examples as the epic of Avdo Mededovic with more than 12,000 verses. We can do better by looking at the plot of the Iliad. There is indeed a parallel here also from south Slavic poetry, but the differences are so great that we are justified in thinking that the poet of the Iliad could write. The decisive arguments for this view are drawn from the many cross-references, often widely separated, which modern scholars have pointed out.

¹ See p. 16 f.

² The dictum of Sterling Dow (Class. Weekly 49, 1956, 197) 'Verbatim oral transmission of a poem composed orally and not written down is unknown' has been challenged recently by G.S. Kirk, 'Homer and Modern Oral Poetry: Some Confusions', Class. Quart. 54, 1960, 271. From observations of contemporary oral epic on its own ground he concludes that faithful transmission is possible. But even if this were applicable to the Iliad and Odyssey, the burning question would still be whether they could possibly have been orally conceived.