

Metricae

Singing Homer's Spell: The End
of Oralist Poetics (Preface)¹

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Abstract

We did not use to know how the prosody of Greek words interacted with Greek metres. With the arrival of the new theory of the Greek accent, now we do. The ignoring of the seemingly irrelevant accent marks in texts seems to have led not to the realisation that all we could know, sadly, about the sound and performance of Greek poetry was its metre, but to the delusion that metre was all there was to know. The level of discovery newly achieved in the texture and the nature of Homeric composition is truly astounding, even to the author. There is no embarrassment, however, because he can take no credit for the content of the treasury: the new law of tonal prominence is merely the key to opening a long silent vault, hidden in plain sight in the accentual notation of East Roman manuscripts. There are now unmistakable proofs—for so they should be called—of Homer’s musical intent and design. The implications for any theory of Homeric composition, and indeed any assessment of his artistic arsenal, can find no bottom, once these findings see the light of day. Most egregious is the hypothesis of an oral tradition shaping composition via purely metrical formulas, with no role whatsoever to be played by the manifest tonal phenomena recorded in the manuscripts. Penelope’s circumflexes, and her special circumflected motif, are a sight and a sound that can no longer be unseen, or unheard in their wake. Odysseus also is discovered to have a distinctive accentual motif (Chapter 11). Let the implications sink in like a down-glide in your voice: there is new music on the radio, and Homer must be heard as if for the first time.

Keywords: Homer, Accent, Greek, Prosody, Music, ‘law of tonal prominence’, Josephus, Oralism.¹

1 The complete argument and book, published by the author, are now available via Amazon.

Resumo estendido

Não costumávamos saber como a prosódia das palavras gregas interagia com os metros gregos. Com a chegada da nova teoria do acento grego, agora sabemos. O fato de ignorar as marcas de acento aparentemente irrelevantes nos textos parece ter levado não à constatação de que tudo o que podíamos saber, infelizmente, sobre o som e a performance da poesia grega era seu metro, mas à ilusão de que o metro era tudo o que havia para saber. O nível de descoberta recém-alcançado sobre a textura e a natureza da composição homérica é realmente surpreendente, até mesmo para o autor. Não há constrangimento, no entanto, porque ele não pode levar crédito pelo conteúdo do tesouro: a nova lei da proeminência tonal é meramente a chave para abrir um cofre há muito silencioso, escondido à vista de todos na notação acentuada dos manuscritos romanos orientais. Agora existem provas inequívocas - pois assim devem ser chamadas - da intenção e do projeto musical de Homero. As implicações para qualquer teoria de composição homérica e, de fato, para qualquer avaliação de seu arsenal artístico, não encontram limite quando essas descobertas vêm à luz do dia. A mais flagrante é a hipótese de uma tradição oral moldando a composição por meio de fórmulas puramente métricas, sem nenhum papel a ser desempenhado pelos fenômenos tonais manifestos registrados nos manuscritos. Os circunflexos de Penélope e seu motivo circunflexo especial são uma visão e um som que não podem mais ser vistos ou ouvidos em seu rastro. Descobriu-se que Odisseu também tem um motivo acentual distinto (Capítulo 11). Deixe que as implicações sejam absorvidas como um deslizamento descendente em sua voz: há música nova no rádio, e Homero deve ser ouvido como se fosse a primeira vez.

Palavras-chave: Homero, Acento, Língua grega, Prosódia, Música, ‘Lei da proeminência oral,’ Flávio Josefo, Oralismo.

Homer brings it ripe: his poems are the well-spring of whatever it is 'the Greeks' illuminated. Only ghostly Pythagoras can compare in his uncanny potency and influence.

On my first encounter with Homer's Greek, I knew I was in the presence of serious music. There was an obvious vigour and intention to her rhythms; no secrets there. We had a time signature, durations of notes, and a stichic structure, a tilt at mid-line and a cadence at line end. But most intriguingly, there were accent marks: existing grammars were not all that helpful on these, but the accent signs most certainly indicated contours, and perhaps emphases, of *changing pitch*.

I was someone used to taking the 'reading' of music seriously. I devoured the lyrics on rock albums, often before I heard the music and the song; I became a student of the strange syncopations involved in delivering English song lyrics effectively (which sometimes meant inarticulately). I learned to follow scores, and got familiar with the usual cul-de-sacs, mews, corners and car parks of tonal harmonic progressions. Shakespeare animated verse from the inside; he is an English speaker's trainer in both the high art and the simple motions of poetry. I knew without knowing how, that Homer also would provide a rich and rewarding feast. What else could one expect from the fount and guiding spirit of Greek learning and the liberal arts? The poet without whom the brilliant Greeks would have had no one to quote? My haphazard musical upbringing had all the same readied me, and no mistake, for this. I was a blues improviser, and one feels it in sympathy, how to compose a line which works, before one can articulate anything sensible about that knowledge.

The trivialisation of Homer as a thinker, or a theologian, or a political scientist, is perhaps acceptable as a sign of the times. Taste in such things comes and goes, and time and taste have a sovereignty. Homer may have to live for now with being the first in line of the 'Great Books' in school curricula. But what

would damn our times for its judgement would be a passive trivialisation of Homer's art, where no thought or attention is paid, or painstaking discipline spent, on the performing of his work. It would be like dismissing Bach's *St. Matthew Passion* as an 18th Century artefact, from which the players and instruments have long since moved on, and could not be bothered to master the language, vocal and instrumental technique required to reenact the piece. The preservation of an adequate written record in this case allowed the piece to be revived long after Bach's death, and the professional instrumentalists and singers were able to recreate the music, so that a less able, literally illiterate audience became gratefully able to savour in full communion Bach's setting of the *Passion*.

Let's say you're one of those who have pored over the Beatles' *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band*. You've heard the individual voices in that album, associated those voices with distinct composers, absorbed the songs to the point that their changes and moments have become second nature. There are many of us so initiated. What would it do for us if it were declared, on authority, that that album, unlike some others, was actually the product of an oral tradition? How does one incorporate into one's experience of the fact, that the *Sgt. Pepper* songs were an ultimate result of repeated improvised singing, a composition that arose from anonymous folk and their folk-whittled formulas, and not from a distinct voice or voices stylised 'John' or 'Paul' or both, or even Ringo?

In a word, we would be *gaslighted*. This is what has happened, by and large, to readers of Homer in his modern reception. Readers in translation experience the characters, the vision, the sweep, the emotion. They are triggered by the moral vice clamps of war, love, justice and gods. But they are cut off from the music, the language itself, and are spoon-fed expertise in that area, about the mysterious wise artfulness of an incremental oral tradition, doing its thing out of view and out of mind. The 'folk' shtick is at least as old in Classical Philology as the 18th Century and Friedrich Wolf's *Prolegomena to Homer*.

What folk? Where?

The fact on the ground is that not a single piece of text or textual allusion from the ancient world points to or even hints at the existence of an oral tradition of improvising bards, composing-in-performance. That Homer did not himself write his composition down (Josephus mentions this as a seemingly prevalent Greek opinion about the author, *Against Apion* 1.12), does not in the least imply that it was produced by an oral tradition of some particular people. Josephus is speaking of a peculiar fact about a particular poet. Meanwhile, every single piece of such ancient textual evidence bespeaks a performance text or script for Homer that was performed by skilled performers, to a knowing audience, whether solo or accompanying the voice with a lyre.

Variations in written versions of these texts are sometimes taken to be original variants, that is, variants in an oral tradition where there was latitude for different occasional or situational implementations. But of course such

variants would be most naturally expected, with the least testing of Occam's Razor, as natural products of the remembering (or mis-remembering) of a song at its first, or second, writing down. The writing down would have been an attempt at remembering the song or 'album' (διαμνημονευομένην ἐκ τῶν ὀσμάτων, Josephus I.12, 'a thoroughgoing act of recollection based on the songs') in the dialect local to the writers. Let us be clear where Josephus has actually been explicit: the writing down of Homer was a thorough and systematic attempt (δια-, ἐκ) to remember a work, from a sequence of songs that were already composed and finished—not in any sense an act of composition itself. There is no hint in him about how the songs or the poems were composed, except by a famous poet with a name.

Variations in human memory are a familiar and demonstrable fact. Variations as an endemic feature of an oral transmission remain inaccessible to empirical study, except as *faits accomplis*. Variants would result, for example, if its musically literate fans tried to write down *Sgt. Pepper* from memory. What if all copies and recordings were suddenly lost? We might get different versions with different spelling conventions for silent r's and h's, from Americans and various British or European or Japanese authorities. But we *predict* that such variants would be metrically equivalent. The recollectors would agree on the tunes absolutely, but only on most of the words; language changes, after all, albeit less when it is frozen inside melody and rhythm. But melodies and rhythms seem to survive concretely in the memory. Perhaps the reconstructors would come readily to consensus on many cruxes, in active consultation with their still vivid and saturated and decided memories. The correct ordering of the songs, apart from any quirks in their internal structure, would be a fans' obsession, an absolute requirement of any reconstruction for devotees of *Sgt. Pepper*.

Nothing prevents us imagining such factors in the scenario that led to the writing down of Homer, among the scattered Greek-speaking communities where devotees of Homer found themselves. We know that Solon's Athenians were particular about hearing Homer's songs in their original or proper order. They knew their *Sgt. Pepper*. One of the seminal 'city editions' of Homer is supposed to come from Massalia (Marseilles), now in France. Nothing points us to an oral tradition, or the indeterminately many generations of a people, and artists, that must be posited to sustain it in any of these locations. Homer's recorded text in fact draws on a number of local versions of Greek for its forms, and hints at others. The composer or his school were clearly lovers of Greek varieties: whatever worked, from wherever he or she or they, or Greek, had travelled.

The worst and most embarrassing aspect of the now centuries-long episode of gaslighting in the academy is that Homer's music has been silent, suppressed in fact, disallowed from speaking for itself. In the absence of any professional apologists and performers of its actual music, the poetry has been broken, to support the orthodox theory of oral composition, into metrical building blocks—abstracted from their explicit, infixed tonal components. The accent marks in

our received texts play no role whatsoever—whatsoever—in the supposedly ‘oral’ theory.

The truth will finally be revealed, later in this book, that Homer’s dactylic hexameter is in fact a vehicle of display for the peculiar tonal prosody of ancient Greek, before this prosody transitioned to a monosyllabic stress accent. We shall be exploring the music of an historical ‘disyllabic contonation’. In particular, the final foot of Homer’s hexameter seems to have been designed for it. Though Homer always exercises his musical options, filling his final foot with the Greek contonation—rising on the first syllable and falling in pitch over the second—seems to be his favourite choice of cadence. It is of course entirely natural that a language’s poetry should serve to showcase its native accentual prosody. This is the norm. In this book we demonstrate the naturalness of Homer’s poetry in this regard, perhaps for the first time in the modern world. What is bizarre, an historical aberration, is the sometimes quoted doctrine, now traditional in Classics, that Greek’s accentual prosody—a conspicuous graphic feature of the textual transmission—plays no rôle at all in the form and rhythm of Greek poetry.

There can be no progress from this situation, this modern blight in the transmission of Homer to future ages—perhaps the only humanistic purpose of the present civilisation—without an advancement in institutional awareness. That is why the book you are holding needs to be published and promulgated. There is a special significance for Homeric studies but also the teaching of Classical languages and literature generally. I’ve done my best to make it palatable all the same. But the necessity arises because, together with my first book, *The Dance of the Muses: Choral Theory and Ancient Greek Poetics*, published by Oxford (2006), it proposes a new empirical law of prosody for Greek and Latin, a law of tonal prominence. This is a development in the field of Classical languages comparable to the introduction of the descriptive law $F=ma$ in classical physics. That is because there is not an interaction with a classical text that does not depend on one’s interpretation of emphasis, and it is impossible to read this emphasis without first knowing how the words of a language are actually stressed or accented in performance. In point of fact, one cannot even talk without knowing this, let alone compose or recite poetry, or play a melody.

It would be outrageous to frame hypotheses about Shakespearean metre, verse, or composition, for example, without the knowledge of how and where to stress his words in the performance of his verse. But this is what is routinely done in regard to ancient Greek compositions and their words, which are known to have been pitch-accented. The law of tonal prominence must therefore be promulgated for the use, abuse, and inspiration of students of the literature of the ancient world.

Let me emphasise that what has been proposed is a new grammatical law, which belongs somewhere near the very beginning of a Greek grammar. Applying it transforms the apprehension and comprehension of any Greek text, poetry or prose, and therefore if it is sound, it is likely to render any present expertise in

these areas, unschooled in the law, obsolete. Hence there is an urgency for dissemination, to help forestall bad guidance at the very least. It must be a very unusual situation in the history of letters, quite unprecedented, where something as absolutely fundamental as the locations of the stress positions of words to the function and being of poetry and human expression, should remain outside the purview of instruction; then for it only to become amenable to sound linguistic theory, and practical instruction by rule, after hundreds of years of scholarship on the performance of ancient texts have already filled the library shelves.

It would be unacceptable for teachers to use their own idiosyncratic stress patterns and consonant values in demonstrating Shakespeare, without regard to the historical practice, or to not follow the score for a melody of Mozart, or any other performance text where the interpretation depends in part on the rendition. But every Classics student has had to live with the idiosyncrasies of their instructor's pronunciation and private performance ticks, which were no doubt passed down in part from their own school instructors. Classical texts are not treated with the respect that is required by these other kinds of performance scores. There is no downside to individuality; but every individual in the field needs to learn the law of tonal prominence, if Classics is at last going to get serious about its performance texts, from Homer to Plato to Herodotus to Euclid.

As for the rest of you, perhaps you will spare the odd fifteen minutes of attention to the 'Homerist': what makes him tick, and what it is about Homer's art and vision that makes him a devotee of Homer's music. Perhaps this music will also call to you, an echo drifting from beyond mountains and strangely blue skies, as you wield your crook like a sceptre among the wandering sheep.

But a main task of this publication is to convert the future faculties in the field of Classics to a fundamentally new way of approaching the teaching of classical languages. Pronunciation and accentual prosody can no longer be shunted to the preliminaries of grammars, never later to play a significant rôle, once it has been shown—as this book intends to do—that it is the selective reinforcement of underlying metre by the vocal accent, not the metrical formula, which constitutes the essential constructive principle in the composing of Homeric poetry. The level of discovery newly achieved in the texture and the nature of Homeric composition is truly astounding, even to the author. There is no embarrassment, however, because he can take no credit for the content of the treasury: the new theory of the accent is merely the key to opening a long silent vault, hidden in plain sight in the accentual notation of East Roman manuscripts. There are now unmistakable proofs—for so they should be called—of Homer's musical intent and design. The implications for any theory of Homeric composition, and indeed any assessment of his artistic arsenal, so to speak, can find no bottom, once these findings see the light of day.

Ignoring the accents is like ignoring the advice and data of a native speaker when learning their language. Technicolour films are meant to be seen in colour.

It was a revelation to people who first saw the *Wizard of Oz* on black-and-white television, that the entrance to the magical land transformed the vision into full colour. What nostalgic for his youthful television would now choose to watch the movie all in black-and-white? The entirety of Greek and Latin literature, poetry and prose, all the composed legacy of the classical world, was stressed by means of a rule-governed, lexical tonal prominence. This is a new fact under the modern sun. Even in the case of Latin, where the stress positions in words are already largely known, the discovery of their tonal nature makes a vast difference in the approach to performance, not to mention the resulting sound and registration. Everyone who undertakes to teach Greek or Latin literature, needs to learn the law of tonal prominence. We're not in Kansas any more.

There is no substitute for the professional continuity that made possible the revivification of Bach's music from a written score. This is of course a sublime experience for the musicians, but the principal beneficiaries are a large public who cannot read this score, but nevertheless respond to the music with nuance and erudition. This book will establish that Homer also, courtesy of the work of ancient scholarship, has left us a written score whose essential music can be discovered by a law of tonal prominence. Of course it will still all be Greek to us. But Homer can once again sing for his supper. Why not hear him and see?

Part I prepares the theoretical ground for performing Homer with authenticity and confidence from a modern edited text. The revelation and demonstration of Homer's musical nature begins properly with examples in Part II. Penelope's circumflexes, and her special circumflected motif, are a sight and a sound that can no longer be unseen, or unheard in their wake. Odysseus also is discovered to have a distinctive accentual motif. Let the implications sink in like a down-glide in the pitch of your voice. One is afforded a glimpse, a glint of secret treasure in a just-opened tomb. Homer comes in living colour: do not adjust your set.

Chapters 1 and 2 provide an introduction to the role of dance and dance music in the genesis of Homeric poetry, and discuss the implications of the new theory of the accent for its interpretation. The inadequacy and occasional incoherence of oral theory are exposed.

Ensuing chapters deal with the visual division of words as 'prosodic units' (Ch.3); the use of the word 'lemma' in the editing of received texts, a term of art borrowed from Alexandrian geometry (Ch.4); and the apparently metaphysical existence of digamma in Homeric music (Ch.5). Of critical importance for the assessment of the textual record is recognising the often disyllabic nature of the ancient accent recorded in manuscripts like the *Venetus A*, as distinct from the monosyllabic stress which was already developing in Greek during Alexandrian times (Ch. 6).

The non-recognition of this essential historical descriptive fact is shown to undermine the attempt of Gregory Nagy to dismiss the accentual marking of *Venetus A* as 'late' and indicative of the takeover of monosyllabic word-level

stress in Greek (Ch. 7). Pitch patterns at the level of the phrase need only be built from the endemic word-level pitch patterns produced by the disyllabic contonation. But the concept 'word-level' must acknowledge a certain fluidity and fecundity in Homer's usage—even prowess—in shaping longer semantic and prosodic units as a feature of his thought (so I argue in Ch. 8). Homer, after all, has no word for 'word'.

There follows (Ch. 9) a summation of the case for the *Venetus A* manuscript as an accurate score for the melodic performance of Homer. This chapter ends Part I and constitutes the 'proof' of concept for the performance of Homer, even from a modern text. In Part II we turn to noting and describing the thing itself, the music of Homer. I call this bit the 'pudding'. There are regular patterns of Homeric tonal cadences, causing the various phenomena which have been described by philology solely in terms of the positions of word endings with respect to the metrical feet. We instead motivate the famous caesura as a side effect of a purely aesthetic motive toward agreement in cadence between accent and ictus (Ch. 10). This first cadence in the third foot of the Homeric line is a regularity, the theme against which Homer sets his variations. Here we begin to read the Homeric score, introducing a system of underlining the syllables bearing the metrical ictus—the downbeats of the dactyls—and setting in bold the tonally prominent syllables, whether these two (ictus and tonal prominence) coincide or contrast. Instantly visible become Homer's musical reinforcements and syncopations as immediate data. We begin to see the Homeric hexameter as a showcase for its native prosody, the disyllabic contonation. Particularly striking, histrionic examples of dramatic musical effects, breaking regularities, are presented (Ch. 11), most notably with respect to the scripted vocal habits of Penelope and Odysseus (and Athena). Certain consciously musical patterns are evident visually from the text, in some cases without even invoking the new theory of the accent or the 'corrected' (selectively underlined and bolded) score—from the original East Roman manuscript, in plain sight and not hidden.

The obviousness of these examples will astonish; how could it be that so many modern generations of classical scholars, presented with a text laden with pitch accent marks, have ignored them? Once we have established that the text is musical by nature and design, we turn to thoughts on the rôle of pauses in prosodic composition and performance, as a glide path to Homer's histrionic dimensions; and we sample and explore the music and its composer's aesthetic (Chs. 12-15). In drawing to a close we raise an exhortation toward an Homeric kind of vision: a nice portion of pudding, where one hopes that Homer's music will have mostly spoken for itself.

The call to theories of composition is a siren song of Academia. Classical music fans are long used to a bifurcation in their experience: on the one hand there is the concert or the recording, with which one harbours an ineffable, private connection. Then there are the liner notes, filled with the composer's biography which is somehow supposed to be connected with that riveting music

expressed whole from within. Various living situations and cities or courts, otherwise atonal aristocratic patrons, jobs and years A.D. surround the precious music with a composer's biographical lego™ castle. Prosaic suggestions are made about his love life. We are never the wiser about the source or the trigger for composition, nor does the biography touch on the piece's form, but the ritual biographical presentation of the music persists, because the composer's life *must* have had *something* to do with the bloody music. All the same, the synthesis of humanly communicative music remains a largely unfathomable process.

Classical philology in particular is not unaware that it has a descriptive problem. No connection has heretofore been made between the ancient Greek pitch accent and the performance of its poetry. Poetry with no connection to its native prosody is a monstrosity. Yet the lack of a coherent solution to such an intractable and fundamental problem has not prevented the indulgence in theories of composition—in the case of Homer, with metrical building blocks whose in-built patterns of pitch were assumed to be irrelevant to their function. It became all too easy for self-styled explainers of the many mysteries of Homer—including his scale and his quality—to project these onto the untestable mechanism for production, of an oral tradition.

The proper question of a theory of composition, of how language can be 'put together' that is both intelligible as a story and compelling as a rhythmic poem, has never really been in reach of explanation via an oral tradition, except as an historical fact: it's been seen to be done. Such known products of oral traditions use language which communicates, and the poems and rituals and music continue to be performed. It was Immanuel Kant who posed the proper question for any theory of *intelligible* composition, most generally and authoritatively: how are synthetic a priori judgements possible? How is it we can know that $2 + 3 = 5$? And $\neq 4$? Of course it took him an entire *Critique of Pure Reason* to answer, with a result that philosophers dispute. But his epic posing of the actual question, which applies to composition as such, but directly also to any *intelligible* Homeric discourse, rather suggests that it is a matter as much of interest to the Herr Professor Doktor as it may be to the Alm-Uncle. The folk have no special bearing on it. Let me suggest Homer's version of such a question, asked of Achilles and Agamemnon: 'Which god was it who yoked them, paired in strife and combat?' The very notion of a dual subject, as opposed to singular or plural, Homer's choice in describing the formative action of this line, is an *a priori* synthetic proposition. To which the poet answers, 'Leto's son and Zeus's.'

The 'folk', and to some extent the 'professional bard', exist by definition in the consciousness of an elitist, in many instances a racist, who at the very least knows the folk as an 'other' whose ways are to be described, for objectivity and accuracy, from a measured distance. A genuine interest in orality would not focus solely on the peculiarities of the performer's lingual product, as one does, in relation to everyday speech or literary forms; it would focus at least as much

on the illiterate audience for such peculiar verbiage—their reception of this peculiarity—and seek energy and motivation there. But here again, distance is the key to the description and the understanding. It is not allowed for an oralist to let on, for example, whether the poetry he studies is any good. Nor does he have a go himself, and sing for his supper. Perhaps this self-defining, 20th Century distanced perspective, of the literate and academic peering like Pentheus upon the oral and traditional, has been exhausted for the professional academic. Certainly it has nowhere left to go in Homer, who manifestly exists as ever we do, in the transition from the feudal to the class and moneyed structuring of societies. The professional bard and the professional scholar yet make their autodidactic way in these worlds.

Mathematics and poetics are the two liberal arts or disciplines to which all others in the academy devolve, the wellsprings of both theory and application. Popular culture distinguishes left brain from right. But there is no field, neither linguistics nor the self-styled sciences, that does not infuse its principles with an admixture from both sources. One might therefore take an interest in Homer's mathematics as well as Pythagoras' poetics. It is through these two arts, mathematics and poetics, that we might yet expect discovery and the genuinely new in human study. In music perhaps we come to their deepest ground. A mathematician well tempers a piano for someone else to scale its chords and paint with it. Metre and measurement may not be, therefore, accidental homonyms. What we offer here is something old and something new. May the rhythm of Homeric 'making', disclosed by the law of tonal prominence, *rhythm* into being a new poetics.

Inside the academy this new linguistic law opens a new approach to Homer, which is to say, to the academy's perennial spring. I am only the first to bring its illumination to bear. There is new music to be heard! My aim in this publication is to begin a process, to find a way to be a responsible critic; but more than that, to serve this music: to be a responsive one. There is now an opportunity in Homeric and other ancient studies, for a generation of first-responders. That we cannot explain its composition, its synthesis, and to some extent give up that effort, does not mean that we cannot make great advancements, and break new ground, in the audition and the description of Homer's music.