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Poetry in Speech

Egbert J. Bakker

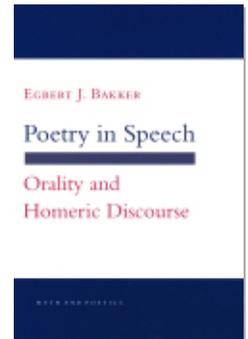
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Foreword

GREGORY NAGY

Many of the books in the Myth and Poetics series center on the power of myth to make language special or specially formal: when language is stylized by myth, it becomes a culture's poetry or song. Egbert Bakker's *Poetry in Speech* approaches myth and poetics from another direction, asking how myth is shaped by poetics and, just as important, how poetics are conditioned by everyday language, language as it is actually spoken. Bakker calls everyday language *speech*, distinguishing it from the special languages of song or poetry (or even prose), and the word is aptly chosen, since the range of its meanings in contemporary English recapitulates the tendency of everyday language to become special in special contexts. In neutral contexts, as when we speak of the human capacity for *speech*, the word applies by default to any language situation; in special contexts, however, as when we speak of a *speech* delivered before an audience, the word refers to a special kind of discourse.

The criterion of everyday speech, it is essential to stress, is a cultural variable, depending on the concrete realization of whatever special speech or discourse is being set apart for a special context. In traditional societies, as the books in the Myth and Poetics series have argued in a variety of ways, the setting apart of such special discourse would normally happen when a ritual is enacted or when a myth is spoken or sung. The language of Homer is a prime example of such special discourse, as Richard P. Martin vividly demonstrated in the first book of this series, *The Language of Heroes: Speech and Performance in the "Iliad."* Homeric discourse is most sharply set apart from the reality of everyday language, no matter how we may reconstruct this reality for any particular time and place in ancient Greece, by its

metrical and formulaic dimensions. Bakker traces these dimensions, which for Milman Parry and Albert Lord mark the orality of Homeric discourse, back to their sources in everyday language—a genealogy expressed in the book’s full title, *Poetry in Speech: Orality and Homeric Discourse*.

Bakker has shifted the emphasis: poetry that is oral is in fact speech that is special, stylized by meter and formula. To put it negatively: it is not the absence of writing that makes oral poetry special. Nor is it the orality of oral poetry that makes it special, as if “oral” were a special category within a body of poetry that we generally experience in written form. From an anthropological point of view, poetry in and of itself is special speech. The real working opposition is the one between special speech—whether it be song or poetry or prose—and the everyday speech from which it derives. That derivation does not imply a binary distinction, of course, and the continuum that runs between everyday language and the varieties of special speech can be extended to include written texts. Speech that is written, because of the stylization involved, sometimes has a better claim to the “special” distinction than do any oral examples of special speech.

Understanding our inherited Homeric text as the reflex of a special language, Bakker transcends purely literary interpretation, refusing to be tied down by presuppositions of a text originally composed in writing and written in order to be read. In analyzing the principles of Homeric composition, he shows us how to rethink even the concept of the sentence and of the period, its classical analogue. Only in a text-bound approach, Bakker argues, can the sentence be considered the basic unit of speech. Following the methods of the linguist Wallace Chafe, he reassesses the building blocks of speech in terms of the speaker’s cognitive system *as it actually operates in the process of speaking*. Chafe resists the artificial superimposition of literate grammar on the analysis of everyday language. Bakker frees his own analysis of Homeric discourse from such superimpositions and defamiliarizes our textbound mental routines in the reading of archaic Greek poetry.

Bakker’s arguments about the shaping of the metrical and formulaic system of Homeric discourse by the everyday speech from which it is derived open many avenues for future research, particularly into the regulation of speech by this system at the posited moment(s) of performance in an oral tradition. The poetics of recomposition-in-performance, which are reflected in the patterns of wording and word placement within the fundamental rhythmical unit of the dactylic hexameter, can now be further examined from both synchronic and diachronic perspectives. Bakker’s own explorations of these questions mark a monumental advance in our under-

standing of Homeric discourse as a linguistic system. A striking example is his success in explaining the syntactic functions of Homeric particles like *mén, mēn, dé, dé, étoi, ára/rhá, gár, autár/atár, kaí, allá, oún*. In the wake of Bakker's analysis, the classicist cannot help but read the Greek of Homer differently: the reader's understanding of practically every verse is affected—and enhanced.

A vital question remains: why exactly is there a need for a special discourse in the self-expression of myth? The answers, which vary from culture to culture, have to do with the special contents of myth itself, which require special forms for their expression. In the case of Homeric discourse, as Bakker shows in minute detail, such answers can be found in the actual usage of the discourse itself. A case in point is the system of noun-epithet formulas. Through these formulas, as also through the deployment of evidential particles, Homeric discourse represents itself as the verbalization of a heroic world that is literally visualized by those very special agents of divine memory, the Muses. Whatever Homeric poetry *sees* through the Muses who witness the epic past becomes just as special as whatever it *says* through the Muses who narrate what they saw (and heard) to Homer. Homeric vision, as expressed by the metrical and formulaic system of Homeric discourse, claims to be something far greater than mere poetic imagination. The blind bard's inner vision becomes the ultimate epiphany of the heroic past.

FOR PETRA

