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Poetry in Speech

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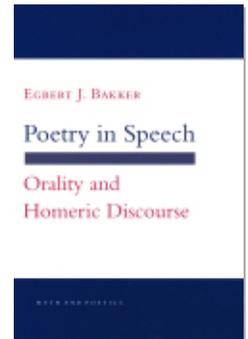
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Introduction

Poetry in Speech examines the poetic discourse of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* in terms of spoken discourse or speech. Such a project needs to be justified at the outset. The most influential type of criticism of Homeric poetry in the twentieth century, the oral-formulaic approach of Milman Parry and Albert Lord, holds that text, the medium opposite to speech, is absent in the composition of the epic tale. And more recent research, focusing on performance, is reaching consensus on the idea that even if an archaic Greek poem has been written down, its text is at best a marginal factor in the reception and transmission of the poem. What, then, is new in the study of Homeric poetry as speech?

While most research dealing with oral poetry views orality as belonging to times and places other than our own, the orality that is the subject of this book is a less remote phenomenon. The performance of Homeric poetry in its institutional setting may be something of the past, of a culture different from our own with regard to the role and importance of writing; but the discourse that was presented in these performances had one very obvious property in common with something in which we all participate: it was a matter of speech and voice, and of the consciousness of the performer and his audience. This is orality too, but not in a historical sense. The difference here is not one of time or culture but of medium; speech as a medium “other” than writing. In treating Homeric poetry as oral in this “medial” sense, we leave, at least initially, the poetic or literary perspective and view Homeric poetry against the background of the spoken medium, considering it as speech or discourse. I have tried, where appropriate, to

think of terms and concepts that apply to speech in its own right, rather than to speech as viewed from the standpoint of writing. Part I offers some thoughts on the opposition between the oral and the literate in this connection. Having argued in Chapter 1 against a conception of orality from the point of view of writing, I then proceed in Chapter 2 with a possible scenario for Homeric writing seen from the standpoint of speech.

The criticism of Homeric discourse as speech is the subject of Part 2. In Chapters 3, 4, and 5, I discuss those features of Homeric style (such as parataxis, adding style, and ring composition) that I believe are better accounted for as naturally occurring strategies of speakers who present their discourse to listeners than as elements of poetic style that have to be characterized as early or primitive with respect to the poetic styles of later periods. My discussion of this Homeric speech syntax—which includes an account of certain Greek particles that differs from the usual descriptions based on classical, written Greek—is at the same time an attempt at establishing links between the level of syntax and higher levels in the flow and composition of the epic tale.

Yet such a discourse analysis of Homeric poetry does not ignore or diminish the importance of the difference between Homeric language and everyday speech. On the contrary, the speech perspective is meant to accommodate the common features of epic style, such as meter and formulas, providing a basis on which they can be studied: in the method that I have followed, the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* are not so much poetry that is oral as speech that is special, a matter of the special occasion of the performance. Thus in Part 3 (Chapters 6 and 8) I argue that poetic meter and formulas, rather than removing Homeric poetry from the realm of the ordinary and the everyday, derive from what is most natural in spoken discourse: the “chunks” that make up the adding style. I argue that meter and formulas entail the stylization of ordinary speech, rather than some inherently poetic principle.

Special attention is paid to the noun-epithet formula, the type of expression that plays a key role in the metrics as well as in the thematics of the Greek epic diction. I argue in Chapter 7 for a function of the noun-epithet formula in Homeric discourse over and above its evident metrical importance, as noted by Parry. Starting from the premise that speech is necessarily a matter of behavior, I analyze the noun-epithet formula as the characteristic articulation of a speech ritual specific to the epic performance: the privileged moment where past and present, heroic action and poetic action, find joint expression in the epithet as the principal bearer of the hero's epic *kléos* ‘renown.’

Much of the effort that went into this book had to do with the apparent paradox posed by the study of Homeric poetry as speech: the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* are texts, and as such they firmly belong to the medium in which most of our scholarly discourse is conducted. Working within the speech perspective implied by my methodology and forcing myself to read Homer as the transcoding of one medium into another, a flow of speech through time that has become a transcript, I began to realize just how much of the vocabulary and the notional apparatus used for our study of language and style is overtly or covertly literate, pertaining to our writing culture, and thus perhaps more indicative of the perspective of the philologist than of speech studied in the form of a text. The result is an attempt to combine the concepts of Greek philology, stylistics, and linguistics with insights drawn from discourse analysis and the study of oral poetry, and most of all to remove the boundaries between these disciplines.

