

# Live at the

HOMER'S MASTERPIECES THE "ILIAD" AND "ODYSSEY" AREN'T THE FINE WRITING THAT SCHOLARS ALWAYS THOUGHT THEY WERE. BUT WHAT ARE THEY? THE ANSWER EXPLAINS EVERYTHING FROM RECIPES TO REVOLTS.

Someone once said that people who hadn't read Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey* were like those who'd never visited the ocean—there's a great thing on Earth they hadn't seen. Everyone agrees that the heroic tales of gods and men not only entertained ancient Greeks, but also taught them politics, geography, morals, metallurgy, history and shipbuilding. They contain inspiration for modern governments. Mostly, though, we marvel at how they've reigned over the world of letters in the West for nearly 3,000 years.

But if you haven't read Homer's poems, not to worry. They weren't meant to be read; they were meant to be heard, says John Foley, Curators' Professor of English and classical studies. Many of those students who have read Homer—even the poets who translated the epics to test their mettle—haven't really "seen the great thing" either. At least not on its own terms. Recent breakthroughs by Foley and others have shown that a work like the *Odyssey* is not great poetry at all in our usual sense. Instead, it's a variety of folksong, complete with stock melodies and characters, repetitions and formulaic ways of speaking that most people would recognize from ballads.

That special way of speaking used by ancient Greek "folksingers" is their "register"—a kind of special language for telling in verse the great stories of a people. We're not talking about performers like Pete Seeger, who typically memorize their material. The singers of Homer's work used the register's handy cache of plot and character to recompose their book-length stories on the spot during each performance.

The *Odyssey*'s basic plot has endured: Hero

Odysseus goes to war, outlasts a long imprisonment and has several fantastic adventures with one-eyed giants, sea monsters and a visit to Hades during his long return home. When he finally reaches Ithaca after 20 years, locals have long presumed his death. He travels in disguise and finds a crew of suitors vying for his wife's hand in marriage. During the interminable waiting for her hero-husband, clever Penelope weaves and unweaves a

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tapestry to stall the suitors in hopes Odysseus will return to save her.

Foley has heard variations on that plot play out during his fieldwork, which has taken him to the noisy, working-class taverns of the former Yugoslavia. There, from the lips of traditional singers—liv-

*This 45 RPM record from the mid-1970s captures a performance of "The Wedding of Mititch the Standard-Bearer" by the guslar Rade Jamina. Jamina is bowing the one-stringed lutelike gusle as he sings. His epic tradition dates at least to the eighth century.*



# Improv

BY DALE SMITH

ing Homers—epic songs very much like the *Odyssey* still resound, especially throughout the Islamic sacred month of Ramadan. “Audiences in current living traditions are not nearly so well-behaved as we would suppose an audience for poetry should be,” Foley says. “They don’t sit there quietly and approvingly clap when the poet is through. They stir around, get up and leave, talk to one another, shout out alternate lines, make quite a bit of noise, criticize the singer if they don’t agree with what he’s doing or if they don’t think he’s very good. In general they co-create the performance along with the bard.”

Meanwhile, those South Slavic bards are working hard singing as well as playing the one-stringed *gusle* (goose-leh) half an hour or more at a stretch unamplified over the chatter of two dozen men. The verb “to sing” in Serbo-Croatian is *turati* (tour-ah-tee), which means to drive out or impel. “So, you’re driving this song out of you,” Foley says. “You’re not in any sense being lyric or precious. This is a physical activity done with great gusto. It’s almost shouting, and it’s done very fast while playing the instrument.” Pick a favorite poet and try to imagine her or him composing book-length verse on the fly while playing an instrument and singing above the din of a bunch of opinionated and possibly drunken revelers. If producing art under those conditions seems impossible, you have some idea of the register’s power and why an oral poetry tradition just has to be dif-

ferent from a literary one.

Based on findings from this living language laboratory in Yugoslavia, as well as research on texts, Foley has sometimes irritated, sometimes intrigued students and scholars alike by debunking several longstanding ideas about Homer. Most of the misunderstandings stem from assumptions that literate people automatically make about poems that “live” in texts. For instance, the literati assumed for centuries that Homer was a genius author; but more likely, he was a preliterate and possibly itinerant bard, who traded in stories handed down for 700 years or so by word of mouth. The literati “ventilated the senses” with the Homeric aesthetic; but now it looks like the *Odyssey* was part of a much larger tradition that accomplished a lot of practical work. The literati’s solitary readers savored original stories through the eye, though now it seems clear that Homer’s work was meant for the ears of clan-sized crowds who already knew the stories. As a singer of tales in an oral tradition, Homer—rather than naming a single person—amounts to a shorthand name for that tradition.

Foley’s breakthrough has been to witness Homer away from the literati by describing the oral dimension of the art—the poetic register—with scientific rigor more often associated with physics than the humanities. In contrast to scholars who make an observation and go hunting for evidence to support it, Foley has created the theory that

defines his field. Medievalist Mark Amodio of Vassar College says Foley’s profound insights have revolutionized the field of oral theory. Scholars all over the world now use the criteria Foley has developed in studying how oral poets structure their work and how these traditional works impart meaning. Using his own eyes, ears and computer analyses, he has described the oral-poetic reg-

*This Greek epic singer (aoidos) fingers the kithara with his right hand and uses a plectrum with his left hand. Although Homer’s tradition stems from at least the 12th century B.C., it was first written down no earlier than the late eighth century B.C. Since scholars can’t do fieldwork in ancient Greece, the living South Slavic tradition is the best window on Homer.*



STATUETTE ANTIKENMUSEUMS UND GYMNASIUMS MÜNCHEN, AB 2416.



*This portrait, composed by the "Berlin" painter, one of the foremost red-figure vase painters of ancient Greece, portrays a younger aoidos "driving" the song out. One-sixth of the Odyssey is sung by the hero himself in the court of the Phaeacians.*

THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART, FLETCHER FUNDS, 1956. (56.171.18) PHOTOGRAPH © 1999 THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART

ister not only for Ancient Greek, but also for Old English (older than 1,000 years) and modern Serbo-Croatian. Foley's habit of working across traditions has made his scholarship all the more substantial, and many colleagues have followed his lead.

The implications of breathing the "orality" back into Homer and other works include strictly artistic concerns but also go deeply into cultures past and present. From the tens of thousands of languages that likely have existed on Earth, only about 80 full-fledged literatures ever developed. Writing didn't exist until December of humankind's "year" on Earth, followed much later by paperback books on New Year's Eve. All of the world's cultures, even the handful with literatures, began the same way: word of mouth. It's hard to grasp for those of us making a living punching PCs in North America and Europe, but most of our planet's peoples still use various oral traditions—from recipes and legal codes to genealogies and epic stories—as their main modes for communicating. Understanding Homer as part of an oral tradition goes so far as to help explain the mesmerizing power exercised by politicians like the late Marshal Tito, who rose to office after leading the Yugoslavian resistance against the Nazis. His funeral notices were filled with heroic descriptions taken directly from the South Slavic oral epics.

THE HOMERIC REGISTER WASN'T the street language of archaic Greece. In fact, it was really only good for one thing: telling heroic stories. Ancient Greeks would not have used the register while buying a loaf of bread, any more than you'd pick up a prescription at the pharmacy with, "Ho there, stout apothecary, I pray thee, make haste and fetch now that balm!" For centuries,

bards learned the register's words, scenes and story plots by listening to the songs and through lots of practice. They kept what fit the verse meter as long as it had the right ring to it. Like any language, the register is so complex and large that no single person could have assembled it. To have composed the stories in his own words from firsthand experience, Homer would have had to live a minimum of 500 years all over Greece—sometimes in two places at once—and would have had to speak two major dialects and some minor ones as well. Same goes for South Slavic, whose hardic register mixes dialects and keeps alive words that are otherwise long-obsolete, Foley says. “The dialect of Serbia, ekavski, and the dialect of Croatia, ijekavski, will stand side by side in the same line of verse. Of course, outside the register, outside the special performance stage, never, never, never.”

Some small recurrent pieces of the Homeric register, such as a phrase like “green fear,” are packed with big meanings, but only in the oral tradition. Since no ancient Greeks left a glossary behind, Foley has learned to tease the orality from texts with a kind of linguistic archaeology. It turns out that the phrase has a supernatural connotation. For instance, one of the 10 times “green fear” occurs in the epics is when Odysseus watches the shades gather in Hades to drink sheep’s blood before they can speak to him. The literati struggled with the translation, Foley says. “Some said ‘pale fear’ because we have the metaphor that someone is pale with fear. It’s a nice equivalent at a

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poetic level, but that’s not what it means in Homer. If you look at all the instances of green fear in the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, and ask yourself the question, ‘Is there anything else going on here besides the color green and the noun fear?’ what you find out is that it always means fear that derives from a supernatural source. Now, how does that come about? Is there anything about green that is supernatural? No. Anything in fear that is supernatural? No. But when you use them together, ‘green fear’ takes on a special supernatural meaning in the tradition.”

Just as good politicians can improvise a

stump speech from well-rehearsed and often-used sound bites, the register repeats itself. One-third of the *Odyssey*’s language is verbatim repetition of formulaic words and phrases, including nametags like swift-footed Achilles and Earthshaker-Poseidon. Those ready-made units were crucial to singers who composed while playing the gusle, and that’s what the other breakthrough in Homeric studies was about back in the 1920s. A young scholar named Milman Parry figured out that, in Homer’s six-foot lines, each nametag’s metrical makeup consigned it to one and only one particular slot. The verbs slip into complementary metrical slots. Singers had plenty of these mix-and-match formulas handy to get even a stubborn character like much-suffering divine Odysseus to ponder something, trick a goddess, sit down, walk through a house, get ready to speak, poke out a monster’s eye, and much more. With just the 27 nouns and 24 verbs that Parry studied for his dissertation, a singer could get 648 combinations of “X does Y.” That gave singers exponential power to tell well-known stories by arranging and

*Holding a ceremonial instrument that’s more for exhibition than for accompaniment, and clothed in festival garb, Obren Miritch poses for his performance of a song about the hero Senjanin Ivo.*





rearranging the formulas. Foley outlines all this in the sixth of his 14 books, *The Theory of Oral Composition*, which was published in Chinese this year, spreading the basics of his field to a huge new population. He

notes how critics complained that the mechanical-sounding theory reduced traditional singers to linguistic robots just stringing together clichés. Surely that couldn't account for Homer's memorable work. But before Parry's ideas could play out, he died of a gunshot wound to the head in 1935.

Roughly 40 years later, a mere hiccup in Homeric studies, the oral-art part started coming together for Foley, who was fascinated by how the Homeric register worked so systematically. His insight wasn't about the minutiae of words and phrases, though, but at the level of whole scenes. He remembers the precise moment in graduate school. It was dinnertime, not his own, but one of many feast scenes he'd found in translating the *Odyssey* from Greek to English. Up to that point, feasts had been predictably full of good manners and high hopes for better times to come. In this one, though, the hero stops at an island on his long trip home, where "Polyphemus, the Cyclops, is eating Odysseus' men, and none too politely," Foley says. "But I noticed that he's eating them with some of the same lines and phrases used in all of the conventional feast scenes."

Here are the stock lines that end all

*The tradition of epic songs was almost certainly a male-dominated art, but women had musical modes of their own. All of these musical traditions, including this woman playing a double pipe, were passed on from person to person without notation or text.*

WOMAN PLAYING THE DOUBLE FLUTE, ATRE BLACK-FIGURE  
PHEGGE BY THE THEBES PAINTER, C. 500-480 B.C.,  
PITRER, MET. MUSEUM OF ART AND ARCHAEOL. CIVIEN MEMORIAL  
FUND (61.1)

other Homeric feasts:

"They put their hands to the good things that lay ready before them.

But when they had cast off the desire for eating and drinking. . . ." they get down to business.

And here's what Odysseus says when Polyphemus goes cannibal:

"But springing up, he put his hands to my companions. . . .

But when he had filled his great belly, eating man-meat and drinking unmixed milk, . . ."

Seeing the similarities, Foley says, "The question then arose about whether the poet was so enslaved by the formulaic language that he had only one way to get people to eat stuff," or whether the tradition allowed the poet license to bend hopeful-feast formulas to the ironic purpose of cannibalizing the hero's men. "I tended toward the latter possibility."

Foley says.

If all this sounds like highfalutin literary analysis, it's just the opposite. Back in Homer's time, everybody from kings and queens to farmers and slaves grew up hearing the stories. Everybody would have been in on the joke. When Polyphemus became fossilized in text, the literati started reading right over this brand of oral art. They put any odd-sounding moments down to Homer's "nodding" on the job. In fact, Foley says, it was the literati that was nodding.

Homer was busy crafting the stories, sure enough, using some time-honored plans that work just as well as formulas recognizable in the latest romantic comedy: Guy and girl (1) are smitten with each other, (2) hit hard times, break up and, (3) get back together in the end. A romantic comedy's quality is judged not primarily by the novelty of the plot, but rather by the art of the execution: The audience must laugh and cry and then



laugh again in all the right places. The problem with studying Homer's plots is that only a pair survives—the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*—and they are so different that they cannot be directly compared like all the instances of feasts or boy-meets-girl. That's partly why, since the 1930s, scholars including Foley have traveled a long way to see the living epic tradition in the former Yugoslavia. It's a rare thing for a classicist to do fieldwork, but it's been the only way to understand how the plots themselves key the register.

All over Yugoslavia, singers recreate a staple *Odyssey*-type plot: Hero called away to war is taken captive; while a captive, he hears of devastation at home; he makes his way back; he finds suitors flocking around his wife; and he eventually meets her again. It seems all very heroic and manly. The nuts and bolts are so consistent that scholars dubbed it a Return Song and went on their way. Foley was fascinated by the ending, though, which varies in tantalizing ways. Sometimes the wife has been faithful, and the homecoming is a happy one. Other times, she lays a trap for the returning hero and murders him. That kind of variety of suspense never shows up in *When Harry*

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*Met Sally* or in Homer's *Odyssey*. What's more, in these heroic and manly tales told to men in taverns, the whole thing turns on the wife. Will she be faith-

ful or not? In the *Odyssey*, wife Penelope is more than faithful—she cleverly fends off suitors for decades with ruse after ruse until Odysseus returns for her. But when the tradition lived 3,000 years ago, the Greek Return Song wife may well have been as mercurial as the mythic Yugoslavian wives.

**T**HAT MYTHIC GRIP ON THE IMAGINATION can have down-to-earth results, such as the rise to power of Marshal Tito, who led the Yugoslavian resistance against Hitler and then ruled Yugoslavia for 35 years after World War II. In times of crisis, Foley says, oral tradition bends and adapts. "Usually, it will provide some aid to the society. This is a mode that we don't have."

When Foley visited the former Yugoslavia in the 1980s, the Nazis' genocidal campaign there was still apparent. Tito had led a guerilla-style force, whose reputation soon grew. "These resistance fighters developed a kind of legendary heroic reputation, which was memorialized in songs patterned on narrative epics," Foley says. "It's almost as if you had a ready-made mold for heroic achievement, and into that you poured a new substance, and that new substance was no longer the leg-

endary heroes of the 14th, 15th, 16th centuries. Instead, it was Tito and these folks right up close we were hearing about in the newspapers because people's sons and fathers were involved with them, and they were fighting the heroic battle against this oppressor's force. Those 'partisan songs' became a tradition in their own right. Once you got them in place—and that tradition is part of people's identity—then the leader has immense political cachet." Tito was like Eisenhower coming back from D-Day, but multiplied by powers of 10, because Tito was the principal heroic leader named in the songs. "So he comes out of that with an identity matching the greatest heroes in pan-Yugoslavian history, and he rides it right into political office. The tradition does things that no single person could accomplish, and no one work could accomplish, because of its continuities."

Oral traditions all over the world, like the Tito songs, aren't "just a bunch of pleasant ditties put in an anthology somewhere so people can ventilate their senses," Foley says. "Oral traditions can show us just how fundamental a role poetry can play in shaping and maintaining cultures." 🌟



*Starting in the 19th century, competitions for the title of folk singer (narodni guslar) were vehicles for oral traditional singers to become prominent in mass society. As the label shows, this selection of stories by Blagoje Tepavčević was recorded at Radio-TV Belgrade.*