Parry in Paris: Structuralism, Historical Linguistics, and the Oral Theory

This paper investigates the origins of the Oral Theory as formulated by Milman Parry in Paris during the late 1920s by reexamining the scholarship on which it rests. Parry’s Oral Theory compared the texts of oral performances in Yugoslavia with the Homeric texts in order to shed light on the presumed oral origins of the latter. His work integrated the work of the linguist and Indo-Europeanist Antoine Meillet, the linguist and scholar of oral poetics Matthias Murko, and the anthropologists Lucien Lévy-Bruhl and Marcel Jousse.

Today, the Oral Theory is used in classics and in other fields of the humanities and the social sciences to support a variety of propositions. Often, the foundational strands that went into the creation of the Oral Theory are unknown or no longer acknowledged. As a result, the arguments that Parry and Lord assembled to provide evidence for oral composition of the Homeric epics are now used to provide proof of orality in ancient, medieval, and some contemporary poetries. Thus, the Oral Theory is used to validate a linked set of assumptions about oral composition, composition in performance, the quality of oral poetry, and cognitive processes in “oral societies.” When re-applied to the Homeric poems the argument is at its most circular; when applied to other poetries, caution is advisable.

An alternate depiction of orality—modeled as it was to structurally oppose a Western-type literacy in all its aspects—is proposed in the last parts of the paper.

I wish to thank the two anonymous reviewers for Classical Antiquity for their insightful comments, as well as Classical Antiquity’s wonderful editors Karen Bassi and Mark Griffith for their help and suggestions. The present article is a longer version of a paper presented at the APA meetings in New Orleans in 2003; I thank Tom Haginek for his encouragement to turn the talk into a paper. Thanks are also due to Steve Lansing, reader and editor extraordinaire.
In the second half of the twentieth century the written word began to come under attack from all sides, continuing a trend that had started in linguistics at the beginning of the century. “C’est une étrange chose que l’écriture,” writes the anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss in 1955 in a chapter entitled “Leçon d’écriture” in *Tristes Tropiques*, the book which established his international reputation. Writing, he says, is the handmaiden of empires and cities, its primary function enslavement. Literacy as a virtue and as the crowning achievement of Western civilization was obviously on its way out.

In the humanities the study of orality—as opposed to the study of written texts—crystallized around the ideas of a classicist, Milman Parry, in the 1930s. He and his successor and student Albert Lord rediscovered in the Homeric poems signs of orality—a mode of textual transmission previously thought to exist only among “the primitives,” and to be extinct in the West. Marshall McLuhan, the best-known scholar of communication studies from the 1950s on, recognizes his debt to Albert Lord’s *The Singer of Tales* (1960) in the introduction to his *Gutenberg Galaxy* when he acknowledges that his book was “complementary” to it. For McLuhan, the printed word represented the Western partiality toward linear and sequential thinking processes, whereas other societies—i.e., those without writing—relied on right-brain activities, and experienced the world holistically. Radio and television would reintroduce twentieth-century man (and woman) to oral culture as it existed before Gutenberg facilitated the mass-production of the printed word. A similar viewpoint concerning the revolutionary aspects of alphabetic literacy was adopted by the classicist Eric Havelock (1963), who claimed that the Greeks before Plato had also lived in an entirely oral, face-to-face environment. Research on contemporary oral societies, Havelock believed, had provided present-day scholars with a renewed understanding of what such cultures must have been like. He saw literacy and a literate outlook gradually replacing the spontaneous oral state of mind of the Greeks. Walter Ong, a Jesuit priest and influential biblical and Renaissance scholar, similarly argued that orality is primary, and that literacy had greatly affected many aspects of Western society.

Havelock’s and Ong’s views gave rise to a wide range of hypotheses on related topics, for instance the origin of alphabetic writing and its role in the recording and transmission of Greek epic poetry, generally believed to represent the oldest written literature in the West. The gradual replacement of the oral manner of transmission, of thinking and expression, and the speed at which the transition from oral to literate occurred became the concern of yet other classicists and philologists who attempted to trace the linguistic signature of orality in the

Homerian texts, such as Hoekstra, Kirk, Ruijgh, Nagy, and many others.\textsuperscript{7}\footnote{Hoekstra 1965; Kirk 1962; Ruijgh 1995; Nagy 1996.} More general studies of ancient literacy, for instance the books by W. V. Harris and R. Thomas, attempt to evaluate carefully which aspects and which members of ancient societies would have been the first to feel the effects of alphabetic writing, and what the impact of such (limited) literacy may have been on those who remained illiterate.\textsuperscript{8}\footnote{Harris 1989; Thomas 1992.} Havelock’s work also achieved recognition in France, where scholars such as J-P. Vernant and Marcel Detienne used his theoretical work on orality as an additional tool for the investigation of such topics as myth, the writing of history, and the different uses of literacy in the ancient Middle East and Greece.\textsuperscript{9}\footnote{Vernant 1966; Detienne 1967; 1988.} In Germany, the investigation of the orality of Homer was added to the already existing complex linguistic investigations, or \textit{Quellenforschung}, of the allegedly earlier poems of the Epic Cycle: their influence, shared themes, and borrowings of oral formulas and themes were identified and shown to have influenced the original (and thus later) creation of the Homeric poems themselves.\textsuperscript{10}\footnote{Kullmann 1960, 1991; Latacz 1979; Latacz et al. 1991.} For most German scholars Homer remains a literate composer, however.\textsuperscript{11}\footnote{A comparison between Latacz’ \textit{Zweihundert Jahre Homer-Forschung} (1991) and Morris and Powell’s \textit{A New Companion to Homer} (1997) illustrates the divergent opinions on the origins of the Homeric poems: the German scholars argue for an original composition in writing, whereas anglophone scholars believe the poems were composed orally in performance, and transmitted fairly faithfully—under the influence of increased contact among performers on the occasion of poetic competitions—until they could be written down.}

Scholars in other fields likewise grappled with the implications of the new idea about widespread orality and the constraints imposed by western-style literacy. In anthropology, speculations about the impact of alphabetic writing—largely founded on the assumptions of classicists such as Moses Finley, James Notopoulos, and many others as well as the work of Lévi-Strauss cited above—shaped the work of Jack Goody and Ian Watt, whose first entry in 1963 upon the scene in “The Consequences of Literacy” is still widely quoted, although Goody spent the rest of his career slowly retracting and changing the revolutionary statements made in that essay.\textsuperscript{12}\footnote{Goody and Watt 1963.} Anthropologists working in developing nations began to study the impact of literacy on non-literate or semi-literate societies, a process made more complicated in many cases because alphabetic literacy often was introduced by Christian missionaries.\textsuperscript{13}\footnote{Street 1993 and many other volumes of \textit{Cambridge Studies in Oral and Literate Culture}.} Folklorists undertook similar studies of folk-poetry and folk preachers in the United States, tracing their oral influences and tracking oral transmission of sometimes quite old songs or themes brought from the various home countries of immigrants.\textsuperscript{14}\footnote{Bauman 1977; 1986; Finnegan 1977.} In medieval studies, orality provided new approaches to the analysis of such works as \textit{El Poema de mio Cid},
the French troubadour poetry of Chrétien de Troyes, Beowulf in English poetry, and the Nibelungenlied in Germany, as well as in many other medieval poetries which were suddenly available again for new research.\footnote{A sample of such essays can be found in Foley 1985 and 1988; for further references see also Finnegan 1977, or almost any issue of the journal Oral Tradition (Slavica Publishers, Columbus, Ohio).}

An examination of all these scholars and their scholarship shows that they fall roughly into three groups. The first group contains those whose main concern is “oral societies” and who explore the implications of orality for a particular culture. Their interests concern a type of shared mentalité among all oral societies.

A second group undertakes methodical philological and linguistic studies to investigate either the antiquity of the Homeric poems or the antiquity of the alphabet; the thrust of their work is diachronic. The last group is not so much concerned with Homeric poetry or orality in ancient Greece as it is with more recent productions: either medieval or even twentieth-century oral poetry and performances of various kinds. For these scholars the comparative Homeric scholarship provides a model or exemplar for investigational purposes. In spite of their different interests, all three groups rely on comparative studies that draw from (diachronic) linguistics and philology, cognitive psychology concerning literacy and orality, and structuralism. Scholars borrow from each other across these groupings to support their arguments in their particular area. Thus, all scholarship remains under the aegis of the Oral Theory.

As becomes clear from the brief descriptions above, it is not easy to define precisely what is meant by the Oral Theory. The cross-borrowings among the proponents of the Oral Theory increase the need to add riders and qualifications so that particular interpretations of ancient data can be accommodated. This proliferation of adaptations of the Oral Theory and the exceptional position assigned to the Greek epics is the result, I shall argue, of the way it was originally framed. Its premises were influenced by French linguistic and anthropological scholarship current at the time that Milman Parry, the Oral Theory’s intellectual father, studied in Paris during the 1920s. Parry’s interpretation of early structural linguistic ideas limits its scope, rendering it impervious to more recent anthropological findings on both orality and literacy in India and other parts of Southeast Asia. This newer research must lead to a reevaluation of the cornerstones of Parry’s conclusions: the use and formation of the performance language,\footnote{I use the term “performance language” as an abbreviation for Parry’s (and Lord’s) findings concerning the special language used by performers, a language that relies on the use of formulas, meter, special diction, themes, etc. These languages can vary in complexity and specialization.} the role of writing, and the perceived differences between “oral” and “literate” performers.

Recent research suggests that specialized performance languages (Kunstsprachen) such as were in use at the time of Parry’s visits to Yugoslavia, are preserved by human intervention over time, which can be either of an oral or literate nature, or both simultaneously. The resulting artifact, the Kunstsprache,
cannot be interpreted according to a simple schema of synchronic linguistic analysis forced into a diachronic framework, with the goal of explaining the past by means of observations made in the present. Secondly, inherent in Parry’s approach is the belief that the alphabetic writing system of the past functioned in a similar way as it did until quite recently: to “fix” a text in such a manner that it will (or can) no longer undergo change. But comparative evidence from other writing systems (including early alphabetic writing) suggests that “fixity” may or may not occur. Thirdly, Parry’s analogy between ancient Greeks and modern Yugoslav singers is anchored in a semi-evolutionary roadmap of mentalités, in which orality gives way to literacy in a progressive and irreversible process that impoverishes the oral singer’s abilities to compose in performance. From a comparative linguistic and anthropological perspective all this looks very dated. Yet the Oral Theory remains central to much contemporary scholarship. It is time for a fresh look.

I begin by tracing Parry’s intellectual journey from graduate school in Berkeley to his encounter with early structuralism in Paris. Although Parry does not openly acknowledge his debt to structuralism or even mention Saussure or Durkheim, the leading scholars of the new movement, the influence of their work on Parry was profound. I will examine the background of the French scholarship to which Parry was exposed, and the questions that he had to address in light of the new trends. What did Parry find when he got to Paris? How were older beliefs about language change integrated into the nouvelle vague of structuralisme? And how did these ideas influence Parry’s research in Yugoslavia?

In the last third of this essay I address the cohesion of the three scholarly methodologies that Parry used to shape the Oral Theory: structuralisme, historical linguistics or philology, and late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century ideas about the evolution of mentalités. Parry’s achievement was to integrate ideas from all three disciplines into a unified framework that has survived to this day. However, each single idea has become discredited in the discipline that gave birth to it. Thus, in my conclusion, I address ways to calibrate the exceptional position that Parry’s Oral Theory claimed for Homeric poetry, bringing it in line with current research.

**PARRY’S ENCOUNTER WITH STRUCTURALISME**

At the time of his move to France (1924), Parry was 22 years old. He was in possession of a B.A. in Greek from the Greek department at Berkeley, and of
a Master’s Degree in 1923 from the same university.\textsuperscript{19} He had been denied further scholarship money for graduate studies at Berkeley and decided to go overseas, to Paris, with his wife and baby.\textsuperscript{20} In the nineteen-twenties France was cheap for Americans, and European universities charged only nominal fees for enrollment to foreigners.

At Berkeley Parry had completed his thesis entitled “A Comparative Study of Diction as One of the Elements of Style in Early Greek Epic Poetry” under George Calhoun. In this brief thesis Parry investigated whether the Homeric epithets were employed consciously (i.e., for their meaning), or mecanistically, in obedience to the requirements of meter.\textsuperscript{21} Already at that time Parry wanted to provide proof that Homer’s verse was “traditional” and that twentieth-century audiences should adjust their aesthetic judgment and demands accordingly and learn to listen to and read Homer in a new manner if they wanted to understand him as his contemporaries had.

In the Berkeley thesis Parry’s investigative tool was diction and its deterioration over time. “Diction,” he wrote, “[is] the \textit{choice of words} for the expression of ideas, which is one of the constituents of style . . .” (his emphasis). Parry’s argument is somewhat circular, in that he states, but does not prove, that the epic style is traditional, which therefore makes diction traditional.\textsuperscript{22} Throughout his MA thesis Parry appeals to aesthetic judgment, showing that, for instance, Apollonius Rhodius or Quintus Smyrnaeus, who lived many centuries later, tried to work within the same epic tradition but could not achieve the same artistic heights as Homer. Even Hesiod, Homer’s contemporary, had failed. Commenting on two \textit{Homeric Hymns} that are believed to be nearest in age to Homer’s poetry and to come closer in aesthetic quality, Parry explained the lack of beauty of the other, later, poetry of Quintus and Apollonius as due to distance from the source: “the use of the traditional diction, an inheritance so rich that its lesser partakers [the authors of the hymns] were richer than the greater men of later years.”\textsuperscript{23} In Homer, he concluded, “As in the sculpture of Phidias the genius of the artist has blended with that of his race so inextricably that the two are hard to distinguish: they can only be realized in the perfection of the result.”\textsuperscript{24}

By setting Homeric poetry as the aesthetic—and traditional—standard for ev-

\textsuperscript{19} The classics department \textit{an sich} came into existence in 1937, when the Greek and Latin Departments (and Sanskrit studies) were combined: Fontenrose 1982: 33.

\textsuperscript{20} Beye 1990: 362.

\textsuperscript{21} Parry asks: “are we not overzealous in finding such beauty as we first described in words whose use is determined not by careful choice for the sake of their meaning, but by pure metrical convenience?” In A. Parry 1971: 427. The thesis was accepted in 1923.

\textsuperscript{22} A. Parry 1971: 422. Both quotations are taken from Parry’s Master’s thesis, dated 1923.

\textsuperscript{23} A. Parry 1971: 429.

\textsuperscript{24} A. Parry 1971: 431. I find it somewhat surprising that in spite of all the work that was being done on the epithet and style, both in Europe and in the U.S., Parry quotes none in his MA thesis, and only credits three \textit{Lexica} (Ebeling’s \textit{Lexicon Homericum} [1885], Prendergast’s \textit{Concordance to}}
everything else, Parry not surprisingly found all other epic poetry inferior. The
problem he had begun to tackle, and which became his life work, is here visible
in embryonic form: does mechanical tradition rule the compositional process,
or does meaning? Parry came down on the side of “tradition” (with some pro-
visos), a position that would bring him in conflict (again?) with Calhoun later
in life. 25

Originally, it seems, Parry had intended to work with Victor Bérard, an im-
portant member of the École pratique des hautes études, Section des sciences his-
toriques et philologiques. Bérard’s views on “diction” must have been “musique”
to Parry’s ears. Bérard, in his introduction to the Odyssey, states:

L’épos est d’abord une musique d’hexamètres, où tout s’incline devant
sa seigneurie le dactyle. Ce que peut retrouver l’étude de l’Iliade et
de l’Odyssee, ce n’est ni un dialecte ni une grammaire homériques;
c’est une “diction épique,” comme dit J. van Leeuwen dans le titre de
son Enchiridium Dictionis epicae; c’est, plutôt encore, une “diction
dactylique,” puisque déclinaison et conjugaison, syntaxe et accords,
vocabulaire, style, et orthographe, tout est régi par le dactyle et ses
commodités: la langue de l’épos est fille de l’hexamètre, die Sprache des
griechischen Epos ist ein Gebilde des Hexameters, comme dit K. Witte. 26

Firstly, epic is a music of hexameters, where everything bows down before
his lordship, the Dactyl. What the study of the Iliad and Odyssey can
recover is neither a Homeric dialect nor a Homeric grammar: it is an “epic
diction,” as van Leeuwen says in the title of his Enchiridium Dictionis
Epicae; it is, furthermore, a “dactylic diction,” since declension and
conjugation, syntax and agreement, vocabulary, style, and orthography,
all are ruled by the dactyl and its convenience: the language of epic is the
daughter of the hexameter, the language of the Greek epic is a creation of
the hexameter, as K. Witte says.

(my translation)

Bérard likewise focuses on the epithet, for in the same introduction he criticizes
translators who, like Leconte de Lisle, decorate the language with fancy trans-
lations of the Homeric epithets. In Bérard’s opinion such authors get overly florid,
so that rather than thinking of a resurrection of the poet, one thinks of a funeral. It
is the translators’ (mis-)understanding of the Homeric epithet that is to be blamed
for this situation:

Homère ne peut revivre parmi nous si, délié des bandelettes mortuaires dont l’enserrent depuis un siècle les “épithètes homériques,” il se reprend à parler comme un homme, et non plus comme un livre.\textsuperscript{27}

Homer can only be brought back among us if, freed from his funerary ribbons in which the “Homeric Epithets” have kept him tightly wrapped for a century, he begins to speak like a human being again, and no longer like a book.

But when Parry arrived in Paris Bérard was on leave, and he began to study with Aimé Puech, a well-known Alcaeus and Pindar scholar.\textsuperscript{28} It was Puech who brought him into contact with Antoine Meillet, an Indo-Europeanist, who became the Président of the École des hautes études in 1925.

\textit{STRUCTURALISME, MEILLET, AND THE REACTION AGAINST DARWINISM}

And this is where Parry’s story really begins. The meeting with Meillet brought him into direct contact with the new current in French scholarship, \textit{structuralisme}.\textsuperscript{29} The new movement can be seen as a direct reaction to the influence of Darwinian evolutionary ideas on humanistic scholarship. Evolutionary theory had helped shape the new disciplines of anthropology, sociology, and linguistics in nineteenth-century France. All three areas of scholarship were relative newcomers, and all three had a close connection with philology, their intellectual ancestor. Darwinian scholarship emphasized the importance of gradual change over time, taking a diachronic view of matters. In linguistics, diachronicity formed the basis for historical linguistics, an approach it had already taken before, but which it now found confirmed by Darwinism. In sociology Darwinism was interpreted to mean that all societies usually progressed step by step, although the forces of selection sometimes led to decline and extinction. Anthropology, limited at the time to the study of pre-literate human societies, saw evolution at work in the childhood of mankind. Scholars and intellectuals had long subscribed to the idea that societies and cultures moved through different phases of development. Many had studied the “primitives” because they believed that doing so would give them useful insights into the first stages of mankind’s path to civilization. More specifically, during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries authors had used their knowledge of the “old” primitives, such as the Scythians, the Germans, the Celts, and so on as described by ancient authors, to explain the “new” primitives encountered in the Americas.

\textsuperscript{27} Bérard 1967 [1924]: xxxv.
\textsuperscript{28} \textit{Annuaire de l’École pratique des hautes études, 1924–1925}: 14.
\textsuperscript{29} Meillet 1952; 1958. Meillet died in 1936—these volumes were brought out posthumously.
When it came to arguing that Greek society must similarly have moved through different phases, however, it became more difficult for classicists to accept the comparative data: although happy to follow the views of classical authors to explain the primitives, they were unsettled by the idea of using the primitives to explain the classics! The problem for classicists was that the present-day primitives were not still primitives for nothing: they obviously lacked the wherewithal to move forward. One of the editors of the *American Journal of Archeology*, responding in 1888 to a reader who had complained that the journal contained only articles on Old World archeology and none on New World archeology, makes this very point:

“[American archeology] is busied with the life and work of a race or races of men in an inchoate, rudimentary and unformed condition, who never raised themselves ... [even] in Mexico and Peru, above a low stage of civilization, and never showed the capacity of steadily progressive development. Within the limits of the United States the native races attained to no high faculty of performance or expression in any field. They had no intellectual life. They have left no remains indicating a probability that, had they been left in undisturbed possession of the continent, they would have succeeded in advancing their condition out of the prehistoric state. The evidence afforded by their works of every kind—their architecture, their sculpture, their writing, their minor arts, their traditions—seems all against the supposition that they had latent energy sufficient for progress to civilization.”

Or, as a New York art critic put it, “My interest is perhaps too exclusively given to those antiquities which are lovely and full of thought: ... Grecian ones!”

Moreover, of course, at that time these Central and South American societies were thought to lack a writing or recording system, an important criterion for being admitted to the stage of “civilized.” The question thus became: how to compare losers with winners? In archeological as well as classical circles primitive societies were thought to be of little use as comparanda for ancient “civilized” ones.

Linguistics provided a more amenable model. Within five years after Darwin’s publication of *The Origin of Species* (1859) this discipline had enthusiastically embraced evolution as a way to overcome the problem of how to explain language change. Earlier studies in historical linguistics focused on the recently discovered language of Sanskrit and the promise it held for a reconstruction of...

30. A shorter version of this quotation is in Winterer 2002: 163, which first called my attention to this quite frank statement of preference.
32. Schleicher’s *Die Darwinsche Theorie und die Sprachwissenschaft: Offenes Sendschreiben an Herrn Dr. Ernst Haeckel* was published in 1863, and F. Müller, a leading Indo-Europeanist, gave his *Lectures on the Science of Language* (second series, Lecture VII) between 1861 and 1864. Müller held Oxford’s first chair of Comparative Philology. Of course, the comparative study of languages—as an area of interest—is much older.
Indo-European. Where anthropologists had failed, linguists were able to overcome classicists’ reluctance concerning discoveries about primitive societies, although, of course, the society that developed Sanskrit hardly qualified as primitive. The belief in stages—and the fact that not every society moved at the same speed through them—was reaffirmed by this discipline as practiced at that time. Ancient Greek and Sanskrit (and many of the Slavic languages) became the preferred languages to study—because of the availability of written records going back millennia, and the promise this type of research held to recreate the language of a pre-literate society. Moreover, Sanskrit provided the perfect venue to claim even greater antiquity for Homer, if only suitable overlaps and comparisons could be found. Also, the erudition required to engage in this type of comparative research was vast. It required intimate knowledge of many languages and the judicious application of two laws that governed Historical Linguistics: the law of analogy and the rule of regularity in sound changes over time.

For classicists the idea of language change over time was a comfortable and familiar concept. But where other nineteenth-century scholars in the sciences and social sciences saw “evolution” as a good thing, as a promise for progress, classicists aligned themselves with historical linguists and tended to take the opposite view. These scholars viewed the changes that the original Indo-European or proto-language had undergone as degeneration: sounds had been lost, interesting grammatical features had been dropped, and so on. From a state of greater perfection these languages had disintegrated into many vernaculars, which themselves threatened further subdivisions into dialects. Consequently, while for the anthropologists of the time change implied evolution and hence progress, classicists held a more pessimistic view.

All this changed abruptly in the early twentieth century. The French structuralists overturned the evolutionary paradigm, both in sociology and in linguistics. The scholars most prominently associated with these changes are Émile Durkheim in sociology and Ferdinand de Saussure in linguistics. For the subject of this essay, Milman Parry, Antoine Meillet was the main conduit.

In sociology the main development was the abandonment of the idea that societies, like organisms, slowly evolve over time until perfection or the best adapted stage is reached. Durkheim only distinguished “traditional” and “modern” societies, which are found co-existing and thus are “synchronic.” The advantage

33. In the case of ancient India, the lack of material culture combined with a very complex linguistic system and a highly developed sense of aesthetics provided a wonderful model for scholars eager to prove that high literature could exist in materially poor environments.

34. Schleicher 1973 [1860] had posited two stages for language evolution: one period of growth, and one of decay, when languages enter “history.” He viewed language as an organism that, like plants and animals, grew into full complex forms and then reached old age, “in welcher sich die Sprachen von der erreichten höchsten Stufe der Ausbildung allmählich mehr und mehr entfernen” (37) (“in which the languages get gradually further and further away from their highest level of development”—my translation). “Organism” and “system” become keywords in later structuralist thought.
of this view is that a society is either traditional or modern: there may be a short transitional period, but the tipping point is rapid. For Albert Lord, Parry’s student and closest collaborator, and for many others, this view of societies as either/or supported arguments in favor of a rapid transition from “oral” (primitive) society to “literate” (civilized) society. The effect of Durkheim’s new ideas can be recognized in Parry’s emphasis on the traditionality of Yugoslav society.

At approximately the same time in linguistics, under the influence of Ferdinand de Saussure, the study of language began to focus on contemporary societies, vernacular languages, and especially spoken language, which was seen as primary. The literary language, being the product of culture, was considered to have broken away from its natural sphere, the spoken language. The focus therefore was on synchronic over diachronic studies, a remarkable change from the long-standing historical approach. The proposed change in method was even more convincing because Saussure had made his reputation with a diachronic study, the Mémoire sur le système primitif des voyelles dans les langues indo-européennes (1878). However, the Cours de Linguistique Générale (1916), put together from class notes by two of Saussure’s students after his death, emphasized the importance of the synchronic approach and posited that meaning can only be obtained by contrasting one language item with another of the same period. Language is a system, and only the contemporary speaker, the sujet parlant, can inform on current meanings or use. Meaning or rules of the past can only be recovered if there is enough comparative material from other sources and from other languages of the same period. Over the decades, Saussure’s conviction that synchronic study held the key to the way linguistic investigations should be undertaken prevailed.

Taken as a whole, the studies of the early twentieth-century French sociological and linguistic scholars were radically different in scope and approach from the evolutionary ones that had gone before. Briefly put, French scholarship looked at contemporary societies and languages and tended to make statements about them as “organisms” or integrated logical systems, where all parts depended on each other. The emphasis on systems, be it the importance of the spoken word over the written or the synchronic approach, led to holistic statements, privileging societies over individuals and so on. Such undertakings spelled conflict for classicists, since they believed in evolutionary phases of both languages and cultures, the importance of the exceptional individual (Homer) or individuals, the primacy of written texts, and the inevitability of steady decline. To believe otherwise was to accept defeat.

35. de Saussure 1949 [1916]: 41 (21 in translation).
36. This work was not translated into English until 1959, and its influence increased greatly after that time.
ANTOINE MEILLET AND MATTHIAS MURKO

The influence of structuralism on Milman Parry came indirectly, through his thesis advisor Antoine Meillet. Meillet was a student and close friend of Saussure, as well as Durkheim. But Meillet was also responsible for a different kind of influence on Parry, namely his introduction to Matthias Murko, a Yugoslav scholar. At the invitation of Meillet, Murko attended Parry’s soutenance in 1928. This connection had come about because Meillet, as a comparative linguist, was interested in the Slavic languages, for they represented a major source of information. Meillet himself had compiled a dictionary of Serbo-Croatian and for several years he directed the Revue des Études Slaves. Murko, a linguistics professor at the University of Prague and a colleague of Jakobson, was an expert on South Slavic oral poetry. He happened to be in Paris at the time to present several papers on the oral composition in performance as practiced by Yugoslav guslars. At the time of his meeting with Parry Murko had already made several research expeditions into the Yugoslav countryside (1912, 1913), and had even made some sound recordings; reports had been published in Vienna. His small book, a “texte amplifié et complété” on the same topic, was published in Paris in 1929; an earlier essay had appeared in France in 1928. It highlighted the improvisational aspect of the performance of heroic-type poetry in his country, an aspect that was to become a key element in Parry’s Oral Theory. Murko wrote:

[Chanter de longs poèmes, sans erreur . . . en vers poétiques irréprochables . . . avec la rapidité la plus grande] n’est possible qu’à des chanteurs qui n’apprennent pas par cœur, mot à mot, les poèmes, mais qui les re créent à nouveau chaque fois, en une brillante improvisation, grâce à leur science de la langue et de la poésie.

[to sing long poems, without mistakes . . . in poetic verse beyond reproach . . . with the greatest speed] is only possible for those singers who do not learn the poems by heart, word for word, but who recreate them anew each time, in a brilliant improvisation, thanks to their knowledge of the language and the poetry (my translation).

The study of epic performance in a contemporary society makes Murko’s work synchronic. It would be up to Parry to sift through this kind of information systematically and apply the findings to the Homeric epics, although the relevance

37. For a brief essay on this scholar, and his influence on Milman Parry, see de Lamberterie in Létoublon (1997). I thank one of the anonymous reviewers for the reference.
38. At this point it is worth noting that the Prague Linguistic circle (which included Mathesius, Trubetzkoy, and Jakobson) had already been meeting since 1926; the outlook of these scholars was also structuralist, in that it is “difference” between language elements that counts. In addition they had a functionalist outlook, which is to say, they considered that each language item performed some function. By extension, the role language plays in society is also of interest.
of Murko’s work for Homer studies had not escaped the German scholar E. Drerup, nor Murko himself, who refers to Homer studies throughout this essay. About the connection with classics, Murko writes that it is

superflous to argue, as some classical philologists have done, the question of whether the pre-Homeric aoidoi were succeeded by rhapsodes or simple reciters, since the aoidoi, that is to say the singers who compose poems themselves, can still be found today among the rhapsodes. I myself have seen several of these singer-poets, and I have trustworthy information on others.

(my translation)

A second essay by Murko, which appeared in 1933 also in Paris, describes further voyages in 1930 and 1931, during which he gathered more precise information on singers, both Orthodox and Moslem. The majority, he notes, knew how to read and write, and some had even mastered both the Cyrillic and the Latin alphabet so they could profit from all kinds of publications. When asked where they had got their songs from, they would answer: “Des anciens chanteurs et des livres” (“From ancient singers and from books”—Murko’s emphasis, my translation).

In the same essay Murko showed how alive the oral tradition still was: singers and songs were popular (although he noted some fading of their importance in the cities), and one singer even traveled to the United States in order to do fundraising and recruit volunteers among his compatriots during World War I!

That same singer performed in Paris in 1933 on his way back from a second (?) trip to the United States. According to Murko, many performers benefited financially from phonographic records made of their performances, which he calls “le dernier procédé de la ‘tradition orale’” (“the last—or latest—step of the ‘oral tradition’”—my translation).

These brief sketches of the work of Meillet and Murko show how unmistakable the influence of these scholars was on Parry’s subsequent publications: both scholars were early structuralists, both emphasized the importance of synchronic

41. See Drerup 1921: 37 and passim. On the same page, Drerup mentions other Slavic sources that had become available over the last four decades or so.
42. Murko 1929: 25.
43. Murko 1933.
44. Murko 1933: 20.
45. Murko 1933: 45.
46. Murko 1933: 33, 44.
research, and Murko described the Yugoslav singers’ improvisational talents displayed during the performances that he recorded with convincing enthusiasm. Meillet, with his interest in diachronic and historic research, indirectly endorsed the comparison of old and new. Nevertheless, Meillet, as a linguist, stressed that the past (in his case, any proto-language) could only be reconstructed if sufficient material of many traditions was available to fill in gaps. As noted above, the historical linguists’ tools mostly consisted of the application of analogy and the regularity of sound change over time. Parry would use these tools for his own interest, Homeric diction.

In May of 1928 Parry defended his thèses before a distinguished group of French scholars. During that occasion, Parry wrote in one of his essays, Meillet pointed out to him that he had “missed” the main point of his own work, namely that “a style such as that of Homer must not only be traditional but also must be oral.” 47 That summer Parry and his family returned to the United States, to a position in Iowa. Scholarship in the United States was very different, even at Harvard, where Parry was appointed as Instructor the following year. One scholar (writing about Werner Jaeger’s time there during the late 1930s) describes it as “[a place] where a game of grammar and translation were played by boys from good families who had graduated from pale American imitations of the great English public schools.” 48 Parry’s novel interdisciplinary work got him promoted in 1932 to Assistant Professor.

**PARRY’S FIELDWORK IN YUGOSLAVIA: THE PROBLEM OF THE “PRIMITIVE MIND”**

Parry made two trips to Yugoslavia, the first one over the summer of 1933, a second trip over the academic year 1934–35. During those years he further developed the hypothesis for which he would become widely known, to wit: “the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* are composed in a traditional style, and are composed orally,” a statement that dates from 1930. 49 The trips to Yugoslavia were intended to reveal exactly how oral composition took place, and how improvisation worked. But in order for the collected material to be usable, Parry had to make the case that present-day material provided valid information that could be transferred (by analogy) to similar situations in the past about which very little was known: i.e., Parry had to bring a historical perspective to synchronic data. Linguists such as Meillet had managed to overcome the gaps in their knowledge by using multiple sources, with analogy as their main tool. The speculations of historical linguists could be retraced and verified by others. For Parry, as a classicist, the problem was more com-

47. A. Parry 1971: 439. The remark is found in the foreword to *Cor Huso*.
plex: in order to apply the “law of analogy” used in historical linguistics to a process, not to individual vocabulary or expressions, several steps would be required, including an evolutionary one to show how ancient traditions and skills were lost.

Before Parry could apply the law of analogy to an ancient society, he first had to establish differences between oral and literate, that is, between methods of composition. His test case had to be one for which there was empirical evidence, and the other one would be Homeric Greece. The criterion for orality would be the stylistic differences observed and recorded earlier by Parry in his Master’s Thesis between Homeric poetry and later Greek and Latin poets. That is to say, the degree of difference in style observed between early and later poetry in Greece—when literacy was entrenched—would be the measuring stick. Thus, Parry’s research was guided by the traditional opposing pair literacy/orality (or civilized/primitive—i.e., illiterate) and presupposed that any differences observed would be due to the advent of literacy, and not to a simple change of taste, or foreign influence, or some other unknown factor.

His studies in Yugoslavia over the summer and the following year provided the necessary empirical data. But while Murko had observed and recorded singers from many different places, both literate and non-literate, Parry selected singers who did not know how to read or write to ensure that the comparison with Homeric and Homeric singers would be more accurate. There are, of course, problems with such an approach since it already assumes that Homer was illiterate, the very point that Parry was trying to prove. To preempt this criticism Parry compared the compositions of illiterate singers to those of singers who had recently become literate. The differences that he observed were interpreted as stemming from the literacy of the latter. Once that comparison was completed, Parry was finally able to apply the law of analogy, well known from historical linguistics and an accepted method to trace historical development. Where Indo-Europeanists compared language sound changes over time and reconstructed missing evidence in one language based on data from other sister languages, Parry stretched the comparisons by suggesting that the differences in style encountered in language Y (Yugoslavia) between written and oral poems would be analogous to those found in language G (ancient Greek).

But one further step was needed to validate the claim that the minds of literate composers worked differently from oral ones; that, in fact, literate poets had undergone an evolutionary change. Parry found his answer in what we would now call cognitive or psychological studies, which were du dernier cri at the time. According to insights gained from this discipline, “primitive (or oral) minds” work one way, while “literate minds” work in another.

In the early nineteen hundreds sweeping statements were made by (some) anthropologists and philosophers on “the primitive mind.” In France, the foremost author of such views was Lévy-Bruhl, a philosopher of the social sciences. During the first two decades of the twentieth century Lévy-Bruhl pub-
lished in rapid succession three books that went through multiple editions, each concerned with a different aspect of the Primitive Mind: most tellingly, *Les fonctions mentales dans les sociétés inférieures* (1910), followed by *La mentalité primitive* (1922) and *L’aître primitive* (1927). In all three books Lévy-Bruhl argued that “primitive minds” are incapable of historical, abstract, or logical thought, tend to think of the here and now, and to think poetically and metaphorically.50

Lévy-Bruhl’s works were known to Parry and are referred to in his thèses. But the author who most convinced Parry, and who was later also revered by Albert Lord, his student and successor, is Marcel Jousse, a Jesuit priest who until 1950 held a chair in linguistic anthropology at the École d’anthropologie. Jousse was the arch-universalizer. He published a collection of aphorisms in 1925, *Le Style oral rhythmique et mnémonotechnique chez les verbo-moteurs*, collected from the many publications on tribal and other societies popular at the time, with multiple quotations from Lévy-Bruhl. The dates of Jousse’s sources range from 1866 to 1924, the exact period that evolutionism was at its apex.51 Jousse constructed his book by means of multiple quotations from these various authors to sum up how humans came to communicate the way they do. At the beginning was gesture; next came vocalization. He writes:

Thus it appears—and the “mimeograms,” the earliest hieroglyphics prove this—that laryngo-buccal gesticulation developed piecemeal and extremely slowly. Among certain people it remains so rudimentary that it must be accompanied by manual gesticulation, which is so essential that they light fires when they want to talk to each other at night: this is the case among the Bushmen, Eskimos, and the tribes of Brazil, etc.52

50. Another author frequently quoted in support of the different way that the primitive or illiterate thinks is L. Vygotsky (1896–1934), an educationalist, whose interests concerned the acquisition of knowledge through the phases of childhood—which (by analogy) he imposed on the “stages” of the development of human societies in general. According to the theories being developed at the time, *all oral societies*, that is, all primitive societies, had a special way of dealing with information and knowledge to ensure their survival for future generations. Vygotsky’s views were further spread by the work of his student, A. Luria. In the United States interest in the primitive mind was high in the nineteen twenties as well: Franz Boas published his *Mind of Primitive Man* in 1921. But Boas’ goals were entirely different: he warned against generalization, and aimed at “clearing away the racial prejudice” (1921: 245). Boas cautioned against seeing primitive societies as having remained in the beginning stages of human evolution. For him, each society had its own set of traditions and ideas, which it employed to analyze and classify new information: logic underlies this process both in primitive and in civilized societies. Boas was careful to stay away from literacy as the main marker of difference between “civilized” and “primitive” (1921: 197–243), or from an evolutionary progression from illiterate to literate; in fact, he spoke out against the whole topic of evolution.

51. I am somewhat puzzled by the use of Jousse’s work to support recent scholarly arguments, as in, for instance, D. F. Melia’s “Orality and Aristotle’s Aesthetics and Methods: Take # 2,” which appeared in 2004. A reviewer (Jose M. Gonzalez) refers to Melia’s use of Jousse as “daring”; given the peculiarity of Jousse’s views, there may be more truth to this statement than the author intended.

The following words of praise, taken from the introduction by the translators to the 1990 English edition, illustrate the information and kind of scholarship found in Jousse’s curious little book: the oral style is “a style that is deeply rooted in the psychological and even physiological nature of man.”

Jousse advances the claim that among the primitives (whom he prefers to call “spontaneous”) the oral rendition of wisdom was, indeed, spontaneous and rhythmic, a pure expression of the *esprit du peuple*, lost once writing was introduced. Communication among early men and in early societies evolved through different phases:

[Jousse’s] anthropological work on human expression led him deeper into the “play” of mimicry and to distinguish between “cinemimism” or mimicry of gestures, and “phonomimism” or mimicry of sounds, which became language in the etymological sense of significative laryngo-buccal gesticulation. By echoing the ear, the mouth becomes the resonator of the sound of things.

Jousse modestly compares the importance of his discovery of the “mnemotechnical apparatus” for the linguistic psychologists to the solution of “the problem of gravitation in the physical universe.” By reducing all the data about oral societies, recitation, and memory to one common “verbo-motor” function of the human psyche, Jousse is able to explain how humans without writing process and transmit information. Thus, Jousse legitimized comparisons between unrelated civilizations by focusing on “mimic gestures” (which include vocalization) as a shared characteristic “of the Sumerians and ancient Egyptians and those of the Indians and even of the present-day Chinese. . . .”

For authors such as Parry, who needed a bridge to cross the distance between past and present, the particularities of Homeric “diction” could now be thought of as part of a much vaster system (as Jousse also suggested), common to all men who used “audible laryngo-buccal gestures,” that is, “the oral style.” Thus, evolutionary beliefs that were thought to apply not only to the development of individual humans but also to the development of societies and mental abilities enabled Parry to align what happened in Yugoslavia with what must have happened in ancient Greece.

In 1935, shortly after his second trip to Yugoslavia, Parry died from a gunshot accident in Los Angeles. His successor Albert Lord, not only continued his life’s work, but also the direction that Parry’s work had taken: very little original theoretical material was incorporated in his *Singer of Tales*, published in 1960.

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56. Jousse 1990 [1925]: xxviii; note that Jousse (unconsciously?) excludes populations which use an alphabetic writing system.
Lord, too, had read Jousse, and had accepted his conclusions and incorporated them in his not inconsiderable corpus of works.  

THE CRISIS OF THE ORAL THEORY IN ANTHROPOLOGY

From the 1960s to the late 1970s all seemed to be well with the Oral Theory. It was applied to medieval poems whose origins were obscure. Existing literature on oral performances collected during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century was re-analyzed, and appeared to conform to the Oral Theory as outlined by Parry and Lord: illiterate oral poets composed in performance with the use of formulas and themes, verses tended to be short and repetitive, and performers could shorten or lengthen the performance according to requirements. A special poetic language (or Kunstsprache) was used in all cases; these Kunstsprachen tended to contain more archaic vocabulary than the spoken language. Also confirmed was the difference in quality and complexity of the recorded modern oral poems and the ancient Homeric ones. Literacy continued to be seen as the culprit in the slow death of the art of oral poetry. What was being recorded were the last gasps of a medium that had begun to decline at the advent of literacy.

Scholars came to believe that some of the trickiest questions about ancient poetry, its origins, preservation, and transmission had been solved, barring a few details about the circumstances in which the ancient poems were first written down. All eighteenth-, nineteenth-, and much early twentieth-century oral poetry had been recorded with the use of dictation, a method that Lord believed had also been used in antiquity. Yet trouble was brewing.

One of the first anthropologists to engage with the Oral Theory and to challenge its universal applicability was Ruth Finnegan. Her book Oral Poetry came out in 1977 (reprinted in 1992 with a new foreword). Finnegan surveyed the available anthropological literature and found similarities to the Yugoslav model proposed by Parry and Lord as well as differences. She focused on the “unwritten” traditions (1977: xix) and thus tacitly accepted the boundaries set by Parry. The search was still on for “pure” societies, uncorrupted by literacy as Homer’s Greece was believed to have been. Literacy, although it kept creeping in at the edges, was to be filtered out of the comparisons as much as possible. Surprisingly, her book was taken by many to be a critique of the Parry/Lord school, which in fact it was not. Its aim was to show that the “oral formulaic” school was “not the only one, nor always a simply applicable model.”

Finnegan’s book was a watershed, opening the field to a wider variety of studies. During the 1980s more data started to come in from outside the field of humanities, information that ignored the niceties of text fixation, antiquity,
or the need to limit research to illiterate performers. Numerous anthropological and linguistic field studies described societies where literacy and orality were employed differently. This led to a questioning and ultimately abandonment of the Oral Theory in anthropology. New comparative research showed that the presence of literacy increased the complexity of both the *Kunstsprachen* and of the stories told. In societies such as India, or other areas of Southeast Asia that have been literate for several millennia, the presence of written texts such as the *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana* did not appear to hamper the literate singers’ ability to improvise in performance. This latter observation directly contradicts the framework on which Parry and Lord’s theoretical work rests, and from it flow several further observations. First, it implies that a “pure” oral environment is not a necessary condition for improvisation in performance. Next, the new research shows that oral performers are able to write down their own texts in the manner in which they expect to perform: this ability explains the “oral” features of written poetry. Thirdly, it shows that literate singers can become masters of a complex *Kunstsprache*, the artificial language that manages to defy the linguistic laws of analogy and regular change over time. As noted, these factors were most clearly observable in the Indic and Southeast Asian traditions, where long epic poems exist in multiple forms and multiple languages. But while anthropologists gradually abandoned the Oral Theory for these reasons, classicists did not. Classicists were not confronted in the same way with fresh comparative evidence; also, the many reconceptualizations of *mentalités* in anthropology were peripheral to the discipline.

What to make then of this influx of new information, and what does it mean for the Oral Theory as currently used by classicists to analyze the Homeric poems? There are several options. The first one would be to force the new material into the existing Oral Theory, which would be problematic, since the role of writing is very important in the new material and is in conflict with the Oral Theory as currently formulated. The second option would be to ignore the Oral Theory and just study the new information; as shown, this approach is current among anthropologists. The anthropologists’ willful disregard for the earlier work makes it difficult for a classicist or medievalist to use the new material in a systematic manner. A third option would be to revise the existing Oral Theory, to bring it in line with the new information from societies that possess both written and oral poems, complex *Kunstsprachen*, and a number of performers skilled in both oral performance and in the writing of performance texts. Such a readjustment would open up the new research from societies such as India to Homerists and others interested in ancient poetries.

The first two options are currently practiced, and hinder progress. In the first case, each new study of a contemporary semi-oral society is mistakenly regarded as confirming the Parry/Lord hypothesis and leaves the Greek epic poems in a

60. Pace Hoekstra 1965.
“special” pre-literate and thus unique position. As long as a new comparand roughly conforms to the Yugoslav model there are no new questions. The second option benefits anthropologists, but does nothing for existing scholarship or a historical understanding of the field and its conclusions. Poems like the Mahabharata or the Ramayana that are regularly performed in one way or another cannot be accommodated and, at best, must be put in another “exceptional” category. The third option is, I believe, not really an option anymore: it is time to put the House of Orality in order. A re-analysis of the building blocks of the Oral Theory will reveal where a set of undetected assumptions influenced its formulation to exclude literacy as an aid to oral performance.

My historical analysis of Parry’s work so far has revealed the following: the Oral Theory rests on an analogy of a process of composition in the present (in modern Yugoslavia) with a process of composition in antiquity (ancient Greece); the many differences observed are attributed to the presence of writing in modern Yugoslavia, the few similarities to the presence of orality in modern Yugoslavia and (probably) ancient Greece. Parry avoided the strict synchronic comparisons stipulated by structuralism by referring to historical linguistics. From this field Parry borrowed analogy (for the processes of composition) and “regular change over time” (to explain the gradual loss of oral forms due to the influence of literacy). The comparison between modern Yugoslavia and ancient Greece was valid, Parry and Lord believed, based on the studies of mentalités (Levy-Bruhl, Jousse) which showed that, no matter what time period, illiterate humans thought and acted one way, while literate humans thought and acted in another.

I will argue that the Saussurian model that Parry used does not work because it was designed for spoken language only. Its move away from the analysis of written language was deliberate and overt. Thus, for Parry whose research material consisted of a written text, the study (or assumption even) of written origins was out of bounds. Saussure makes his point in favor of synchronic investigation with the use of an illustration, one that I wish to exploit here, because it helps show that Parry may have compared two different poetries: one oral and synchronic (Yugoslavia) and one written in an oral style, amorphous and ever-changing over time (Greece).

Saussure’s example presents a picture of a stem of a plant, cut horizontally.61 It shows how the fibers, veins, etc., relate to each other at that particular part of the plant: yet each little fiber is separate from the others. If we slice the stem vertically, we get a different view of what constitutes the plant. If we visualize a language as a “plant” that grows and changes, then cutting it horizontally will give us a picture of what the plant consists of at that particular place in its growth; if we take multiple slices, we will have sampled the language at different moments in time, and that will aid our understanding of how the fibers relate at a later point.

61. The picture can be found on page 88 in the translation of the Cours, on page 125 in the original edition.
This works for most languages, because most language change is organic. No one innovates consciously, and no one deliberately drops words or linguistic features; no single individual has the power to bring about such changes.

But if we use the plant metaphor, and adjust it for a poetic language that has acquired the level of Kunstsprache, we obtain an entirely different result. A Kunstsprache is a language that was never spoken, and it contains numerous items from different dialects and from different time periods. It is the equivalent of an artificial plant: it is man-made. If the society in which we find this artificial plant is oral, the plant will possess a relatively homogenous structure. The Yugoslav oral poetic language shows features similar to those of the African Sunjata epic, for instance; more examples of this kind can be found in Finnegans and in other ethnographies. But a Kunstsprache that can rely on some form of writing can become so intricate over time that only the initiated can understand it. Such a poetic language undergoes continuous innovation and change. The poetic Kunstsprache that can rely on writing is like a living Christmas tree that is never taken down: at every festive occasion, some new decorations are put on, some old ones fall off, and some other old ones are hung back up again at different moments, and perhaps not on the branch where they started out; meanwhile, the tree keeps on growing. To satisfy the traditionality of Christmas trees, all decorations have to seem old: new ones made to look old are also hung on the tree—and this process continues over hundreds of years. The tree grows, and decorations are sometimes hung on the higher branches, and sometimes on the lower ones; some have been on the tree so long that they have become part of the bark. If we now use the same slicing technique outlined above, our slice will be a mix of fibers, cells, and decorations. How they relate to each other is haphazard: they did not come into existence at the same time. All we can say is that they roughly follow the “system” of a language; but the “slice” of epic language that we have obtained is such a mix that what came first and what was the original trunk is no longer recognizable.

The tree/plant image shows that in order to obtain a useable synchronic slice of an ancient language one has to be absolutely sure that no interference has occurred. This cannot be guaranteed for the Homeric poems or the Indic epics. It is impossible to situate any of the Indic poems, the Mahabharata and Ramayana and all the derived and related poems in Southeast Asia, within a time frame based solely on linguistic analysis. Kunstsprachen were used to recompose these poems over and over: sometimes a later composition used more archaic forms than an earlier one, and so on. We must conclude that Saussure’s plant metaphor works as long as we stick to similar data: spoken language. When one of our comparands is of dubious origins, the need arises to investigate a different pedigree. The moment writing is added to the plant metaphor the plant develops in a different manner.

The new evidence on the role of literacy in the growth of Kunstsprachen directly affects two connected key points of the Oral Theory. If oral poets can

improvise in performance and also be literate, then there is no need for a scribe, or for dictation. If poets can re-compose in performance at any time, then they can do the same in writing, and indeed all epic poetry from India and Southeast Asia shows signs of having been composed and recomposed in writing many times. Thus, the presumed antiquity of certain parts is but an illusion. Not only could their ancient composers bring a poem up-to-date, they could, with the help of existing texts and lists, bring it “back-to-date” if they wished to do so.

Homer scholars may raise objections to the above observations. They will point out that Parry and Lord studied their singers’ ability to improvise in performance, distinguishing between literate and illiterate performers, a point briefly mentioned above. The literate singers performed badly: their style was stilted and hesitant. But there are many explanations for those results besides their recent acquisition of literacy. For instance, in their improvised performances the newly literate singers tried to imitate the existing written poetry, the product of a literate society far from their ken. The transition from illiterate to literate was too abrupt, the shock too great. Or perhaps the maladroitness of the Yugoslav newly literate singers could be blamed on the fact that they were expected to sing a text in the form of the existing written ones, and they felt that they no longer had the liberty to improvise, since their culture (Western culture) frowned upon such freedom. An additional fact is that in early twentieth-century Yugoslavia singers belonged to marginalized groups. Their desire, after acquiring literacy, to sound like (what they considered to be) their “betters” is only human. The Indian and Southeast Asian singers suffer from no such marginalized status; most are literate so they have no special ax to grind. What they learn is not the poems but the Kunstsprache, or, in my earlier metaphor borrowed from Saussure, they harvest and use a complex plant rather than the ordinary everyday one. Their festive performances rely on a millennia-old Christmas tree, not a modern bush.

A more general point is that Parry and Lord studied only one society, selecting one group (illiterate singers) that they thought would most closely resemble improvising singers in ancient Greece. Based on this single sample and the evidence gathered from the few remaining illiterate singers, Parry and Lord concluded that the difference in quality between the ancient Greek epics and the Yugoslav poetry could be explained by the presence of literacy in Yugoslavia, which “took away” from the ability of singers to perform. In other words, the “art of performance” had declined because of the presence of literacy: the decay of the performing language followed the rules of decay that form part and parcel of the (d)evolutionary paradigm, as accepted by linguists and classicists. I argue, by contrast, that it was the Yugoslav singers’ lack of literacy and knowledge of written texts that created poetry and performances similar in quality and spirit to those of societies that have little or no literacy.

Both Parry and Lord felt that their conclusions were strengthened by the scholarship of mentalités—most significantly, Jousse. They accepted his premise that human minds, once touched by literacy, will be changed and be incapable
of improvisation in performance. This may have been true in Yugoslavia in the 1920s, but evidence from other societies now contradicts this point.

If to the above we add my argument that not all writing systems—and certainly none in their earliest beginnings—are deployed to “fix” texts, then the evidence brought by Parry and Lord in support for their analogy between the Yugoslav singers and Homer becomes very thin. The role of writing cannot be shown to have negatively affected the oral productivity of ancient singers, so the argument that literacy has a degenerative influence will have to be changed to state that literacy has productive power. For the Yugoslav poems this means that their quality is different from the Greek ones not because literacy had taken away the gift of superb improvisation but because the presence of literacy in Greece improved a singer’s abilities to invent and create. Such a solution is tidier than claiming an exception for Greek compositional methods: to date, no purely oral society has produced oral poetry similar to the Homeric poems.63

Thus, on a more general level, the presence of literacy and its influence on oral performance and composition require a rephrasing or reformulating of the Oral Theory so that findings in present-day societies may be integrated more seamlessly into current Homeric research and scholarship, without the need to claim special status or exceptions for the products of any society. Moreover, the reanalysis of the foundations of the theory allows us to drop the dubious arguments about the mentalités of literate and illiterate singers.

CONCLUSIONS

The contextualization of Parry and Lord’s scholarship explains why anthropologists today bypass the Oral Theory, and why the borrowing of anthropological and linguistic data force classical scholars (and medievalists, too) continually to adjust the Oral Theory to their particular texts. To summarize, I view these problems as originating in early twentieth-century scholarship and in Parry’s interpretation of it. Parry, influenced by early structuralism through Antoine Meillet, adapted Saussure’s concept of langue/parole into the opposing pair (epic) langue and poet’s diction (parole). The use of this contrastive pair allowed him to emphasize the traditionality of the langue and the innovation of the diction. The langue was the common property of a race of singers, and the diction the property of just one. At the same time, the structuralist approach also favored the exploration of the “oral” as the only true way to approach language study. Oral was seen

63. Many scholars wish to see in Greece a “pure” uncontaminated oral society whose like cannot be found today. However, Greece was surrounded by, and traded with, countries where literacy had existed for several millennia; indeed, at some point literacy had existed in Greece itself. Thus, the situation of ancient Greece is similar to the situations of, say, the Mande singers in Africa in the sixteenth century, who performed their songs but did not write them down. Or to the epics of the islands east of Bali, before Indonesian and a western-style literacy were introduced at the beginning of the twentieth century (see Fox 1988).
as primary, as more pure than written. But because Parry had to overcome the separation in time between Homer (for whom we only have written records) and his contemporary subjects (the Yugoslav guslars carefully selected for illiteracy), he had to create a stepping stone which would allow the juxtaposition and comparison of the two. This he found in the work of Lévy-Bruhl and Jousse, who claimed to have found differences in mentalité between (contemporary) literate and illiterate subjects. These differences fitted perfectly into an older, evolutionary science developed for diachronic linguistic studies, which had reigned supreme before Saussure. The “phases” of any language reflected the evolutionary “phases” of human culture and societies. In addition, the belief of the early Indo-Europeanists that languages degenerate over time encouraged Parry to view the Kunstsprache of the Homeric poems as the last record of an oral performance, before writing corrupted both the poetry and the mentalité of a people.

In the decades between Parry’s field work and publications and the present, the step-by-step evolutionary view of the development of human societies has been discredited in anthropological and linguistic circles; so have beliefs about primitive and civilized mentalités. Much more research has become available that shows how Kunstsprachen are used and preserved and that highlights the special qualities and occasions assigned to their use. For instance, in all Southeast Asian traditions the performance language (not an entire poem) is learned from written records, and can be used either to perform a poem or to recompose one in writing. In the Balinese case, an inheritor of the Indic tradition far removed by time and geographical distance, an ancient mixture of several different languages is used only in performances of historical (epic) dramas. The style and content of such recomposed poems rely heavily on type scenes and formulas, like the Homeric poems, and are much closer in nature and in form to the ancient Greek epics than the Yugoslav poetry recorded by Parry, Lord, and earlier (Murko) and later researchers.

Some of the implications of my historical analysis of the Oral Theory are obvious. Now that the focus on the orality of the poems has been shown to be a vestige of early structuralist influence, combined with passé ideas about mentalités, we can reassess the entire problem of Homeric composition. Parry and Lord were right in their observations about oral performers. But their comparative analysis went too far when they assumed that writing had nothing to do with the oral style of the Homeric poems. They compared the products of illiterate poets with those of a poet whose illiteracy was presumed, not confirmed. They succumbed to the desire to see the Homeric poems as the first written records of ancient Greece and as a reliable source of information on customs, singing, and the state of knowledge in the eighth century.

If writing and rewriting played a role in the composition of the Iliad and Odyssey, as I have argued, it becomes vain to try to assign a specific date for

64. De Vet 1996.
their composition or to use these poems as a first record or source for later events and customs. If these poems took shape over a period of centuries one can no longer argue that they reflect a particular moment in time, as the original Saussurian plant metaphor would lead us to expect. A late composition (or recomposition) of the Homeric poems brings my hypothesis into direct conflict with those who have interpreted Parry’s work more generally, claiming that oral transmission must have taken place rather integrally and exactly over several centuries, until recorded and perhaps polished in writing. That particular and limited understanding of orality removes creativity from the writing process, places it in the (earlier) “oral” period, and thus allows these scholars the continued use of the Homeric poems as sources for information on the eighth century BCE and before. By contrast, my interpretation of the newer data suggests that if we did so, we would follow the Greeks in their invention of tradition.65

A reformulation of the Oral Theory that incorporates modern anthropological scholarship might read as follows: oral poets compose in performance, with the use of formulas, themes, and the constraints of meter, or melody, or music. Some oral poets are literate: yet they also compose in performance. Oftentimes, a literate oral poet will compose poetry in writing, in the style in which he is expected to perform. These literate performers take advantage of an ancient performance language to which they can add new archaisms or other interesting features they may have found in older manuscripts, or in specially designed dictionaries and lists. Their performances benefit from their access to depositories of poetry, both written and oral. Others may borrow a poet’s manuals and manuscripts, and so the cycle of ever-increasing, ever-changing, and ever-longer poems is born. As a result such poems carry the hallmarks of orality, while they benefit from their inexhaustible written sources. A synchronic “slicing” approach in order to assess their age is impossible; a diachronic one is also impossible for the same reasons.

I offer a cautionary note: when I suggest that the Indic poems represent a better comparand for the Homeric poems, I am not suggesting we return to the excesses of the nineteenth-century historical linguists. These scholars found numerous similarities between the Iliad, the Odyssey, and the Ramayana and Mahabharata, and sometimes even believed that the Indic poems were reworkings of the Greek ones. Nor should we look for similar expressions, or personalities, or similes that “sound” Homeric or Indo-European. Comparative study no longer involves comparing details. Rather, we should examine the processes and the rules: how do literate poets perform, what language do they use, how do they use it, how do they use their written and oral sources, and how and why did the Western

65. There is nothing wrong, of course, with accompanying the Greeks on the road to the invention of tradition: in fact, the Homeric poems might shed more light on fifth- and fourth-century Greece and its beliefs about its past than on eighth-century Greece and earlier. The danger lies in finding “precursors” of, for instance, democracy, in the many descriptions of assemblies held in the Homeric military camps, rather than seeing these descriptions as the result of fifth- or fourth-century authors’ inability to understand that those must have been different times with different rules.
tradition become so focused on orality (a question I have attempted to address in this essay). We will discover that, like their Indic counterparts, the Homeric poems shaped as well as reflected the culture around them, in a language specially crafted over time. At what time the poems and their creators began to do so with the use of writing, and which reflection belongs in which time period, can no longer be assessed. And finally, the quality of the Homeric poems did not begin to decline at the advent of writing; in fact, only at that moment did it become possible to create more complex and more intricate stories, in a more refined language.

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