

## Review Article

### The Ancient Art of Oral Poetry

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Among poets of consequence in the history of European literature, no name is more familiar than Homer's. Millions who have never read a word of him know he existed. Two reasons have supported a unique status for him: he is massive and monumental, and also, inexplicably, he is there, present at the beginning, the first, the oldest, the archetype. Over the last half century, this general esteem has gained a new dimension. He can now be read, or rather listened to, as the prototype of the poetic word orally composed and orally recited without benefit of writing.

This discovery, if that be the right word for an explanation of his style which now seems obvious, originated in a study of the formulaic and repetitive character of the text in which the style is preserved. Theory deduced from this fact was then confirmed by empirical evidence gathered in the Balkans, by observing and recording the formulaic and thematic practices of certain oral "singers of tales" in the villages and countryside, these performances being regarded as contemporary survivals of an ancient art. Comparative studies supplied further analogical evidence, drawn from the styles of early "epic" or "heroic" poetry preserved in other areas of the world. In the meantime, two related disciplines, one extending from the nineteenth century, the other formed very recently in the twentieth, have been converging upon the same problem. Anthropology, responding in particular to the intellectual leadership of French science and scholarship, has studied in increasing quantity the oral "literatures" and "myths" of preliterate societies, in areas of Africa and the Americas, where these have survived long enough to be recorded by literate investigators. In America, the proliferation of new media of mass communication has encouraged a new interest in communication as such. What are its modes, its methods, and its aims? Within the range of these problems, an investigation of the modes and effects of oral communication plays an

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increasingly prominent role. If, as the writings of McLuhan and Ong suggest, the culture of our own generation is seeing a revival of orality as a viable mode of communication with a long historical ancestry, a mode moreover which has advantages over the "linear" methods of the literate word, are we to look into Homer for additional light upon this important question?

*The Winged Word*,<sup>1</sup> Berkley Peabody's important contribution to the study of "Oral Theory and the Epos" (the title of the first section of his first chapter), brushes in close contact as it were with these larger questions, while avoiding any involvement with them. But he does confront and attempt to solve one "Homeric question" which it is fair to say many classical scholars, let alone the general public are scarcely aware of. What precisely was this meter in which Homer composed? Or rather, since it is easy to define each "line" on paper as a "hexameter," marked off and divided by written symbols into six "feet," each "foot" adding up to two "long" syllables or one "long" plus two "shorts," with each hexameter always adding up to the equivalent of 24 "shorts," neither more nor less—How did it come about that such an unusually formal and rigorous system of counting, standardized within a fixed number of possible variations, could impose itself upon the rhythms of the Greek tongue? The hexameter is so familiar, so neat in its careful elaboration, so manageable, that its essential strangeness escapes notice, especially as the Roman poets adapted it to Latin, in which tongue it had until recently been known and scanned and translated by generations of schoolboys. What of the other meters of Greek poetry? Do they exhibit the same kinds of elaborate fixity? Does any known verse of other cultures combine such complexity with such regularity?

The question was asked and an answer proposed (though not dogmatically) in the first quarter of this century by the French scholar Antoine Meillet. The hexameter he suggested was a "foreign" meter (deriving from whatever source "foreign" might indicate) not native to Indo-European tongues. Some proof of this is visible in the manipulation which the Greek vocabulary has had to undergo to fit into the meter, producing "epic" forms which are artificial. Peabody grounds his own ex-

position of oral theory in a firm rejection of this suggestion. The hexameter, he argues, like other Greek meters, developed within a general metrical tradition which was Indo-European. Its particular prototypes can be seen in the earliest surviving poetries of Persia ("Iranian") and India, the ancestors of classical Sanskrit poetry. As we examine the relationship between the Greek verse and these "eastern" prototypes, we are on the way to discerning also the general principles of phonetic association upon which all genuinely oral composition proceeds, anywhere in the world.

Peabody pursues the proof of this thesis, in general perspective and closely reasoned detail, with conviction and commitment and, it might be said, a degree of fanaticism. Both method and conclusions are vulnerable to criticisms of a kind which I shall describe later. But his book overall is too close to the realities of the oral situation, it contains too many insights which penetrate into the character of the oral-linguistic medium and the secrets of the mentality that uses it, to be brushed aside or ignored as the work of a specialist with limited appeal to a narrow audience. Yet Peabody makes few concessions to his readers. To follow his argument is a formidable exercise. His text (pp. 1–272) is convoluted, occupying less space than notes and appendices (pp. 273–562). The notes supply a wealth of reference and information which often read more easily and are more convincing. The usefulness of the book is crippled by the lack of a general index. Bibliography can be traced through a name-index of authorities, but laboriously. Stylistically the work suffers from being overwritten with frequent complexity of jargon which has the effect of concealing from view an analysis which, presented in simpler terms, would have more immediate effect. Yet I know of no treatise which seeks to engage so intimately with the phonological and phonetic substance of the oral compositional process. Peabody is not the first to explore the components and continuities of the Greek oral style. But as one reads the competing theories of previous exponents of descriptive metrics, especially as applied to the Homeric sphere of colometric theory, formula analysis, geometric patterns and "monumental" composition, one receives a continual impres-

sion of a critique which is still reading a text, looking at it as a visible body to be dissected or assembled. What Peabody does is to try to listen, to see if he can catch the incantation of the verse and somehow describe its own acoustic laws and methods.

The work deserves to be recommended to an informed audience who are unlikely to have the patience to read it through. The summary which follows may help to perform this service. Its length seems necessary if I am to avoid doing violence by omission of essential detail to the careful continuity of Peabody's argument.

Chapter One, styled "The Approach," opens with the argument that there is a specific oral style of composition, distinct from literate styles, which has a necessary existence as the vehicle of the "oral tradition" by which the continuities of a culture are maintained. Actual presence of the style in a given text is detectable by criteria defining five types of "redundancy" or "regularity" in the language. These are phonemic patterns, like rhyme or assonance, formulaic patterns, occurring in recurrent "morphemic clusters," periodic or syntactic patterns, thematic patterns (by which Peabody appears also to identify the repetition of similar syllables in different words) and finally the "Song Test" (1-8). Chapters Three to Six, the reader will discover, in effect explore the substance of these tests, in the order given, explication of the Song Test being reserved for the last chapter. The remainder of Chapter One with Chapter Two explores the problem of the Greek hexameter, as used by Hesiod in what Peabody assumes to be its earliest available Greek form (9-11). Greek is an Indo-European tongue; its meters other than the hexameter have Indo-European analogies. The hexameter is no exception, being a form developed from the meter used in the Iranian Gathas ("Songs") preserved in the collection known as the Avesta, and the Vedas of India (20-29). Chapter Two, "The Shape of Utterance" (30-65) examines these "eastern" prototypes. They are used to express religious utterance, in the form of rituals, incantations, hymns and the like, indicating the original purpose of metrical speech and hence the general character of the oral tradition out of which the Greek epos developed. Narrative style intruded on these forms only later as a gloss (30-

31). The Gathas are composed in "lines" of between eight and twelve syllables. These are syntactically separate units and form a series of padas ("feet," the term being used in an extended sense). The padas combine in twos or threes to form verses, and the verses combine in twos or threes to form stanzas. The Vedic meters have a similar base but are more regularized and in some Vedic "lines" quantity (rather than mere syllable count) begins to emerge as a factor at the end of the line; "the rules are the same as for Greek" (37). In later classical Sanskrit verse, quantity extends over the whole line; the rule of a "long" as equivalent to two "shorts" emerges and the caesura, hitherto a feature of these eastern meters, as of Greek, begins to be eliminated through the process of "Sandhi," a blurring of junctures between words (38–45). However, syllable count still remains fundamental. The line of development from Avesta to the Vedas to classical Sanskrit can be discerned in parallel within the structure of the Greek hexameter. While its syllable count varies between eleven and seventeen, the "mora" count (in which a long syllable equals two short ones) is a constant twenty-three or twenty-four. This has been achieved by combining two padas of 12 syllables each or three of eight, the original junctures being indicated by the Greek caesuras (45–51). The "irregular" quantities encountered in hexameter verse indicate that the original base of the meter was syllabic and not quantitative (51–55). The "long" syllables came about through "syllable collapse" (55–64), so that the hexameter is not that artificial rhythm rigidly controlled by the quantity rule which it is often envisaged to be. The Avestan, the Vedic and the Greek metrical developments are alike (65).

Guided by this view of the ancestry of the Greek epos, Chapter Three, "The Form of Words" examines the structure of the hexameter in terms of the colon (66–96) and the formula (96–117). The text of Hesiod's *Works and Days* (referred to in this review henceforth as "Hesiod") will constitute the basic evidence for such a study (66). The cola are the initial units of composition, being "groups of syllables" (forming a whole word or words) usually but not necessarily four to a hexameter. Their arrangement governs the caesura, not vice versa. The last one is

habitually lengthy and reflects the eight-syllable pada of Avestan verse. The cola can group themselves into two pairs, each pair forming a hemistich which recalls the twelve-syllable "line" of Avestan. Hesiod's verses are tabulated according to types of distribution of syllable units. Twelve such types account for three quarters of the Greek total (66–70). The quantities (as opposed to syllable counts) of the meter are created at "junction points" (72–73). Cola are "single" or "compound," sometimes "eccentric." The final long one takes various forms. These varieties are tabulated statistically (73–95).

"Formulas" (rendered familiar to students of oral theory by Milman Parry's work) are examined colometrically, as consisting of single cola or aggregates of such. The longer ones usually form hemistiches (104–106). There is a separate category of "set phrases" (107–110). These various components of the verse enable the singer to sing, assisted by the fact that idioms and rhythms of ordinary speech (as learned for example by children) are reflected in his composition (110–113). The cola are the basic raw material of composition. The composer moves on from one colon to the next. There are up to five possible "points of decision" for him in the verse (114–116).

Cola are units of rhythm, not in themselves meaningful until combined into "syntactical periods," "clauses," or "sentences." These become the subject of Chapter Four ("The Extension of the Clause" 118–167). The compositional process advances by accretion: first the pada, then the metrical "line" of the eastern prototype. This is also a "clause," and is itself composed of two elements. Padas are then combined to form "utterances" or "sentences," the largest of which becomes the "stanza" (119). These patterns appear in the Avesta and the Vedas and indeed in all Indo-European prototypes and are reproduced in Greek stanzaic construction (120–121). The internal structure of the hexameter is equivalent to a combination (as has been said) of two or three padas. Hexameters frequently combine into couplets, each equivalent to four padas of the Avesta (122). However, the hexameter often behaves internally as though these padas were "enjambéd" or fused together. This is a Greek and not an Eastern phenomenon (123). In Hesiod only

165 hexameters are “syntactically separate,” about 20%—a figure also true of Homer. In the majority of these a two-clause construction or something like it is perceptible. Such “coincidence of pada and clause periods” reflects Eastern metrical tradition (125). As for the larger “stanza,” this also is related to Eastern prototypes, showing a long term trend moving from simple two-clause “incantations” to “sets” of paratactic clauses, a trend demonstrable in Hesiod’s text (126–129). However, hexameters also enjamb with each other (135–143), another exclusively Greek habit. Thus while Hesiod yields only 165 single (syntactically separable) hexameters, he yields 250 formed into 125 couplets and 413 yielding larger “periods” of three or more hexameters (143). The single type can under analysis be seen to compose a prototypical “stanza” of hexameter length (147). The structural terms “haploid” and “diploid” (introduced as headings of sections at 143, 152, but not otherwise mentioned or explained till 155) describe ascending stages of “incremental” stanza construction in which the metrical unit is one hexameter, itself formed as a “two or three pada verse” (155), then increased to a hexameter couplet, then to three-and four-hexameter groups, in which the couplet becomes the new “unit,” so that historically the epos grows incrementally, using one-cola formulas, then compound formulas, then compounding formulas into a pada, then combining two or three padas into a hexameter, then combining two of these into a couplet (a “haploid” stanza), then fusing couplets into “diploid” stanzas (161). Yet the haploid construction remains dominant; only one quarter of Hesiod is “diploid” (165).

Chapter Five moves on to consider “The Responions of Thought.” The true “thought” or content of oral epos is traditional, to be found in the formulaic and stanzaic patterns of the text, not in the conscious intentions of the singer-composer. “The thought of an oral tradition belongs properly to the discourse of that tradition and not to any individual” (172). The singer controls only “phenomenalised meaning” (179), in the form of narrative features. The thought is the “wisdom” or the “message” of the oral composition (168, 170). It expresses itself in the patterns of “theme” and stanza. The thematic struc-

ture can be illustrated by a passage (Hesiod 427–440) in which syllables of words and word themselves are found echoing each other as the verse proceeds, as in *gar . . . arousin . . . bousin . . . aroun . . . heteron . . . heteron* etc. (179–183). The epos in this way is always presenting an “immediate present idea” (188). Phonetic redundancy of diction, producing alliteration, anaphora, chiasmus, and the like, expresses “responsions of thought” (189–192). There is also present that assistance to the “Song” produced by musical instruments. Traditional composition has been associated with “hand activity” (197; this would apply particularly to drum and strings). Phonetic echoes are vital to oral composition. The fable of The Hawk and The Nightingale (Hesiod) and the episode of The Building of the Raft (*Odyssey*) exemplify this (198–206). On the other hand the larger structures of narrative proper are secondary, a “super-structure” imposed upon the original *padas* and stanzas (206–213). The “thought” of the tradition is found in the “theme”; it resides in a “generalised memory,” while the tale told by the singer is deployed at a second “diachronic level” of the memory; the song is a “feedback” (213–215).

It comes therefore as no surprise when Peabody in his last chapter, “The Flight of Song,” argues that the story told in the epos is a secondary feature. It is not here that we look for basic clues to the character of oral composition. Nevertheless, “song” (his preferred term) is “what the singer remembers as the truth,” which means “the memory of songs sung.” It cannot therefore be “imaginative”; it is less essential to traditional discourse than theme; it “regulates” theme like a kind of “super-ego”; it is “remembered experience” (216–218). Yet song can apparently take over from theme, or restrict it and “garble” it (220). The two would seem to interplay with each other. It is wrong to perceive “theme and song patterns only in rapid narrative” (221). Yet in fact the two (theme versus song) are difficult to separate. Thematic units can grow into short narratives, by introduction of narrative formulas (222) and “thematically salient” formulas “fade into the general phenomenalisation of the song.” In examples like the Raft Building (*Odyssey*) and the Generations of Man (Hesiod) we can see “semantic decorum” becoming “the

first shadow of song," usually after extending beyond four or five verses (223). At greater intervals of about eleven verses "phonic echo" forms an "interlacing web," though not always predictably. The time span of such phonic response systems is about one minute. Possibly they represent "a mental process which synthesises our phenomenalized reality" (224).

Connections beyond this span are achieved by song alone (224). To identify these "song patterns" one first identifies and eliminates all formulaic and thematic features. "Song" is what is left (225–227). To explicate song as a superstructure, Peabody turns to the extended episode of Achilles' Shield (*Iliad* 18). In its context it is "unusual" (231) and indeed the mission which elicits it, the visit of Thetis, Achilles' mother, to Hephaestus to obtain arms for her son, is "all but needless" (234). What has happened is that the singer improvising as he goes commits an initial "accident" (231) by letting Achilles say "I will return to battle" (*Il.* 18, 114) when he logically cannot do so, being without armour; the statement is "accidentally premature." The singer realises his mistake as he sings, but is unable to undo it—"a verse once uttered cannot be recalled" (234)—so his verse stumbles (*Il.* 18, 115–126) and then recovers by retracing and re-singing in reverse order what he had related to this point. But, alas, he then commits a blunder by letting Achilles be prematurely re-armed (*Il.* 18, 165–214). This results from over-recollecting and re-using an inappropriate formula from Book Eleven, a "crucial Homeric nod" (233–234). He then proceeds to re-sing (in summary form) parts of Book One, so as to bring Thetis to Hephaestus (who is substituted for the Zeus of Book One). By this route he reaches the theme of "arms" (*entea, tenchea*), picked up from before the point where the original "accident" occurred. "Retrogression is an important song feature" (232) used in this instance to remedy the "loss of song" and supply its "recall" (233).

In Peabody's concluding pages (266–272) this rationale of Homeric composition is applied to Hesiod, whose text offers an initial difficulty: "The several sections . . . are developed to a size that makes them like complete songs in themselves" (237). Even in the "Strife Passage," Hesiod's first section, "the nar-

rowing of semantic scope . . . does not occur in a gradual, even way . . . rather in a series of steps or plateaus . . .” (239). Nevertheless, the poem overall must have that kind of associative continuity proper to oral composition. Disconnection is only apparent. It disappears when one perceives the singer employing those twin devices of the *Iliad*, “retrogression” and “remembered song” (243–245). Their employment appears internally within the initial Strife Passage (245) and also supplies linkage between the subsequent main sections of the entire poem, which Peabody here identifies as “The Pandora Myth, The Kings, The Harangue on Justice, and the great Catalogue” (244). The Shield of the *Iliad*, functioning as remembered song—Peabody is thinking in particular of the description in it of a legal dispute—supplies the recollection required to assist composition of the Harangue; or, putting it the other way round, “the re-emergence of dik- in the Harangue prepares the way for the development of the Shield Scene clump” (255). A second major influence in Hesiod’s overall composition is supplied by the “Paris Song” (245). The identity of this portion of the *Iliad* (in Book Three and a large part of Four) is defended in an important note (480). It “casts a peculiar shadow on the Works and Days” (245), supplying such “thematic” recollections as *neikos* (quarrel), Helen (equals Hesiod’s Pandora), and congruent names like Paris-Perses, Pandarus-Pandora (246). Even Hesiod’s Generations of Man is introduced (at line 106) by a thematic linkage with the same fourth book of the *Iliad*, which turns on the word “crest,” as well as by the theme of “strife” (248–250). Recollection of some song passages in the *Odyssey* explains linkage between Hesiod’s Hawk and Nightingale and his Pandora (251–252), and reveals that the two birds represent rival singers (253). The Harangue is followed by Hesiod’s “Principal Section,” amounting to two-thirds of the poem and containing “two calendar catalogues one of seasons and one of days” (256). The second of these revives thematic material recollected from the Strife Passage (258–259), and also “relates directly to the first section of the Harangue” (260). Peabody admits however that “sections” of the Song of the Seasons follow “a strict non-linguistic chronological sequence” (260), recollection of the Paris Song

having already “faded away” (258). The final Catalogue of Days “depends directly on the Harangue” even though Perses is no longer mentioned (262–263).

The poem overall is unified by the “controlling ‘theme’ ” expressed in the proem to Zeus. This “dominates all sections” (264). Its effect is reinforced by recollection of a passage in Hesiod’s *Theogony* describing the offspring of Zeus’ marriage with Themis. Pairing of names, like Zeus with Themis, has significance for oral composition; so also the “pair of names” Hesiod and Perses, implying contest between rival singers, only one of whom is Zeus-inspired. Possibly Perses recalls the “wise Perses,” a Titan in the *Theogony*, Prometheus (a figure in both poems) being also a Titan (265–266). To be sure, “the peculiar feature of the controlling theme is the personal aspect,” which is connected with “contests of singers,” so that the whole poem becomes a “Contest-Song” (267–268). The existence of this contest genre of oral poetry is supported by comparative evidence (270–271). However, “the principal song form . . . is difficult to assess . . . there is little to identify” (268–269). Possibly it is “a specialised type of religious song” with an analogue in the Homeric Hymn to Hermes (269). Or is it like “a speech from a giant heroic-epic” (270)?

The poem was however sung in a culture “more and more dependent on material technology for its survival . . . Somehow the song is overly aware . . .” Through its words “we take a very terrible look deep within the dying eyes of a tremendously brave and ancient past” (272).

To construct this account Peabody has drawn on a large apparatus of previous scholarship, mastery of which is sufficiently indicated in the “Notes” and “Bibliography.” Immediately evident is his reliance on the fundamentals established by Milman Parry: oral poetry is a phenomenon *sui generis*, and its composition is formulaic. The researches of Albert Lord have added emphasis to the “theme” as a larger component of the style (one which had already begun to attract Parry’s attention). For Peabody, thematic structures become based on phonemic patterns—an important advance in scope and precision. Colometric analysis derives from the work of American scholars who

followed Parry (O'Neill and Porter; the importance of cola had however already been recognized by Wilamowitz and H. Fraenkel). Contributions from a century of scholarship, chiefly German and French, have been drawn on to support the thesis that the Greek epos must be understood as belonging in a larger historical context. In order to pursue a simpler "eastern" prototype for the Greek hexameter, he revives the "developmental" approach to problems of Greek metrics first proposed and promoted in Germany in the nineteenth century (Bergk and Usener, and later Wilamowitz). French scholarship (Meillet) and Slavic (Jakobson) are drawn on to explicate the syllabic basis of Indo-European verse, even while rejecting the parallel notion that verse rhythm responds to quantitative variation (Meillet). An imaginative analysis of the psycho-dynamics which inform the mental processes of the oral composer recalls French investigation of this problem. (Jousse; the relevance of much of this European scholarship had of course been noted by Parry himself.) Almost as an aside, Peabody applies to the Greek epos a lesson from linguistics, drawn from the influential perception that in the rhythms of poetry we hear echoes of the "phonological patterns" of ordinary language (Jakobson). Insistence on the fact that the "thought" of an oral tradition (as opposed to "idea") is "inherent in its actual linguistic practice" is supported by recent behavioristic theory (Skinner). The resources of Sanskrit scholarship (Arnold, Macdonell, Winternitz, Taraporewala, Keith) are drawn on to supply a foundation for placing the Greek hexameter in a context of the Avestan and Vedic meters. This resumé indicates only the range of sources and authorities cited, not their volume. Regrettably, Adam Parry's edition of his father's writings (*The Making of Homeric Verse*, Oxford, 1971) is ignored, as also is my own *Preface to Plato* (Harvard, 1963) though both appear to have been drawn on.

Peabody handles the Greek texts with agreeable dexterity. Desire to press his thesis can betray him into some slips of translation and twists of interpretation. This is particularly true of his management (the best word) of the Shield episode in Homer's *Iliad*, intended to demonstrate "accident" and "mistake" on the part of the singer. The demonstration retains

doubtful validity, despite its imaginative reconstruction of a singer's mental processes. But errors in philology—and there are not many—are a minor matter. It is more important to inquire whether there are larger criticisms to which this account of the Greek epos is vulnerable, and which go to its heart.

Spoken language does not fossilize. The student of orality cannot, like the archaeologist, rely on the "hard" evidence of artifacts. His explorations, when all is said and done, even after making full use of comparative materials, have to rely very considerably on a mixture of psychological intuition and common sense, avoiding if possible a commitment to dogma. Criticisms, however fundamental—as in this case they seem to me to be—are best framed in the interrogative mood.

1. Hesiod's *Works and Days* is presented as a "Song," representing the closest we can get to the original forms of Greek oral composition. It is "archaic" in the sense in which Homer's epic tales are not. Can we really be sure of this? Peabody himself is perhaps not quite certain. Chronology for one thing scarcely supports it. Quite recently textual proof has been offered (in my *Greek Concept of Justice*, Chapter Eleven) that Hesiod's treatment of justice, oral as its style may be, nevertheless draws upon certain episodes of both *Iliad* and *Odyssey*.

2. Hesiod's asserted priority over Homer supports the important conclusion that narration as such is only a secondary element of oral composition, a "superstructure" imposed upon material of a different character, as seen in Hesiod, whose "song" is committed to singing "Wisdom," not (for the most part) telling a story. If however Hesiod's priority over Homer is doubtful, so also is the thesis that narrative is a secondary characteristic of the oral style. May it not after all be the primary one?

3. A considerable part of Hesiod is catalogue poetry, as Peabody admits. The rest of the poem is made up of "sections" which are identified as a "Strife Song," a "Pandora Song," a "Generations of Man Song," a "Fable," a "Harangue," a "Song of the Seasons." There are also groups of verses ("stanzas") retailing aphorisms, proverbs and the like. Associative connection is sought, sometimes rather desperately, between

these apparently disparate elements to demonstrate that the whole poem is one continuous "song" (though in his conclusion Peabody seems to back away a little from this). But is the poem not more plausibly to be perceived as a congeries of materials, in which the singer is deprived of those "continuities" which assist the progress of genuinely free composition? Is not the attempt to unify the poem, in the sense that Homer's narratives are unified, an artificial exercise?

4. The poem's intentions are overtly didactic. This was recognized in antiquity. Its content is indeed "wisdom" as Peabody defines it. What real support is there for the opinion, widely if unconsciously shared among scholars, including Peabody, that "wisdom literature" constitutes the most antique form of oral composition? that catalogues, religious and moral maxims, and ritualized statements were in circulation as free compositions anterior to epics?

5. The presumption that they were leads Peabody easily to the Sanskrit material as prototypical of oral composition. Much of it is indeed "incantation," religious in tone, even "mystical." For Peabody, it is in these religious hymns that the genius of oral song was born. The barriers of chronology to be climbed in order to reach this conclusion are formidable. The surviving Iranian material postdates the far eastern conquests of Alexander the Great. Tradition in fact asserts that what existed prior to this date was destroyed. As for the Vedas, scholars are free to postulate ancient originals if they choose but no Indian poetry that we have can predate the earliest evidence for Indian writing, in the third century B.C., and most of it is much later. How is one to be sure whether this body of Sanskrit verse responds to the rules of a strictly oral style, rather than to rules which have been modified by literate (or more accurately proto-literate) practice?

6. Must not the same doubts surround the allegedly oral character of Avestan and Vedic metrics? Peabody's model for the hexameter is found in a combination of two or three "padas"; their latent presence in the Greek verse is traced with an ingenuity that is often convincing. But, putting aside the chronological difficulty, can we be sure that the rather mechanical formalism

of the pada measures in the texts we have genuinely reproduces the metrics of an oral style, whether Iranian or Indian, in its original freedom?

7. In fact, when it comes to reconstructing the kind of psychological process which the singer undergoes when he sings, Peabody is guided by the Balkan examples rendered so familiar by Lord's work and illustratable in the Parry collection at Harvard. Overall, the Greek epos is explained in terms of two competing models. On the one hand there are the Yugoslav recitations which offer narrative without benefit of wisdom; on the other there is the "eastern" poetry which offers wisdom without benefit of narrative. In Homer it is possible to perceive the two in combination. May his epics not offer the true original models both of oral style and oral function and purpose in a truly oral culture? This is not a possibility which Peabody considers.

There remains however the genuine problem of Homer's meter (and Hesiod's), which Peabody confronts and for which he offers a carefully thought-out solution. Another can be proposed, of quite a different kind, though it is one for which Peabody denies that any evidence exists. The metrical term "foot" is Greek, and most naturally refers to a dance step. The Greek "chorus" defines a group of dancers, not singers, or else the dance itself. The "strophes" and "antistrophes" into which the stanzas they sing are divided are "turns" and "counterturns" of dance movements. Even the word *metron* ("meter") can apply to a measure spaced out on a surface. Is it possible that the origins of the hexameter—as possibly of other Greek meters—were choreographic? that it was a dance measure (in two-four time?) the tempo of which accompanied elocution? In a literate culture like our own, in which choreography has become a separate and silent art, such a notion may seem bizarre. But might not an oral culture encourage such a partnership, in order to reinforce the task of memorizing the uttered word? Rhythmic pleasures, that is to say, (including those induced by musical instruments), were mobilized to assist in the difficult task of placing the traditional wisdom in orally remembered storage. Whatever the truth of this socially motivated explanation, the epos may have originated in dramatic performances of greater

antiquity, later developing its own identity as an independent recitation, but retaining rhythm and music. The reasons for thinking such a theory is plausible lie beyond the limits of this review. What one can say of Peabody's exposition of the problem is that, despite doubts which may surround his particular solution, he cleaves firmly to the phonemic realities which underlie a genuinely oral compositional process. He listens to the singer compounding cola into formulas, formulas into thematic clusters, enclosing clusters in hexameters and hexameters in stanzas, following the lead of the phonetic shapes of the words, by a kind of psychological automatism. It is in these, not in the formation or pursuit of "ideas," as Peabody continually and correctly stresses, that the secrets of oral composition lie. These are the nuts and bolts of the process. Precisely however as one's ear is tuned to hear such rhythms, rather than just see them inscribed on paper, one is tempted to look for analogues, not in the groomed and rather monotonous verses of Sanskrit poetry but in the drumbeat of African and Polynesian recitals, or even the ritualized performance of a rock and roll concert.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Berkley Peabody, *The Winged Word. A Study in the Technique of Ancient Greek Oral Composition as Seen Principally through Hesoid's Works and Days* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1975), pp. xvi + 562.