



## UvA-DARE (Digital Academic Repository)

### Narratology and Oral Poetry: The Case of Homer

de Jong, I.J.F.

**DOI**

[10.2307/1772645](https://doi.org/10.2307/1772645)

**Publication date**

1991

**Document Version**

Final published version

**Published in**

Poetics Today

[Link to publication](#)

**Citation for published version (APA):**

de Jong, I. J. F. (1991). Narratology and Oral Poetry: The Case of Homer. *Poetics Today*, 12(3), 405-423. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1772645>

**General rights**

It is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), other than for strictly personal, individual use, unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

**Disclaimer/Complaints regulations**

If you believe that digital publication of certain material infringes any of your rights or (privacy) interests, please let the Library know, stating your reasons. In case of a legitimate complaint, the Library will make the material inaccessible and/or remove it from the website. Please Ask the Library: <https://uba.uva.nl/en/contact>, or a letter to: Library of the University of Amsterdam, Secretariat, Singel 425, 1012 WP Amsterdam, The Netherlands. You will be contacted as soon as possible.



## Narratology and Oral Poetry: The Case of Homer

Irene J. F. de Jong

*Poetics Today*, Vol. 12, No. 3 (Autumn, 1991), 405-423.

Stable URL:

<http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0333-5372%28199123%2912%3A3%3C405%3ANAOPTC%3E2.0.CO%3B2-F>

*Poetics Today* is currently published by Duke University Press.

---

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/about/terms.html>. JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use provides, in part, that unless you have obtained prior permission, you may not download an entire issue of a journal or multiple copies of articles, and you may use content in the JSTOR archive only for your personal, non-commercial use.

Please contact the publisher regarding any further use of this work. Publisher contact information may be obtained at <http://www.jstor.org/journals/duke.html>.

Each copy of any part of a JSTOR transmission must contain the same copyright notice that appears on the screen or printed page of such transmission.

---

JSTOR is an independent not-for-profit organization dedicated to creating and preserving a digital archive of scholarly journals. For more information regarding JSTOR, please contact [support@jstor.org](mailto:support@jstor.org).

# Narratology and Oral Poetry: The Case of Homer

Irene J. F. de Jong  
*Classics, Amsterdam*

Theories of narrative are most interesting when they are put to use. W. Martin, *Recent Theories of Narrative*

## Introduction

Headed by Barthes (“Innombrables sont les récits du monde”), narratologists claim as the object of their study a vast and heterogeneous corpus of texts: “newspaper reports, history books, novels, films, comic strips, pantomime, dance, gossip, psychoanalytic sessions,” etc. (Rimmon-Kenan 1983: 31).<sup>1</sup> However, the theoretical apparatus of narratology has mainly been developed on the basis of one specimen of narrative text: the novel. This is understandable from both a historical and a logical point of view: the theory of narrative grew out of the theory of the novel,<sup>2</sup> and the novel, being one of the most elaborated and complex forms of narrative, offers a rich field of investigation. At the moment, a number of comprehensive narratological theories are available, and scholars have started to turn to other narrative texts as well, such as the Bible or historiography. Oral poetry, in this respect, is a great challenge to narratology: Are the categories and concepts developed with a view to written narratives also applicable to and relevant for oral narratives?

In De Jong (1987), I have undertaken such a narratological ap-

The research for this paper was made possible by a fellowship from the Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences. I thank S. R. van der Mije for his critical remarks, H. Mulder for correcting my English.

1. Cf. Barthes (1981 [1966]: 7): “Le récit peut être supporté par le langage articulé, oral ou écrit, par l’image, fixe ou mobile, par le geste et par le mélange ordonné de toutes ces substances.”

2. See Martin (1986: 15–30). Notice also the change in title from *Typische Formen des Romans* (1964) to *Theorie des Erzählens* (1979), both by F. K. Stanzel.

proach to oral poetry, *in casu* the Homeric *Iliad*.<sup>3</sup> My main object was to challenge the *communis opinio* among Homeric scholars that this poem is an objectively and impersonally told story. For this purpose I made use of the refined analytical instruments which the theories of Genette (1972) and Bal (1981, 1985) offer. It turned out that these theories were indeed applicable to the *Iliad* and that their application yielded, apart from the desired arguments against the dogma of objectivity, new insights into the poetic use of oral devices. In this paper, I will pursue this direction further and discuss three examples which show how narratology may contribute to the literary interpretation of typically oral text elements.

Of course, the Homeric epics cannot stand for all oral poetry. For one thing, not all oral poetry is epic or narrative.<sup>4</sup> But, on the other hand, the recent rise of interest in oral poetry or oral literature among literary scholars was triggered by the research of Parry and Lord on the Homeric epics, which have thus acquired a kind of paradigmatic status. This makes them, I think, acceptable representatives of the genus "oral poetry." In order to appreciate better the contribution narratology can make in the case of the Homeric epics, it is necessary to begin with a brief historical introduction.

#### 1. *The Homeric Epics: From "Homeric Question" to Parryan Impasse*

Milman Parry was not the first to contend that the Homeric epics were the result of oral composition. Before him, Robert Wood (in *Essay on the Original Genius of Homer*, 1767) and Friedrich August Wolf (1985 [1795]) had made similar suggestions. The attention of Homeric scholars had been completely absorbed, however, by another issue brought forward by Wolf, the so-called Homeric question: Are the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* each unified works—a position defended by a minority, the "Unitarians"—or are they each, in fact, amalgams of older and more recent layers of composition, as Wolf and his many successors, the "Analysts," took them to be?

Whereas Unitarians and Analysts had concentrated on the many inconsistencies and irregularities in the Homeric poems, Parry started working on an entirely different phenomenon, that is, the recurrent phrases or, as he came to call them, *formulas*: groups of words which are regularly used under the same metrical conditions to express a given essential idea. The complexity and economy of the formulaic system, which his meticulous analyses laid bare, convinced him that the Homeric poems had been preceded by a long tradition of orally

3. Of course, narratologists, notably, Vladimir Propp, A. J. Greimas, and Claude Bremond, have occupied themselves before with oral narratives (Russian folktales, myths), but the orality of these texts was not in itself central to their investigations.

4. See Zumthor (1983: 49–50).

composing singers. The formulas and larger ready-made elements like repeated sentences or scenes enabled these singers to compose their songs while performing them.<sup>5</sup>

Parry's oral-formulaic theory has rightly been called "the most important single discovery about Homer made during the past half-century" (Dodds 1968: 31), and it is a major step toward a better understanding of Homeric *diction*. But what about our understanding and appreciation of the poems themselves? As Adam Parry readily admits, for his father "the tradition was more important than the poet who at any moment embodied it," and "we shall look in vain through all he wrote for any comment on the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* as poems" (1971: li, lii). Some of Milman Parry's followers, notably, Notopoulos (1949) and Lord (1968), went even further and decreed that the Homeric poems could no longer be interpreted according to the traditional, Aristotelian standards, but required a whole new set of aesthetic criteria. Unfortunately, such an "oral poetics" was not readily available.<sup>6</sup> As Adam Parry notes (1971: lvi), the suggestions of Notopoulos and Lord were themselves largely negative: one must not look for any real coherence in the Homeric poems because they are by nature episodic; no great significance is to be attached to single words because they are chosen on metrical, rather than contextual, grounds.

To sum up, while overcoming to a certain degree the impasse of the Unitarian-Analyst controversy,<sup>7</sup> Parry's work itself created a new impasse with regard to interpreting the poems. As a result, literary studies of Homer were reduced to a small trickle in comparison with the vast torrent of formulaic studies.<sup>8</sup> Only recently has the tide seemed to turn. Strictly formulaic research has reached a certain saturation point, and literary studies have become fashionable again. Instead of Lord's *Singer of Tales*, a title like *Homer, Poet of the Iliad* (Edwards 1987) crops up again. What ways have been found to get out of the Parryan impasse?

5. An excellent introduction to Parry's theory is provided by his son, Adam Parry (1971: ix–lxii).

6. The problem was still acute in 1983; cf. Zumthor (1983: 9): "Il nous manque une poétique générale de l'oralité qui servirait de relais aux enquêtes particulières et proposerait des notions opératoires, applicables au phénomène des transmissions de la poésie par la voix et la mémoire, à l'exclusion de tout autre." Zumthor's book is a first step toward such an oral poetics.

7. —Without, however, solving the "Homeric question." We still do not know exactly how the texts of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, as we have them, have been established. For this question, see Jensen (1980).

8. The literary studies that appeared between, say, 1930 and 1980 were produced mainly by German scholars, notably, Schadewaldt (1938) and Reinhardt (1961), who took no notice at all of Parry's theory.

## 2. *Getting Out of the Impasse*

The simplest and most radical way out has been to virtually *ignore* the oral background of the poems.<sup>9</sup> The most recent advocate of this approach<sup>10</sup> is Griffin (1980), who states his position as follows: “We shall, I think, have to go on with aesthetic methods not essentially or radically new, observing caution and avoiding arguments which are ruled out by an oral origin for the work, but approaching the epics in a manner not wholly different from the way in which the Greeks themselves approached them” (ibid.: xiv).<sup>11</sup> In the remainder of his book, Griffin no longer seems to ask himself whether or not his own arguments are “ruled out by an oral origin for the work.” But his interpretations have an almost irresistible charm and persuasiveness, and his book has contributed to no small degree to the turning of the tide, that is, the reestablishment of Homeric literary interpretation.

Another way out has been to look for Homer’s artistry precisely in the use he makes of the traditional style, in other words, to readopt the ancient saying, “explaining Homer out of Homer.”<sup>12</sup> Comparison with Yugoslav oral poetry—as undertaken by Milman Parry and, especially, Lord to prove the orality of Homer—brought out his superb quality: far from being subordinated to his tradition, Homer is a complete master of it,<sup>13</sup> using the devices of oral poetry to attain such special effects as emphasis, foreshadowing, symmetry, and contrast. Many scholars have, in fact, contributed to this gradually growing awareness of Homer’s poetic exploitation of traditional material; I mention only Edwards (1987) as one recent example of this direction.

It is to this second line of approach that narratology may contribute, by offering new paradigms for detecting significance in traditional elements, such as the formula or verbatim repetition. One narratological paradigm which will be of particular importance to the discussion of Homeric examples, below, is the distinction between narrative situations based on Genette’s and Bal’s concepts of narration and focalization. In order to provide a frame of reference for that discussion, I

9. I speak of “oral background” to leave open the question of the text’s exact fixation (see note 7, above).

10. Adam Parry (1971: lvii–lviii) gives earlier examples.

11. By “the Greeks,” Griffin means the ancient commentaries or scholia on the Homeric epics, from which he quotes extensively throughout his book to support his interpretations. Although they do not express themselves explicitly on this point, the scholia do not seem to consider Homer an oral poet.

12. This suggestion was made for the first time by Ann Amory Parry (1971), in a polemic against Lord.

13. Heubeck (1978) goes even one step further: the difference between Homer and his predecessors is not a gradual one; rather, Homer transcends the boundaries of oral poetry, creating a large-scale composition with the help of writing.

will end this introductory section with an inventory of the main narrative situations found in the *Iliad*. To start with, we have an external primary narrator-focalizer who presents fifty percent of the total text. (I call this portion “simple narrator-text,” of the type: Diomedes killed many Trojans.) Secondly, in five percent of the total text, the external primary narrator-focalizer verbalizes the perceptions, feelings, etc., of characters, who function as internal secondary focalizers (“complex narrator-text,” of the type: Aeneas saw *Diomedes wreak havoc among the lines of his men*). Finally, forty-five percent of the total text consists of direct speech (“character-text”), which means that characters function as internal secondary narrator-focalizers, as in “Aeneas said: ‘I see that Diomedes kills my men.’” The same three narrative situations are found in the *Odyssey*, but there the proportion of direct speech is higher: sixty-seven percent.

### I. Example 1: Speech Formulas as Attributive Discourse

In Homer the transition from narrator-text to character-text (speech) and vice versa is, almost without exception, marked explicitly by introductory and capping verses like “And to him/her spoke in answer Odysseus of many devices” and “Thus he spoke,” respectively. The reason for this explicitness is clear: an oral narrative cannot make use of (typo)graphical signs like quotation marks or indentation. As a result of the large number of speeches in Homer, the introductory and capping verses tend to be highly formulaic. To give an impression, the verse quoted above (“And to him . . . devices”) recurs no less than 106 times in the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. This has led scholars to deny the Homeric speech formulas all significance, apart from indicating a change of speaker. Challenging this idea, Edwards (1969, 1970) showed the subtlety of formulaic artistry even in this seemingly mundane corpus.

One further step is to analyze the speech formulas as forms of what Prince (1978: 305) has called *attributive discourse*: “les locutions et les phrases qui, dans un récit (je pense au récit écrit),<sup>14</sup> accompagnent le discours direct et l’attribuent à tel personnage ou à tel autre.” Let us start by taking a closer look at the main elements of attributive discourse (speaker, verb of speaking), as they are found in the Homeric speech formulas.

Most of the time, the *speaker* is indicated with his/her proper name,

14. As appears more clearly several pages later, Prince considers attributive discourse an element of written narrative only: “Au théâtre, au cinéma (et, jusqu’à un certain point, dans le récit oral), nul besoin de formules de présentation” (1978: 313). I agree, where theatre and film are concerned, but not in the case of oral narrative.

plus a standing epithet (see the speech formula quoted earlier: “. . . Odysseus of many devices”). But sometimes we find something else. In *Iliad* 22 the Trojan prince Hector is alone, awaiting Achilles outside the walls of Troy. His parents, standing on the walls, beg him to come inside and avoid an encounter with Achilles, who is likely to kill him. The speech of Hecuba, his mother, is introduced as follows:

And side by side with him [Priam] *his mother* in tears was mourning  
and laid the fold of her bosom bare and with one hand held out  
a breast, and wept her tears for him and called to him in winged  
words.

(22.79–81)<sup>15</sup>

The substitution of the proper name “Hecabe” by “his mother” is significant and highly effective since, in the ensuing speech, she will try to dissuade Hector from confronting Achilles by appealing to his reverence and love for her as his mother:

“Hector, my child, look upon these and obey, and take pity  
on me, if ever I gave you the breast to quiet your sorrow.”

(22.82–83)

As regards the *verb of speaking*, Prince (1978: 306) notes that in *La Princesse de Clèves*, for example, eight different verbs are found, in *Madame Bovary* forty. For the *Iliad* I have also counted no less than forty different verbs, ranging from “shouting,” “exhorting,” “begging” to “reproaching” or “teasing.” A passage which illustrates the richness and variety of the Homeric speech formula particularly well in this respect is found in book 22, in that same context of Hector’s parents’ begging him to come inside. Priam is the first to spot Achilles running at full speed towards Hector, and his speech to his son is introduced as follows:

The old man groaned aloud and with both hands high uplifted  
beat his head, and groaned again, and spoke supplicating  
his beloved son, who there still in front of the gateway  
stood fast in determined fury to fight with Achilles.  
The old man stretching his hands out called pitifully to him.

(22.33–38)

No less than three different verbs of speaking lead up to the actual words of Priam, significantly referred to here as “the old man” since, in the ensuing speech, he will use his old age as an argument to persuade Hector:

“Oh, take  
pity on me, the unfortunate still alive, still sentient

15. All quotations of the *Iliad* are from the English translation by R. Lattimore (Lattimore 1951).



but ill-starred, whom the father, Cronus' son, on the threshold of  
old age  
will blast with hard fate.”

(22.58–61)

Apart from the speaker and the act of speaking, attributive discourse may indicate “celui à qui il [the speaker] parle, le ton employé, la mimique des interlocuteurs et leurs gestes, le contexte—physique ou autre—des paroles exprimées, leur signification profonde, etc.” (Prince 1978: 307). All of these elements can be amply exemplified in the Homeric epics, and I discuss only some of the more interesting cases.

The *addressee* is generally represented in a minimal way (as a personal pronoun: “to him/her/them”) and is clearly regarded as less in need of introduction than the speaker.<sup>16</sup> But sometimes we do find a substitution of the “Hecabe/his mother” type, as in *Iliad* 22.33–38, quoted above, where we had: “[Priam] spoke supplicating his beloved son.” In *Iliad* 3 Helen’s abductor, Paris, and her original husband, Menelaus, fight a duel over her. Paris would have been killed by Menelaus if Aphrodite had not quickly wrapped him in a cloud and returned him safely to his bedroom. Helen, who has been watching the duel from the walls of Troy, prepares a “warm” welcome for Paris:

and Helen, daughter of Zeus of the aegis, took her place there  
turning her eyes away, and spoke to *her lord* [Paris] in derision:  
“So you come back from fighting. Oh, how I wish you had  
died there  
beaten down by the stronger man, who was once my husband.”

(3.426–29)

Again, the substitution serves a clear purpose, in that it signals the theme for Helen’s speech: a comparison between her new and old husbands.<sup>17</sup> A third example of this kind is found in *Odyssey* 14. Odysseus, disguised as an old beggar, has just arrived at the hut of the swineherd, Eumaeus. The faithful servant does not recognize his master (he addresses him as “old man” and “stranger”); yet his first words to Odysseus are introduced by, “And he said *to his master*” (14.36).<sup>18</sup> In

16. The situation is the same in novels, where most of the time we find “he/she said,” not “he/she said to him/her.” This phenomenon is not difficult to explain: in a dialogue or conversation among more than two persons, once the speaker has been announced, the addressee(s) is/(are) also clear by implication.

17. Lattimore’s translation “her lord” (instead of “her husband,” which the Greek text has) is unfortunate, in that it blurs the parallel between attributive discourse and speech.

18. All quotations of the *Odyssey* are from the English translation by E. V. Rieu (Rieu 1946).

the ensuing speech, Eumaeus will express his grief over the absence of his master:

“Here I sit, yearning and mourning for the best of masters and fattening his hogs for others to eat, while he himself, starving as like as not, is lost in foreign lands and tramping through strange towns—if indeed he is still alive and can see the light of day.” (14.40–44)

The irony of the situation (Eumaeus’s talking about his absent master in the very presence of that master) is brought out by that simple substitution of “Odysseus” by “his master.”

An example of *tone* comes from *Iliad* 1. Zeus has just been speaking privately with Thetis, who has asked him to support the Trojans temporarily. Zeus’s wife, Hera, has seen him talking with Thetis and, upon his return to Olympus, immediately addresses him:

and at once she [Hera] spoke revilingly to Zeus son of Cronus:  
 “Tracherous one, what god has been plotting counsels with you?  
 Always it is dear to your heart in my absence to think of  
 secret things and decide upon them. Never have you patience  
 frankly to speak forth to me the thing that you purpose.”  
 (1.539–43)

Zeus had foreseen this reaction in his words to Thetis:

“This is a disastrous matter when you set me in conflict  
 with Hera, and she troubles me with recriminations.  
 Since even as things are, forever among the immortals  
 she is at me and speaks of how I help the Trojans in battle.”  
 (1.518–21)

Against this background the special poignancy of the speech formula in line 539 becomes clear: this is the first time that Hera speaks in the *Iliad*, and the speech formula sets the tone not only for the present speech, but for many others to come. Hera is an ardent supporter of the Greeks and therefore continually quarrels with Zeus, who is bound by his promise to Thetis to support the Trojans (the Will of Zeus).

An example of a speech formula containing an indication of *facial expression* is, “Then looking darkly at him Achilles of the swift feet spoke.” This same formula is used of other characters too, but mostly of Achilles, as in *Iliad* 1.148, 22.260, 344, and 24.559. As such, it helps to characterize this hero, of whom even his best friend, Patroclus, admits that he has an irascible character:

(Patroclus: Nestor)  
 “You know yourself, aged sir beloved of Zeus, how he is  
 a dangerous man; he might even be angry with one who is  
 guiltless.”  
 (11.652–53)

An example of a speech formula describing *gestures* is: ‘s/he stroked him/her with his/her hand and called him/her by name and spoke to him/her.’ This formula recurs six times in the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, always introducing a particularly affectionate speech by someone to one who is dear to him/her (e.g., Hector, addressing Andromache: *Iliad* 6.485; Calypso, addressing Odysseus: *Odyssey* 5.181). Twice it is used to refer to the same combination of speaker and addressee, that is, Thetis and Achilles (*Iliad* 1.361 and 24.127). In *Iliad* 1, Achilles cries because Agamemnon has taken Briseis from him and is consoled by his mother, who promises to ask for Zeus’s help; in book 24, the last book of the poem, he cries because of the death of Patroclus and is again comforted by his mother, who brings him a message from Zeus. The repetition of the speech formula is one of the many ways in which the primary narrator-focalizer establishes a close link between the beginning and end of his story.

Finally, an example of a speech formula describing *the effect of a speech* occurs in *Iliad* 9, when a delegation of Greeks is sent to Achilles to try to persuade him to put aside his wrath and take up fighting again. However, Achilles’ answer is a clear “no,” and this is the reaction of the delegation:

So he spoke, and all of them stayed stricken to silence  
in amazement at his words. He had spoken to them very strongly.  
(9.430–31)

Upon their return to the other Greeks, one of the delegation members, Odysseus, reports Achilles’ negative answer, and his speech is capped in lines 693–94 by exactly the same formula that was used in lines 430–31. The repetition of the formula has the effect of stressing the impact of Achilles’ “no” on the despondent Greeks.

This rapid survey of attributive discourse in the Homeric epics, which has not, by any means, mentioned all the varieties that are actually found,<sup>19</sup> allows us to reach the following conclusions: (1) attributive discourse is present and worth analyzing in oral narratives, too (cf. Prince 1978: 313, quoted in n. 14, above); (2) even though Homeric attributive discourse is to a large degree formulaic, there exist, in fact, so many different formulas to express that elementary *inquit*-formula (“he/she said”) that, in this respect, the oral Homer does not compare unfavorably with a sophisticated novel like *Madame Bovary*.

## II. Example 2: Verbatim Repetition

Zumthor (1983: 141) mentions, as “le trait constant et peut-être universellement définitoire de la poésie orale,” “la récurrence de divers

19. For a more exhaustive discussion, see De Jong (1987: 195–208).

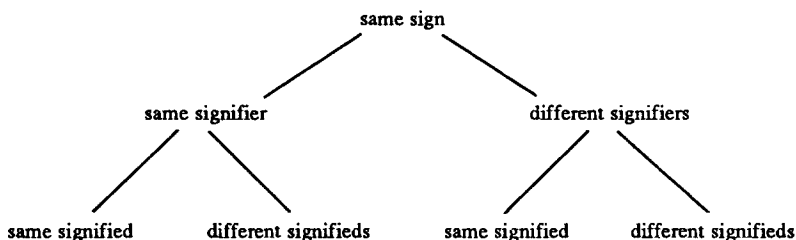


Figure 1.

éléments textuels: ‘formules’ au sens de Parry-Lord et, plus généralement, toute espèce de répétition ou de parallélisme.” In this section I will talk about this last category: the repetition of verse-clusters, that is, the repetition of at least two verses. Such repeated verse-clusters are a well-known feature of Homeric poetry. Following the suggestion of Rimmon-Kenan (1980: 152), I distinguish between repetition of the sign, of the signifier, and of the signified. For verbatim repetition, we arrive at the following diagram in Figure 1. The implementation of this diagram leads to the following typology of verbatim repetition:

- a. The same text is used (more than once) by the same narrator-focalizer to refer to the same event.
- b. The same text is used by different narrator-focalizers to refer to the same event.
- c. The same text is used (more than once) by the same narrator-focalizer to refer to different events.
- d. The same text is used by different narrator-focalizers to refer to different events.

I note in passing that only types (a) and (b) are forms of repetition in Genette’s (1972: 145–82) sense: the same event is presented more than once. Types (c) and (d) are forms of what he calls *singular* presentation: an event is presented once. Let us turn to Homeric examples of each of the four types of verbatim repetition.

The first type of verbatim repetition mostly concerns character-text: one character uses the same words on more than one occasion. An example is found in *Iliad* 3. The rivals, Paris and Menelaus, have agreed to fight a duel in order to decide who will have Helen as his wife. The conditions of the fight are stated by Agamemnon:

“then let the Trojans give back Helen and all her possessions,  
and pay also a price to the Argives which will be fitting,  
which among people yet to come shall be a standard.”

(3.285–87)

When the duel is over, Agamemnon repeats these same words:

“Do you [Trojans] therefore give back, with all her  
 possessions, Helen  
 of Argos, and pay a price that shall be fitting,  
 which among people yet to come shall be a standard.”  
 (3.458–60)

The verbatim repetition here is functional on the level of communication between characters: Paris has lost the duel, and Agamemnon, repeating the exact conditions of the duel, urges the Trojans to fulfill them.

In the case of the second type of verbatim repetition, the Homeric epics present us with two (sub)types: either the primary narrator-focalizer repeats the words of secondary narrator-focalizers (b1)<sup>20</sup> or different secondary narrator-focalizers use the same words (b2). An example of (b1) is found in *Iliad* 4. The goddess Athena advises Pandarus to pray to Apollo before aiming an arrow at Menelaus:

“but make your prayer to Apollo the light-born, the glorious  
 archer,  
 that you will accomplish a grand sacrifice of lambs first born  
 when you come home again to the city of sacred Zeleia.”  
 (4.101–3)

Some verses later, the primary narrator-focalizer repeats these words:

and he made his prayer to Apollo the light-born, the glorious  
 archer,  
 that he would accomplish a grand sacrifice of lambs first born  
 when he came home again to the city of sacred Zeleia.  
 (4.119–21)

The function of this verbatim repetition is clear: the primary narratee-focalizee is informed that Pandarus strictly obeyed the orders of the goddess.

An example of (b2) is the recurrence of *Iliad* 4.163–65 in 6.443–49:

“For I know this thing well in my heart, and my mind knows it.  
 There will come a day when sacred Ilion shall perish,  
 and Priam, and the people of Priam of the strong ash spear.”

The first time the speaker is Agamemnon, who exhorts his men. The second time it is Hector, speaking with his wife, Andromache. This time the repetition is not functional on the level of communication between characters—Agamemnon and Hector do not know that they echo each other—but can be interpreted by the primary narratee-

20. In the opposite case, that is, of a character’s “repeating” an event presented earlier by the primary narrator-focalizer, we never find verbatim repetition: the character’s version always differs to a greater or lesser degree from that of the primary narrator-focalizer.

focalizee, who is, after all, the recipient of the entire text (narrator-text *and* character-text),<sup>21</sup> as expressing the contrast in perspective between future victor (Agamemnon) and future vanquished (Hector). For Agamemnon and his men, the idea that Troy is doomed to fall is a stimulus to fight as hard as they can. In the mouth of Hector, these same words acquire a tragic tone: he knows he is fighting for a lost cause, yet the heroic code forbids him to stop fighting (as his wife has just begged him to do).

The third type of verbatim repetition is found mostly with the primary narrator-focalizer as speaker: recurring events, such as arrivals, baths, meals, and offerings, are presented by him in exactly the same words. Homeric scholars speak of type-scenes (after Arend 1933). Even such type-scenes can, in certain contexts, have a special significance. An example is found in the last book of the *Iliad*, which tells of the encounter between Achilles and Priam and their reconciliation (Priam's son, Hector, had killed Achilles' friend, Patroclus, and Achilles had killed Hector). After a moving exchange of speeches and the release by Achilles of Hector's body (24.485–620), the type-scene of preparing and eating a meal occurs:

So spoke fleet Achilles and sprang to his feet and slaughtered  
a gleaming sheep, and his friends skinned it and butchered it  
fairly,  
and cut up the meat expertly into small pieces, and spitted them,  
and roasted all carefully and took off the pieces.  
Automedon took the bread and set it out on the table  
in fair baskets, while Achilles served the meats. And thereon  
they put their hands to the good things that lay ready before them.  
(24.621–27)

The detailed and almost ritual nature of the type-scene has great force here. It brings home to the primary narratee-focalizee the importance of what is taking place: Achilles and Priam, both of whom had abstained from eating for several days, have now returned to normal human behavior; the reconciliation has made their grief pass or, at least, become bearable enough to eat again.

The fourth type of verbatim repetition is only seldom found in the Homeric poems. One of the few examples is *Iliad* 5.458–59 / 5.883–84:

“Even now he stabbed in her hand by the wrist the lady  
of Cyprus, and again, like more than a man, charged even  
against me.”

21. According to Bal (1985), the relationship between a primary narrator-focalizer and secondary focalizers or narrator-focalizers is hierarchical: The primary narrator-focalizer embeds the focalization or narration-focalization of a secondary focalizer or secondary narrator-focalizer. Accordingly, the primary narratee-focalizee receives (through secondary focalizees and secondary narratee-focalizees) all text; see De Jong (1987: 35–37).

The first time, Apollo is telling Ares how Diomedes attacked Aphrodite and himself; the second time, Ares tells Zeus how Diomedes attacked Aphrodite and himself. Once again the verbatim repetition can be interpreted by the primary narratee-focalizee as significant, in that it emphasizes Diomedes' aggressive behavior toward the Olympic gods, which, in fact, forms the central theme of the fifth book.

I conclude that a narratological approach to the oral phenomenon of verbatim repetition has two advantages: (1) instead of speaking in a rather diffuse way about this phenomenon, the typology given above, based on a distinction among sign, signifier, and signified, makes it possible to separate repetition from singular presentation (in Genette's sense)<sup>22</sup> and to analyze more precisely on which level(s) the verbatim repetition is operative, whether on the level of communication between characters or of that between primary narrator-focalizer and primary narratee-focalizee; (2) analyzing in terms of primary narrator-focalizer and primary narratee-focalizee, instead of Homer and the physical hearer/reader, allows us to think of verbatim repetition as a meaningful, instead of a purely mnemonic, device and not to worry whether a physical reader still remembers *Iliad* 4.163–65 when he or she hears 6.443–49: the primary narratee-focalizee, being a semiotic function rather than a living being, is not impeded by any limitations and may be used by us, flesh-and-blood interpreters, to maximize our interpretation.

### III. Example 3: Formula and Narrative Situation

Concentrating on the formulaic system (each hero has a name-epithet formula for each grammatical case and for each metrical position), Parry argued that this system, rather than context, is the dominant factor underlying the choice of a particular epithet. Recently, scholars have shown that sometimes there is a relationship between formula and context. Let me give one example:

And the games broke up, and the people scattered to go away,  
 each man  
 to his fast running ship, and the rest of them took thought of their  
 dinner  
 and of sweet sleep and its enjoyment; only Achilles  
 wept still as he remembered his beloved companion, nor did sleep  
*who subdues all* come over him.

(*Iliad* 24.1–5)

The use of the stock epithet for sleep, “who subdues all,” in this particular context emphasizes the extent of Achilles' agony: sleep subdues all, and indeed, all Greeks are asleep, except for Achilles.

What about the relationship between formula and narrative situa-

22. This point has not been further worked out in my discussion.

tion: that is, do we find the same formula in simple and complex narrator-text and in character-text (the speeches), or do the primary narrator-focalizer and the individual characters use different formulas? Pioneering work in this field has been done by Austin (1975: 11–80). He made a catalogue of all references to Odysseus in the *Odyssey* and found that the poet uses name-epithet formulas far more often than do the characters, who prefer circumlocutions like “my father/husband/master,” etc. Whenever characters do use name-epithet formulas, distinctive patterns are discernible. Thus, the Suitors never call Odysseus “much-enduring” or “cunning”: “How could they and still remain in the man’s house importuning his wife?” (ibid.: 51). Others have investigated not so much the distribution of formulas as of words over the narrative situations. Already in antiquity, it was remarked that poet and characters sometimes use a different vocabulary, and studies by Friedrich and Redfield (1978), Griffin (1986), and myself (De Jong 1987: 136–46; 1988) have confirmed that the speeches (and complex narrator-text) contain a more colorful, emotional, and personal language than (simple) narrator-text.

For the purposes of this paper, I will follow Austin’s lead and take a closer look at the distribution of formulas over the narrative situations. Some formulas are used in all narrative situations (e.g., “herdsman of men,” “horses with single hoofs,” “strong-greaved Achaeans”), while others show a distinct pattern. It is from this last category that examples will be given here.

Two examples of formulas used only by the primary narrator-focalizer are “Menelaus of the great war cry” (18 times),<sup>23</sup> as in *Iliad* 6.37: “Now Menelaus of the great war cry captured Adrestus alive”; and “looking darkly” (26 times), as in *Iliad* 1.148: “Then looking darkly at him Achilles of the swift feet spoke.” We might call these typical narrator-formulas.

On the other hand, there are typical character-formulas, that is to say, formulas which are found in complex narrator-text and character-text only. An example is *heart-sore anger* (three times: three times character-text). Twice the formula refers to Achilles’ famous wrath, which is the theme of the *Iliad* (“Sing, goddess, the anger of Peleus’ son Achilles” [1.1]): 4.513 and 9.260. The formula is used a third time, by Phoenix in his story about Meleager, told to Achilles (9.561). This “embedded story” is clearly meant to function as “an indication to the actor” (Bal 1985: 147): Achilles should, like Meleager, give up his wrath before it is too late. The repetition of the formula “heart-sore anger” is one of the ways in which a link is established between embedded story and context.

23. Totals include both the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*.



Another example is *crafty Aegisthus* (four times: four times character-text). Both Athena and Nestor, in speaking to Telemachus, refer (for hortatory purposes) to the story of how Orestes killed “crafty Aegisthus” to revenge his father, Agamemnon (*Odyssey* 1.300, 3.198). Incited by these brief references, Telemachus asks Nestor for the full story about “crafty Aegisthus” (3.250) and gets it (3.308).

A third example is *forceful creator of panic* (three times: once complex narrator-text; twice character-text), as in *Iliad* 12.39:

[the Argives] were crowded back on their hollow ships, and  
struggled to get  
clear in dread of Hector, the forceful creator of panic.

At this point in the story, Hector is at the height of his glory and about to break through the wall around the Greek camp. So far it has been the Greek hero, Diomedes, who has been called (by the Trojans) “forceful creator of panic” (6.97, 278), and the use of this formula in connection with Hector signals the reversal of fortunes: due to Zeus’s support, it is now the Trojans who have the upper hand.

A fourth example is *Apollo, the glorious archer* (five times: once complex narrator-text; four times character-text), as in *Iliad* 4.101:

(Athena: Pandarus)  
“but make your prayer to Apollo the light-born, the glorious  
archer.”

The epithet is particularly apt here since Pandarus is about to act as archer himself.

A final example is *the fighting where men win glory* (eight times: twice complex narrator-text; six times character-text), as in *Iliad* 6.124:

(Diomedes: Glaucus)  
“Who among mortal men are you, good friend? Since never  
before have I seen you in the fighting where men win glory.”

Diomedes’ use of this epithet emphasizes the point he is making. Glaucus has not yet won enough “glory” in the “fighting” to be recognized by his Greek opponent, Diomedes (who, famous warrior himself, is immediately recognized by Glaucus: 6.145). The difference in status between the two heroes comes out clearly in their famous weapon exchange:

but Zeus the son of Cronus stole away the wits of Glaucus  
who exchanged with Diomedes the son of Tydeus armour  
of gold for bronze, for nine oxen’s worth the worth of a hundred.  
(6.234–36)

Sometimes a typical character-formula is, by way of exception, used by the primary narrator-focalizer. A special effect (pathos or emphasis) may be intended. An example is the formula “invincible hands”

(14 times: twice simple narrator-text; once complex narrator-text; 11 times character-text). One of the two exceptional simple narrator-text cases is *Iliad* 20.503–8:

before great-hearted Achilles the singlefoot horses  
trampled alike dead men and shields, and the axle under  
the chariot was all splashed with blood and the rails which  
encircled  
the chariot, struck by flying drops from the feet of the horses,  
from the running rims of the wheels. The son of Peleus was  
straining  
to win glory, his invincible hands spattered with bloody filth.

The formula “invincible hands” adds a pathetic touch to an otherwise graphic description. It also has a thematic function in the context of books 20–22: nobody can stop Achilles on his way to Hector, the one who killed his friend, Patroclus.

An interesting case is that of the metrically equivalent formulas “of manslaughtering Hector” and “of horsetaming Hector.” The latter, a less dramatic formula, is used by the primary narrator-focalizer only (four times); the former, three times by the primary narrator-focalizer, five times by characters (once, complex narrator-text; four times, character-text), particularly Achilles: *Iliad* 1.242, 9.351, 16.77. This pattern attains a special and sinister significance when we realize that it will be Hector who, at the end of the sixteenth book, kills Achilles’ best friend, Patroclus. It turns out that Achilles has all along been signalling exactly that characteristic of Hector with which he himself will be confronted so dramatically.

I conclude that the relationship between formula and narrative situation promises to be a rewarding field of investigation. The introduction of complex narrator-text (embedded focalization) as a category lying between simple narrator-text and character-text may help to distinguish more sharply between narrator-formulas and character-formulas.

### Conclusion

The case of Homer has shown, I hope, that the application of narratology to oral poetry is possible and fruitful. Narratological categories may be discerned in and are relevant to both oral and written narratives. This may sound self-evident, but, as we saw earlier, a narratologist like Prince considered attributive discourse a prerogative of written narrative only, and according to the classical scholar Goldhill (1983: 6), “Literariness consists in the use of narrative techniques. All narrative techniques to a lesser and greater degree draw attention to the literariness of a text, the *writtleness* of a text” (my italics).

This conclusion, that narratology is applicable to oral poetry, is in itself pleasing to narratology as a discipline, but it has further consequences as well. It might stimulate additional narratological research on oral poetry and thereby increase our knowledge of the narrative techniques employed in these texts. Thus, I think that all three examples discussed here (speech formulas as attributive discourse, verbatim repetition as a form of semiotic repetition, narrator-formulas vs. character-formulas) can be investigated in other oral texts too. This increase of knowledge will undoubtedly also increase our appreciation of narrative art in oral poetry. Such an increase of appreciation might, in its turn, be of relevance to the orality-literacy debate raging around certain of these texts. Sophistication of narrative technique, which narratology may help to detect, need not necessarily point to literacy.

In the particular case of the Homeric epics, a narratological approach has proved to be fruitful, in that it contributes to a stimulating combination of formulaic research and literary interpretation. And, of course, a narratological analysis need not restrict itself, as I have done in this paper, to the purely oral elements. By way of encouragement to future research, therefore, I would like to end by quoting the words of a distinguished member of the Parry school, Ann Amory Parry:

All narrative poetry presents characters, recounts actions, describes a world, implies values, and so on. At a certain level it makes no difference to a critical interpretation whether a poem is written or oral. (1971: 14)

### References

- Amory Parry, Ann  
 1971 "Homer as Artist," *Classical Quarterly* 21(1): 1–15.
- Arend, Walter  
 1933 *Die typischen Szenen bei Homer* (Berlin: Weidmann).
- Austin, Norman  
 1975 *Archery at the Dark of the Moon: Poetic Problems in Homer's Odyssey* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press).
- Bal, Mieke  
 1981 "Notes on Narrative Embedding," *Poetics Today* 2(2): 41–59.  
 1985 *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press).
- Barthes, Roland  
 1981 [1966] "Introduction à l'analyse structurale des récits," in *L'Analyse structurale du récit*, 7–33 (Paris: Seuil).
- De Jong, Irene J. F.  
 1987 *Narrators and Focalizers: The Presentation of the Story in the Iliad* (Amsterdam: Grüner).  
 1988 "Homeric Words and Speakers: An Addendum," *Journal of Hellenic Studies* 108: 188–89.

- Dodds, Eric R.  
1968 "Homer i–iii," in *Fifty Years (and Twelve) of Classical Scholarship*, 1–17 (New York: Barnes and Noble).
- Edwards, Mark W.  
1969 "On Some 'Answering' Expressions in Homer," *Classical Philology* 64: 81–87.  
1970 "Homeric Speech Introductions," *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* 74: 1–36.  
1987 *Homer, Poet of the Iliad* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press).
- Friedrich, Paul, and James Redfield  
1978 "Speech as a Personality Symbol: The Case of Achilles," *Language* 54: 263–88.
- Genette, Gérard  
1972 *Discours du récit*, in *Figures III*, 67–273 (Paris: Seuil).
- Goldhill, Simon  
1983 "Narrative Structure in Bacchylides 5," *Eranos* 81(1): 65–81.
- Griffin, Jasper  
1980 *Homer on Life and Death* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).  
1986 "Homeric Words and Speakers," *Journal of Hellenic Studies* 106: 35–57.
- Heubeck, Alfred  
1978 "Homeric Studies Today: Results and Prospects," in *Homer: Tradition and Invention*, edited by B. Fenik, 1–17 (Leiden: Brill).
- Jensen, Minna S.  
1980 *The Homeric Question and the Oral-Formulaic Theory* (Copenhagen: Museum Tusulanum Press).
- Lattimore, Richmond, trans.  
1951 *The Iliad of Homer* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press).
- Lord, Albert B.  
1968 "Homer as Oral Poet," *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* 72: 1–46.
- Martin, Wallace  
1986 *Recent Theories of Narrative* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press).
- Notopoulos, James A.  
1949 "Parataxis in Homer: A New Approach to Homeric Literary Criticism," *Transactions and Proceedings of the American Philological Society* 80: 1–23.
- Parry, Adam, ed.  
1971 *The Making of Homeric Verse: The Collected Papers of Milman Parry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).
- Prince, Gerald  
1978 "Le Discours attributif et le récit," *Poétique* 35: 305–13.
- Reinhardt, Karl  
1961 *Die Ilias und ihr Dichter* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht).
- Rieu, E. V., trans.  
1946 *Homer: The Odyssey* (Harmondsworth: Penguin).
- Rimmon-Kenan, Shlomith  
1980 "The Paradoxical Status of Repetition," *Poetics Today* 1(4): 151–59.  
1983 *Narrative Fiction: Contemporary Poetics* (London and New York: Methuen).
- Schadewaldt, Wolfgang  
1938 *Iliasstudien* (Leipzig: S. Hirzel).
- Stanzel, F. K.  
1964 *Typische Formen des Romans* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht).  
1979 *Theorie des Erzählens* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht).

Wolf, Friedrich August

1985 [1795] *Prolegomena ad Homerum*, translated by A. Grafton, G. W. Most, and J. E. G. Zetzel (Princeton: Princeton University Press).

Zumthor, Paul

1983 *Introduction à la poésie orale* (Paris: Seuil).