

THE DESCENT OF MILMAN:  
A DARWINIAN READING OF PARRY  
ON THE HOMERIC FORMULA

— R. DREW GRIFFITH —

ABSTRACT

*The opposition of synchrony to diachrony represents a false dichotomy for understanding Parry's work, for, like Darwin before him, he sought to reconstruct from the present state of the evidence historical developments (in his case the oral, formulaic style). Since no pre-Homeric Greek was known to him, he used the noun-epithet formulae he found in Homer's finished text and later that of South Slavic oral song. Many aspects of his work echo what Darwin's Origin of Species has to say about evolution.*

KEYWORDS

*Milman Parry, Homer, Homeric formula, Charles Darwin, theory of evolution, Structuralism*

The publication of Kanigel's (2021) fascinating biography of Milman Parry, *Hearing Homer's Song* shortly after the launch in *HCS* of a journal devoted solely to the history of Classical scholarship has moved me to take a second look at some (decidedly unbiographical) notes I prepared a decade or so ago on the famous Homerist's works. I present them here in a revised and updated form in the belief that Kanigel's book will stir up renewed interest in his celebrated subject and his early application of statistics and other scientific methods to work in the Humanities.

### Introduction

The purpose of this article is simple: to outline the similarity between Darwin's theory of evolution in *The Origin of Species* (1859, 6th ed. 1872) and Parry's account of Homer's formulary system, from his two doctoral theses of 1928 through articles published until his death on 3 December 1935. This comparison is far from new. Linguists were quick to see the implications of Darwin's work for their own field (Schleicher 1863), and as Adam Parry (1971: xxvi) points out in introducing his father's papers,

Wade-Gery (1952: 38–9, cf. Levin 2000: xx–xiii) had already told the audience of Cambridge University’s J. H. Gray lectures in 1949 that:

the most important assault made on Homer’s creativeness in recent years is the work of Milman Parry, who may be called the Darwin of Homeric studies. As Darwin seemed to many to have removed the finger of God from the creation of the world and of man, so Milman Parry has seemed to some to remove the creative poet from the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*.

Combella (1959: 195) furthermore compares Bassett’s (1938: 247 n. 8) eagerness to belittle Parry’s work, by suggesting that it was not so original after all, with the reception originally given Darwin. To the best of my knowledge, however, no-one has yet done what I propose here, namely pursue this insight by asking whether the methods, as well as the ostensible results, of the two thinkers, Biologist and Classicist, bear any resemblance one to the other.

To a large extent the present paper is a reply to de Vet’s (2005) article, “Parry in Paris: Structuralism, Historical Linguistics, and the Oral Theory”. It is a reply not in the sense of rebuttal (for de Vet’s is an excellent article, which I highly recommend), but rather an attempt to forestall a misperception that might arise in the mind of her readers to the effect that Parry’s work is in some way anti-Darwinian. As we shall see, the exact opposite is the case. The passage of de Vet’s article that, in my view, runs the greatest risk of misleading is that (pp. 264–7) in which she characterizes Antoine Meillet’s view of the nascent Structuralist movement as a reaction against Darwinism.

The context of this discussion is Parry’s meeting with Meillet in Paris in the mid-1920s — an event for the understanding of which I, like de Vet and Kanigel, am indebted to the account by de Lamberterie (1997). De Lamberterie recounts how, though Parry’s *doctorat ès lettres* was supervised at the Sorbonne by Aimé Puech, a distinguished Pindarist of the belletrist variety, Parry’s own ideas were much more closely in line with those of Meillet, a linguist at the Collège de France (which does not grant degrees), who was to preside over the committee for Parry’s *soutenance* on 31 May 1928. From Parry’s acquaintance with Meillet, de Vet infers that Ferdinand de Saussure, founder of the Structuralist movement in linguistics (as Émile Durkheim was in sociology), influenced the young American’s work in a way that was profound, though possibly indirect and in any case never acknowledged.

Such influence seems probable. Readers of the first of Parry’s two Sorbonne theses, *L’Épithète traditionnelle dans Homère*, will be struck

by the predominance in it of lists of metrically equivalent formulae conjoined with one or another common noun or proper name. These tables are the basis upon which Parry (1971: 95) demonstrates that, “the existence in Homeric diction of this system of generic epithets capable of being applied to any hero must inevitably involve a choice of epithets not according to the character of the hero, but according to the metrical value of his name”.

The core feature of Structuralist linguistics, and indeed the very “structure” whence it derives its name, is the opposition between the axis of selection (or paradigm) consisting of all the possibilities offered by a given language (otherwise called *langue*) and the axis of combination (or syntagm) consisting of actual utterances in that language (*parole*). In de Saussure’s (1979: 36 [76]) own words:

L’étude du langage comporte donc deux parties: l’une, essentielle, a pour objet la langue, qui est sociale dans son essence et indépendante de l’individu; cette étude est uniquement psychique; l’autre, secondaire, a pour objet la partie individuelle du langage, c’est-à-dire la parole y compris la phonation: elle est psycho-physique.

Linguistic study thus involves two parts: one, which is essential, has as its object language, which is in its essence social and not dependent on the individual; this study is psychological only; the other, which is secondary, has as its object the individual linguistic aspect, which is speech including phonation, i.e. the production or utterance of vocal sound: it is both psychological and physiological. (my translation)

De Vet (2005: 264, 266, 267) correctly says that,

Darwinian scholarship emphasized the importance of gradual change over time, taking a diachronic view of matters [...]. All this changed abruptly in the early twentieth century. [...] [U]nder 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.

It is certainly true that the intellectual climate of Paris in the 1920s was not favourable to Darwin. Ernest Renan, whose *Future of Science* Parry (1971: 2, 269 n. 1, 409) repeatedly quotes, affirmed (1890: vii) that:

Le français ne veut exprimer que des choses claires; or les lois les plus importantes, celles qui tiennent aux transformations de la vie, ne sont pas claires; on les voit dans une sorte de demi-jour. C'est ainsi qu'après avoir aperçu la première les vérités de ce qu'on appelle maintenant le darwinisme, la France a été la dernière à s'y rallier.

The Frenchman wants to speak only of clear things; however, the most important laws, those that hold to the transformations of life, are not clear; one sees them in a sort of twilight. Thus it is that having been the first to perceive the truth of what one now calls Darwinism, France was the last to rally round it. (my translation)

Moreover, Bergson's critique of Darwin's mechanistic view of life, above all in *L'Évolution créatrice* of 1907, was very much *au courant* in Paris (Bergson would receive the Nobel Prize for Literature for 1927, the year before Parry's doctorate).

It may be doubted, however, whether either the tepid reaction to Darwin in France or the excitement surrounding the *dernier cri* in linguistics would have unduly swayed Parry's views, for they were already well established by the time he arrived, as his supervisor Puech (1936: 87–8) says in an obituary notice in the *Revue des Études Grecques*:

J'avais été tout de suite séduit [...] par la netteté [...] avec laquelle [Parry] concevait déjà son programme. [...] Il était déjà très maître de ses idées, et je les discutais avec lui, moins dans l'intention de les modifier que pour l'amener à les approfondir ou à les nuancer.

I was immediately seduced by the clarity with which Parry already conceived his research-program. He was already very mature in his ideas, and I would discuss them with him, less with the idea of changing them, than in order to help him deepen them or give them subtlety. (my translation)

We are told that Parry's first ambition as a college-student was to major in the natural sciences — perhaps Chemistry (Levin 1937: 259, Beye 1990: 361, though Kanigel knows nothing of this) —, and that he, “foresaw the possibility of establishing a physiology of literature, of investigating the way it works, the necessities which call it into being, the circumstances under which it flourished” (Levin 1937: 262). This is not the background of one who would casually set aside the most exciting and controversial (the Scopes trial took place in July of 1925) scientific development of the last century. Any doubts about this should be laid to rest by the eulogy to

the historical method in literary criticism that Parry (1971: 408–13) delivered to the Board of Overseers of Harvard College on 15 May 1934 — after his return from France.

In what follows I will juxtapose quotations from the definitive 1872 edition of Darwin's *The Origin of Species* (as he reissued it with corrections in 1876 six years before his death) with answering quotations from Parry's collected papers, along with my own comments on the relationship between the two sets of ideas. I by no means imply that either Biology or Homeric studies has stood still in the eight decades since Parry's death, for both continue to build their respective Milan Cathedrals, to use the allegory with which Gould begins his final book (2002: 2, quoting Hugh Falconer), or that the Humanities are crying out to be further colonized by Biology. This article could more easily than usefully have been expanded to include up-to-date references from both fields, and could have provided a great catalogue of biology-based models for study in the Humanities, had such been its aim.

### **The Processes: Darwinian Evolution and Parry's Tradition**

One searches *The Origin of Species* in vain for any mention of “evolution” prior to the work's final edition (though its last word had always been “evolved”; Darwin 1876: 429). It is ironic that the word that for most people succinctly encapsulates the great thinker's ideas was so seldom upon his lips. Nonetheless, the conviction pervades his *magnum opus* that individuals come to carry more and more new traits until new species can be said to have emerged. This process involves three interconnected ideas: that species change by slow increments, that these changes operate over vast timescales, and that the resulting organisms tend to be more highly organized than their precursors. I allow Darwin (1876) to express these ideas in his own words:

I believe that species come to be tolerably well-defined objects, and do not at any one period present an inextricable chaos of varying and intermediate links: first, because new varieties are very slowly formed, for variation is a slow process, and Natural Selection can do nothing until favourable individual differences or variations occur, and until a place in the natural polity of the country can be better filled by some modification of one or more of its inhabitants, and such new places will depend on slow changes of climate, or on the occasional immigration of new inhabitants, and, probably, in a still more important degree, on some of the old inhabitants becoming slowly modified, with the new

forms thus produced and the old ones acting and reacting on each other. (p. 144)

It may be metaphorically said that Natural Selection is daily and hourly scrutinizing, throughout the world, the slightest variations, rejecting those that are bad, preserving and adding up all that are good; silently and insensibly working, *whenever and wherever opportunity offers*, at the improvement of each organic being in relation to its organic and inorganic conditions of life. We see nothing of these slow changes in progress, until the hand of time has marked the lapse of ages, and then so imperfect is our view into long-past geological ages, that we see only that the forms of life are now different from what they formerly were. (pp. 68–9; emphasis in the original)

and

Natural Selection acts exclusively by the preservation and accumulation of variations, which are beneficial under the organic and inorganic conditions to which each creature tends to become more and more improved in relation to its conditions. This improvement inevitably leads to the gradual advancement of the organization of the greater number of living beings throughout the world. (p. 103)

The notion of evolution so described seems to tally with Parry's conviction (1971: 6) that the artificial nature of Homer's language as an amalgam of forms from dialects (principally the Aeolic and Ionic) that no one individual Greek would ever actually have spoken — that is to say, the fact that it is a *Kunstsprache* — proves it to be traditional. A tradition (*παράδοσις* is the Greek word) owes almost everything to the past, which gives it over (*παραδίδωσι*) to the present, while letting the possibilities intrinsic in that past gradually unfold — *evolvere*. Hence it is unsurprising that Homeric tradition entails the first two aspects of evolution (to say nothing of a Heraclitean sense of impermanence and flux), namely gradualness of accretion and the great length of time required for its development. In Parry's (1971: 6) words:

[T]he character of [Homer's] language reveals that it is a work beyond the powers of a single man, or even of a single generation of poets; consequently we know that we are in the presence of a stylistic element which is the product of a tradition and which every bard of Homer's time must have used.

and (1971: 314), “We know that the Homeric diction was centuries in the making”.

The third aspect of Darwinian evolution — ever increasing complexity — is also a feature of Homeric tradition, as we find best expressed not by Parry himself, but in the words of his student and successor, Lord (2000: 151), who writes:

We shall never be able to determine who first sang these songs, nor when they were first sung, nor where, nor what form they had. We can only be sure that it was a long time before Homer’s day; for, as I have said, the songs themselves show that they have had a long history. We can with some certainty assume that their original form, their first singing, was crude as compared with our texts and only in basic story similar.

### **The Products: Species and Formulae**

For Darwin what evolves are species, a category of beings that he never clearly defines. For him, no species is a *Ding an sich*, but is rather to be recognized by its degree of variation in contradistinction to other species. He (1876: 36–7) writes:

Practically, when a naturalist can unite by means of intermediate links any two forms, he treats the one as a variety of the other; ranking the most common, but sometimes the one first described, as the species, and the other as the variety. But cases of great difficulty, which I will not here enumerate, sometimes arise in deciding whether or not to rank one form as a variety of another, even when they are closely connected by intermediate links; nor will the commonly-assumed hybrid nature of the intermediate forms always remove the difficulty. In very many cases, however, one form is ranked as a variety of another, not because the intermediate links have actually been found, but because analogy leads the observer to suppose either that they do now somewhere exist, or may formerly have existed; and here a wide door for the entry of doubt and conjecture is opened.

This idea, coincidentally, is paralleled in Structural linguistics. Second only in importance for that discipline to the binary opposition of *langue* to *parole* is the idea of *l'arbitraire du signe* (de Saussure 1979: 100 [235]), which is to say that the word “knife”, for example, no more partakes of the Platonic form of “knifeness” than do *couteau*, *Messer* or any of its other translation equivalents. Meaning is wholly context-

dependent, and the signifier “knife” represents the signified “metal blade with sharpened longitudinal edge fixed in handle either rigidly or with hinge, used as cutting instrument or as weapon” (Fowler et al. 1976: 597) only in English contexts. It follows from this that, as de Saussure (1979: 166 [239]) says:

*Dans la langue il n’y a que des différences. Bien plus: une différence suppose en général des termes positifs entre lesquels elle s’établit; mais dans la langue il n’y a que des différences sans termes positifs.* (emphasis in the original)

*In language there are only differences. Moreover, a difference supposes in general positive terms between which it exists; but in language there are only differences without any positive terms.* (my translation)

For Parry, tradition operated primarily on formulae, which he (1971: 13) defines thus:

In the diction of bardic poetry, the formula can be defined as an expression regularly used, under the same metrical conditions, to express an essential idea. What is essential in an idea is what remains after all stylistic superfluity has been taken from it.

In practice, however, Parry largely confines himself, as the title of his first doctoral thesis (*L’Épithète traditionnelle dans Homère*, cf. 1971: 20) makes plain, to formulae that consist of a noun and one or more epithets. Like species, epithets that are used in formulae (called “fixed” or “generic”; in Greek, *οὐ τότε ἀλλὰ φύσει*, “not for that occasion, but by nature”, whose meaning is purely “ornamental”) are best defined in opposition to unique combinations of a given adjective and noun (so called “distinctive” epithets; in Greek, *οὐ κόσμου ἀλλὰ πρὸς τι*, “not for the sake of ornament, but to some purpose”, whose meaning is “particularized”). Parry follows Aristarchus (1971: 127, cf. 120) in defining the first, “fixed” or “generic” epithet, as follows:

An epithet is not ornamental in itself, whatever may be its signification: it is only by dint of being used over and again with a certain substantive or group of substantives that it acquires this quality. It becomes ornamental when its meaning loses any value of its own and becomes so involved with the idea of its substantive that the two can no longer be separated. The fixed epithet then adds to the combination of substantive and epithet an element of nobility and grandeur, but no more than that. Its sole effect is to form, with its substantive, a heroic



expression of the idea of that substantive. As he grows aware of this, the reader acquires an insensibility to any possible particularized meaning of the epithet, and this insensibility becomes an integral part of his understanding of Homeric style.

As regards the other, “particularized” epithet he (1971: 155) admits, as it were, a wide door for the entry of doubt and conjecture:

[H]ow shall we discover the particularized epithet? We have two ways only of doing so. They may at first sight appear incomplete, but they are in practice adequate. They are the context and the other uses of the epithet.

Homer’s fixed epithets are readily recognizable, even to the point of inviting mockery (Eliot 1956: 74): “swift-footed Achilles”, “rosy-fingered dawn”, “leg-plaiter kine”, and so forth. A good example of a particularized epithet is *δραπετής*, “flying” as used to describe birds of prey in a line from the *Homeric Hymn to Aphrodite* (see Faulkner 2008: 78–9 ad *Hymn. Hom. Ven. 4*) that boldly repurposes an epithet by which Homer elsewhere always modifies in a purely ornamental way the word *ποταμός*, “river”.

### **The Constraints: Competition for Food; Temporality of Oral Composition**

Darwin (1876: 3) tells us at the outset that his thinking was informed by Malthus’s (1798) notion of competition for finite resources, which was in turn formulated against the background of Smith’s idea of enlightened self-interest (1776) and — farther back in history — by Hobbes’s “condition of war of every one against every one” (1651: 407). Very English, it would seem, this radical individualism; as Novalis (1957: 117 § 2195) says, reworking a phrase of John Donne’s, *Jeder Engländer ist eine Insel*, “every Englishman is an island”. Darwin (1876: 56–7) continues:

The amount of food for each species of course gives the extreme limit to which each can increase; but very frequently it is not the obtaining food, but the serving as prey to other animals, which determines the average numbers of a species [...]. Many cases are on record showing how complex and unexpected are the checks and relations between organic beings, which have to struggle together in the same country.

There is one resource as rigidly limited for Homer as is food in the biological world, namely time. The limitation of time for the Greek bards derives from the oral nature of their craft. Parry (1971: 269–70) explains:

The poet who composes with only the spoken word a poem of any length must be able to fit his words into the mould of his verse after a fixed pattern. Unlike the poet who writes out his lines, — or even dictates them, — he cannot think without hurry about his next word, nor change what he has made, nor, before going on, read over what he has just written. Even if one wished to imagine him making his verses alone, one could not suppose the slow finding of the next word, the pondering of the verses just made, the memorizing of each verse. Even though the poet have an unusual memory, he cannot, without paper, make of his own words a poem of any length. He must have for his use word-groups all made to fit his verse and tell what he has to tell. In composing he will do no more than put together for his needs phrases which he has often heard or used himself, and which, grouping themselves in accordance with a fixed pattern of thought, come naturally to make the sentence and the verse. The oral poet expresses only ideas for which he has a fixed means of expression. He is by no means the servant of his diction: he can put his phrases together in an endless number of ways; but still they set bounds and forbid him the search of a style which would be altogether his own. For the style which he uses is not his at all: it is the creation of a long line of poets or even of an entire people.

The constraining power of time for Homeric verse reveals itself under at least three headings. First is the issue of tempo in a musical sense. Parry (1971: 262, cf. 317) writes:

The Singer has not time for the nice balances and contrasts of un-hurried thought: he must order his words in such a way that they leave him much freedom to end the sentence or draw it out as the story and the needs of the verse demand.

This avoidance of “dead air” is closely akin, it has often been said (e.g. Homann-Wedeking 1966: 14, Woodford 1986: 4), to the *horror vacui* that led geometric vase-painters to fill every available surface with triangles, diamonds, “bowties”, zigzags and meanders.

The second aspect is narrated time, which, in marked contrast to the case of lyric poetry with its characteristic *fren dell’arte* or “brake applied by art” (Brancato 1960: 47–63, after Dante, *Purgatorio* 33.141) and *Abbruchsformeln* (Schadewaldt 1966: 268), is marked by an “epic

fullness” as Bassett (1926: 134), speaking of what Parry (1971: 253 n. 1) would later call “unperiodic enjambments”, has said. We see this omnivorous appetite for narration, for example, in the *Catalogue of Ships* (*Il.* 2.484–759), which counts as much as it re-counts (*zählt soviel wie erzählt*) events, and in those similes that are noteworthy for their “tails”, whereby they seem to detach themselves from their context and start to lead a life of their own (Charles Perrault apud de Jong 2012: 23). Parry (1971: 406) tells us that often in Yugoslavia he would hear a poet say, “that [another] had shortened the song (which among singers is the most rankling of all accusations)”.

The third way time constrains epic is that, within the context of metre — itself a mnemonic device —, it calls on the resources of Memory, and her daughters, the Muses, who, as Heidegger (1962: 262 [219 German ed.]) reminds us, preserve what must not (*ἀ-*) be forgotten (*λανθάνεσθαι*) — namely the truth (*ἀ-ληθεία*). Parry (1971: 407) says of the bard that:

he has listened to so many songs and stored away in his mind ready for use such a vast stock of details of heroic action, in the form of the verses and verse parts whereby they are expressed in song, that at no point in his story is he forced to give up telling his story in all its fulness [*sic*].

In short, time in all its aspects is the most important and most strictly limited and limiting resource with which the bard has to deal.

An example will show how this feature of Homeric poetry constrains the bards’ diction. The first example, though rare, is especially clear. This involves a type of error pointed out by Leumann (1950: 109–10, 122–37, Dihle 1970, cf. A. Parry 1971: xxxiii n. 2) whereby the division between two words is wrongly shifted. This is the process that turned earlier English “a nadder” into the present “an adder” (cf. “apron”, “auger” and “umpire”, etc.) and the earlier “an ewt” into today’s “a newt” (cf. “nickname”). The Homeric examples include *βρότος* < *ἄμβροτος* and *ἰότης* < *δηιοτήης*. The relevance of this phenomenon to our subject is shown by the very interesting case in which Hephaestus invites the other Olympians to come and see his wife, whom he has caught in bed with her lover. He calls their adultery *ἔργα γέλαστα*, “laughable deeds” (*Od.* 8.307), and indeed the gods do laugh at the pair, which is as severe a punishment as can be inflicted on immortals (Brown 1989). Though all manuscripts have this reading, the scholia preserve the variant, *ἔργ’ ἀγέλαστα*, “unlaughable deeds”, a characterization with which we can readily sympathize. Clearly only one of these phrases can have been used, and only one of these meanings intended in any given recitation of the episode: they are in direct competition with one another for a place on the poet’s tongue. This

phrase in either variant is unique in Homer, and so (ἀ)γέλαστα is a distinctive epithet. A similar phenomenon may have occurred, however, with the fixed epithet in the common formula ἔπεα πτερόεντα, “winged words”. The fact that Homer uses, seemingly as a synonym, the phrase ἄπτερος μῦθος, “wingless word” (*Od.* 17.57, etc.) has led Hainsworth (1960) to argue that some bards at least understood the formula as \* ἔπε’ ἀπτερόεντα, “wingless words”.

### **The Constructors (part one): Variation and Diversity; Innovation and Extension (Scope)**

The first of the two great constructors of evolution is mutation — what Darwin himself calls “variation”. He writes (1876: 34):

No one supposes that all the individuals of the same species are cast in the same actual mould. These individual differences are of the highest importance for us, for they are often inherited, as must be familiar to everyone; and they thus afford materials for Natural Selection to act on and accumulate, in the same manner as man accumulates in any given direction individual differences in his domesticated productions.

Variation is very seldom definite, being so termed by Darwin (1876: 6), when “all or nearly all the offspring of individuals exposed to certain conditions during several generations are modified in the same manner”. In other words, variations, or mutations, if you will, are generally unpredictable, which is to say random.

As with biological species, so with Homeric formulae: they must continually arise in the work of poets, or else the poets would be reduced to the status of mere rhapsodes, endlessly repeating without comprehension (cf. *Pl. Ion* 541e) the same songs, or at best *pasticheurs*, stitching together centos of preexistent units, as Gregory of Nazianzus did in his *Christus Patiens* (Tuilier 1969) using lines from Euripides’s *Bacchae* or Matro of Pitane did with lines from Homer himself (Olson and Sens 1999). How, then, did the bards create new formulae? Most likely they arise from ones already extant. Parry (1971: 72) explains one form of such development:

One discovers in Homer not a few cases in which the sounds of one expression have suggested another quite different in meaning. One of the most striking examples of this is the resemblance between the two expressions ἀμφήλυθεν ἠδὺς ἀντιμή (μ 369) and ἀμφήλυθε θήλυς ἀντή (ζ 122).

As Parry himself says (1971: 73), such analogies are a kind of pun, and since by definition (Preminger et al. 1974: 681) puns play on two words or phrases similar in sound, but disparate in meaning, and since the relation of sound to sense in any word is arbitrary as per de Saussure's dictum, all puns — hence all of Homer's formulae derived by analogy — are no less aleatory in origin than species sprung from indefinite variation, that is random mutation. Formulae can of course arise by other, equally random processes: from the Leumannian misunderstandings we have already considered, or as doublets, such as *αἶα* / *γαῖα* or *εἶβω* / *λείβω* (Haslam 1976). In many other cases, as with *ψυχή* and *κεφαλή*, semantics rather than phonology has suggested the new term. In still other instances the perceived need to have any epithet at all seems to drive the creative process. Thus Homer's ships seem always to be either "black", "curved", "hollow" or "swift" (Alexanderson 1970), all of which epithets, being ornamental, in effect mean no more than "typical of the heroic age" (Parry 1971: 128).

It is a tautology to say that variation results in variety, i.e., that mutation leads to diversity. Nonetheless, we should note that such is in fact the case. Darwin (1876: 90) writes that:

We may assume that the modified descendants of any one species will succeed so much the better as they become more diversified in structure, and are thus enabled to encroach on places occupied by other beings.

This is, by the way, also the reason evolution is so often confused with progress *tout court*, since, despite rare counterexamples such as cave-dwelling animals that have lost their eyes (Darwin 1876: 110), an increase in varieties usually entails an increase in *complex* varieties — occupying those niches left unoccupied by their simpler forebears.

Similarly, Parry (1971: 6–7) writes:

[T]he dialectal and artificial elements of the language of Homer constitute a system. [...] [T]he *extension of the system* lies in the great number of cases in which, to a given element of one dialect, one can oppose the corresponding element of another. (emphasis in the original)

In other words, the "genetic material" (a concept devised by Darwin's contemporary, Gregor Mendel, and unknown to Darwin himself), of that background constant of Homeric verse, the dactylic hexameter is the Greek language, but not any actual Greek — rather the fondue of a

*Dichtersprache*, into which has melted every dialect then extant — an ideal Greek, as it were, in the same way that the *lemmata* of Liddell and Scott’s dictionary represent the language in an abstract, idealized form that largely (but not quite) resembles the dialect of fifth-century Athens.

### **The Constructors (part two): Natural Selection; Conservatism and Simplicity (Economy)**

Variation is prevented from overwhelming the planet with organisms by the other great constructor, the process of natural selection, which results in what Darwin’s friend, Herbert Spencer called “survival of the fittest”. Darwin (1876: 49) explains:

Owing to [the struggle for life], variations, however slight and from whatever cause proceeding, if they be in any degree profitable to the individuals of a species, in their infinitely complex relations to other organic beings and to their physical conditions of life, will tend to the preservation of such individuals, and will generally be inherited by the offspring [...]. I have called this principle by which each slight variation, if useful is preserved by the term, Natural Selection, in order to mark it in relation to man’s power of selection. But the expression often used by Mr Herbert Spencer of the Survival of the Fittest is more accurate, and is sometimes equally convenient.

An important actor in natural selection is the periodic change of environmental conditions. Darwin (1876: 54) elaborates:

Climate plays an important part in determining the average numbers of a species, and periodical seasons of extreme cold or drought seem to be the most effective of all checks. [...] [E]ach species, even where it most abounds, is constantly suffering enormous destruction at some period of its life, from enemies or from competitors for the same place and food; and if these enemies or competitors be in the least degree favoured by any slight change of climate, they will increase in numbers; and as each area is already fully stocked with inhabitants, the other species must decrease.

The equivalent of survival of the fittest in terms of the Homeric formular system is its simplicity (Parry speaks interchangeably also of “economy” and “thrift”), which, according to him (1971: 7), “consists in the fact that corresponding dialectal or artificial elements are of unique metrical value”.

Darwin never uses the noun, “fitness”, though he makes frequent use of the verb “to fit”. Nonetheless, there is obviously a quality that natural selection recognizes, so to speak, in those most fit, whom it then allows to survive. Darwin implies a definition of this quality when he writes (1876: 62–3):

Can it, then, be thought improbable [...] that other variations useful in some way to each being in the great and complex battle for life, should occur in the course of many successive generations? If such do occur, can we doubt [...] that individuals having any advantage, however slight, over others, would have the best chance of surviving and of procreating their kind?

These advantages do not make an organism more apt to survive in general, but only in a particular ecological context, which Darwin (1876: 52) refers to as, “every station in which they could any how exist”.

For Parry the fitness of a formula consists in it being (Parry 1971: 197):

an expression at once noble and adapted to hexameter composition. These qualities preserved it until the day when the same bard, or another, wanted to express an idea more or less close to that of the expression in question, and found he could do so by modifying it. Thus in the course of time there came into being series of formulae from the most simple to the most complex types. These series were what the apprentice bard heard in the verse of his masters, and he learned them and remembered them easily because of their resemblance to each other.

That is to say that the fitness of formulae has three components: stylistic nobility, metrical convenience and familiarity. Here too such adaptations do not operate in general but in relation to specific metrical contexts or *cola* (and Parry 1971: 251–65 states that the line is usually the maximum length of unit, enjambment being less likely in Homer than in other poets’ work). He (1971: 9) writes:

Of [Homer’s] formulae, the most common fill the space between the bucolic diaeresis and the end of the line, between the penthemimeral caesura, the caesura *κατὰ τρίτον τροχάϊον*, or the hepthemimeral caesura and the end of the line, or between the beginning of the line and these caesurae; or else they fill an entire line.

We have already noted above that the form of the hexameter never changes — indeed it would later survive wholesale transposition into

Latin — though the Greek language (the “climate”, as it were, in which formulae exist) changed over time, forcing the poets either to create new formulae or to retain old formulae with a pronunciation that now violated the metre. The familiarity-component to fitness often favoured old formulae over new ones designed to express the same idea in the same metrical *sedes* (their ecological niche, so to speak) — even when they had become strictly speaking unmetrical.

### **Exceptions: Living Fossils: Equivalent Formulae, Illogical Epithets and Glosses**

The products of evolution are seldom perfect. We see flaws, for example, in vestigial organs, which have lost their purpose and now represent pure form with no function. Darwin (1876: 157, cf. 397–402) writes:

Organs now of trifling importance have probably in some cases been of high importance to an early progenitor, and, after having been slowly perfected at a former period, have been transmitted to existing species in nearly the same state, although now of very slight use.

Entire organisms can exhibit comparable want of adaptation to their current environments. These evolutionary dead-ends are living fossils. Darwin (1876: 83–4) writes:

On a small island, the race for life will have been less severe, and there will have been less modification and less extermination. All freshwater basins, taken together, make a small area compared with that of the sea or of the land. [...] And it is in freshwater basins that we find [...] some of the most anomalous forms now known in the world, as the *Ornithorhynchus* and *Lepidosiren*, which, like fossils, connect to a certain extent orders at present widely sundered in the natural scale. The anomalous forms may be called living fossils; they have endured to the present day, from having inhabited a confined area, and from having been exposed to less varied, and therefore less severe, competition.

All these rule-breaking phenomena have counterparts in Homer’s diction, as Parry sees it. For example, not all formulae exhibit the economy that Parry elsewhere praises. He (1971: 180) notes:

[A] certain portion at least of the formulae we have been studying have escaped the tendency of the bards to preserve only one unique formula for each need. The answer lies in a psychological fact: the habit of using



a definite group of words containing a noun-epithet formula has often been so strong with the bards that the epithet contained in this group of words has been exempted from the constant simplification of the technique of the use of the epithet.

Examples include Apollo's name preceded by either Διὸς υἱός, "Zeus's son", or its metrical equivalent, ἐκάεργος, "far-working" or Hera's preceded by either βοῶπις πότνια, "ox-eyed lady" or θεὰ λευκώλενος, "goddess white-armed", or Hector's name (in the genitive) followed by either ἀνδροφόνοιο, "manslaying" or ἵπποδάμοιο, "horse-taming".

Crucial to Parry's thinking is the notion that ornamental epithets are chosen for metrical convenience and not for their semantic content. Νηῦς θοή, for example (Parry 1971: 128):

awakens in [Homer] a single idea, that of a hero's ship which possesses the speed characteristic of the finest ships; but in the world of epic poetry he knows only the finest ships — there are no others. So he thinks simply of ship, in the genre of epic poetry, the only kind, as it seems, that there was in the heroic age.

Proof of this indifference to any context-dependent sense of the *mot juste* is the illogical use of epithets, which have clearly lost their meaning and become pure signifiers with no signified. Examples include the φυσίζοος αἶα, "life-giving earth" (*Il.* 3.243) in which Castor and Pollux are buried, νηῦς θοή, "swift ship", said of those at anchor or drawn up on the beach or wrecked, and many other examples (Combella 1965, Parry 1971: 125, 127, 132 n. 1, cf. de Jong 2012: 25). If Homer uses words with disregard to their meaning, he also uses words — sometimes as ornamental epithets — which seem to have no meaning at all for him or his original audience. Parry (1971: 241) defines these "glosses" as, "an element of vocabulary which has either no correspondence, or at best a remote one, with any element of vocabulary in the current language of an author's public". Such words, of which the list is long (Parry 1971: 243), including αἰγίλιπος ("destitute even of goats", hence "steep"), αἴμων ("eager"?), ἀκάματος; ("without sense of toil", hence "untiring"), etc., presumably fall under de Jong's (2012: 29) rubric of "fossilizations", by which she seems to mean "living fossils".

## In the Field

While it is well said that Time holds a mirror up to human nature, eventually revealing the base man's character (Eur. *Hipp.* 428–30), there

is also an important sense in which Nature holds a mirror up to Time. Darwin's study did indeed "take a diachronic view of matters", as de Vet says, but only in an unusual, inferential way. Though it has roots in antiquity with observations by Herodotus (2.75, 4.82, 9.83), Cicero (*Verr.* 2.4.46.103, *Div.* 13) and many others (Mayor 2000: 260–81), palaeontology was still very much in its infancy in Darwin's day, with the fossil record very poorly preserved and understood, as he himself (1876: 282–3) laments:

Now let us turn to our richest geological museums, and what a paltry display we behold! That our collections are imperfect is admitted by everyone. The remark of that admirable palaeontologist, Edward Forbes, should never be forgotten, namely, that very many fossil species are known and named from single and often broken specimens, or from a few specimens collected on some one spot. Only a small portion of the surface of the earth has been geologically explored, and no part with sufficient care, as the important discoveries made every year in Europe prove. No organism wholly soft can be preserved. Shells and bones decay and disappear when left on the bottom of the sea, where sediment is not accumulating [...]. The many cases on record of a formation conformably covered, after an immense interval of time, by another and later formation, without the underlying bed having suffered in the interval any wear and tear, seem explicable only on the view of the bottom of the sea not rarely lying for ages in an unaltered condition.

The highly defective paleontological record prevented Darwin from doing history the usual way — by consulting actual historical records — and forced him instead to use the readily available evidence of still living species to postulate a history that he could not directly observe. Thus, the theory of evolution owes its very existence to this need to extrapolate a diachronic narrative from set of a synchronous data.

Parry found himself in a very similar situation with regard to Homer. In Parry's day Homer's was the earliest Greek anyone possessed, and the Linear B tablets had barely been discovered (the first large cache was found in 1900), let alone deciphered — in a saga fully as enthralling as Parry's own (Fox 2013). (Indeed, five years after Parry's death, Ventris [1940], future decipherer of the Mycenaean Greek tablets, breathlessly announced to the world in a fit of youthful enthusiasm that the Minoan script, of which he then saw Linear B as a mere variant, was Etruscan!) Moreover, there were no linguistic "fossils" available to study, for even if, like Edwards (1988: 26), one so calls those cognate poetic formulae that Adalbert Kuhn discovered in the mid eighteenth century (Watkins 1995:

13) in both Homer and the *Rigveda*, such as *ἱερὸν μένος* ~ *iṣirena mānasá*, “holy strength” and *κλέ(F)ος ἄφθιτον* ~ *śrávas ákṣitam*, “undying fame”, these were publicized only after Parry’s death through the work of scholars such as Marcello Durante, Calvert Watkins, Rudiger Schmitt and Gregory Nagy.

Yet, as we have already seen, the artificiality of Homer’s idiom had convinced Parry that the poems had a long history. Like Darwin, he had without reference to this “fossil record” inferred a diachrony from the contemporary state of affairs — in Homer’s case, his text as fixed by Peisistratus, or whomever it was, during its first writing down. It was precisely to recover that history, as far as possible that Parry turned to the only tool at his disposal other than a synchronic study of Homer’s noun-epithet formulae, namely comparison with contemporary South Slavic oral epic. Here, once again, the decisive influence was Meillet, who invited to Parry’s thesis-defense the Slovenian scholar Matija Murko, just then visiting the Sorbonne, whose 1929 book had introduced Yugoslavian epic to the wider world.

Darwin’s fieldtrip aboard the H.M.S. Beagle (1831–1836) preceded his theorizing; Parry’s two trips to Yugoslavia exactly a century later (1933–1935) followed his. Darwin’s voyage from western Europe to Ecuador in South America spanned almost the identical distance of Parry’s from California to eastern Europe, albeit in completely opposite directions. In the Galapagos Islands Darwin found the inspiration for his idea; in the Sanjak of Novi Pazar (i.e. “Newmarket”) Parry found living proof of his. There it was, on Lord’s telling (1948: 40), that Parry first heard of *Ćor Huso*, the legendary great *guslar* — blind as Homer was supposed to have been, and indeed “*Ćor*” is Ottoman Turkish for “blind”, just as *ὄμηρος* is said to be the Cymaeian and Ionian word for “blind”. It was in nearby Bijelo Polje, Montenegro that Parry met a living bard, who preserved something of Huso’s ability (Kanigel 2021: 221–3). Avdo Mededović sang for his recording device the epic, nearly as long as the *Odyssey*, *The Wedding of Smail’s son, Meho*, which years later Lord would give to the world in his own English translation (Mededović 1974).

## Conclusion

We should note two last things. First, both Darwin’s and Parry’s work hold out to their followers a great temptation to expand beyond their own original intentions. Darwinist principles have colonized many fields of science, most notably — in fact, notoriously — Sociobiology (Wilson 1975). In Parry’s case, he saw the beginnings of the two greatest developments within his own short lifetime. One was the expansion of oral

theory to embrace such higher-order narrative structures as the typical scene discussed by Arend (1933; Parry 1971: 404–7). The second was the comparative approach, which was one of the initial impulses for the discipline of Comparative Literature (Mitchell and Nagy 2000: xvii).

Second, to return to Wade-Gery's observation with which we began (and leaving aside God's finger, which owes more to Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel ceiling than to the present subject), Darwin removed God from the story of creation only on a literal reading of Genesis 1–3, but such a reading is absurd, since metaphysics speaks only in metaphor, for "the metaphorical exists only within the metaphysical", to invoke Heidegger once more (Ricoeur 1977: 280 [357 French ed.]) — and metaphor is of course the opposite of literalism. Philo Judaeus stated this clearly two thousand years ago (*Legum allegoria* 1.14 [43–4]):

For let not such impiety affect human reason that it supposes that God tills the ground and plants walled gardens, since also as to the reason why (he would do so) we will immediately be at an impasse [...] for not even the whole universe could be an estate and dwelling-place worthy of God, since God himself is his own place, and himself full of himself, and himself sufficient unto himself.

In other words, Darwin has indeed removed God from creation, but only in a role He had never actually played.

As for Parry, he faces head-on the charge that he has deprived Homer of his creativity, writing (1971: 21–2):

The matter at stake is the poet's freedom of choice. Was Homer, or was he not, obliged to use traditional formulae? And is he a greater poet for having used them, or for having rejected them and sought instead words appropriate to the particular nuance of his thought? [...] [Kurt] Witte expressed no more than the truth when he said that in Homer, convenience of versification alone determines the choice of a dialectal or artificial element in the traditional language. Homer's use of this or that archaic or dialectal form is a matter of habit and convenience, not of poetic sentiment.

A different way of putting this is to say that, once having decided to express a given idea at a given point in his line, Homer had no choice about the form whereby he could express this idea. The tradition dictates that form. But this is no more than Heidegger's familiar idea that "language speaks", with the unit of speech now moved up one order of magnitude from the word to the formula. That the tradition forces the poet to express in one way only an idea upon which he has settled by no

means constrains him to settle on that idea rather than on another. To return to what I said above, if I want to write about a knife, I must call it a “knife”, because I am writing in English and I risk being badly misunderstood if I call it a *nož*. Yet neither I nor my reader is likely to feel this constraint as a burden.

And again, Parry writes (*ibid.*): “[O]ne cannot speak of the poet’s freedom to choose his words and forms, if the desire to make this choice does not exist.” In other words, Parry has indeed deprived Homer of his creativity, but only in a sense in which the bard himself could never have dreamed of exercising it.

R. Drew Griffith  
*Queen’s University, Kingston*  
griffitd@queensu.ca

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