Another Man by the Same Name — by R.L. Fowler

Very often when introducing students to Homer for the first time I am asked about the so-called "Homeric Question" (or questions): who Homer was; how we come to have written versions of his poems, even though he supposedly could not write himself; and whether the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* were both written by the same person (or, indeed, whether each of these poems was produced by one person or a team of authors). There seems to be a general awareness, even among students who may never actually have opened the covers themselves, that some basic difficulties exist about the authorship of the two great Greek epics. So it occurred to me that readers of *Labyrinth* might find some information on the subject interesting.

Who was Homer? The short answer is, we don't know. These poems were produced at a very early stage of Greek civilization, about 700 BC, and for this early period we have little reliable information about the lives of any Greeks. To be sure, there are biographies of Homer preserved from the ancient world, but these were all written centuries after he died and are of little value. Their authors plainly had no old sources on which to draw, and had to resort to their imaginations to write their accounts of Homer's life. Homer doesn't tell us anything about himself in his poems, since it's not the style or purpose of epic poetry to convey personal information about the composer. The poet remains anonymous, reporting the events of the epic objectively. There is a consistent tradition that Homer was blind; this is at least plausible, since music and poetry were activities blind people could pursue in the ancient world. There is also a strong tradition that he was born on the island of Chios, which is an Ionian island, where Ionic Greek, the principal ingredient in Homer's Greek, was spoken; so that too is plausible. But other places also claimed to be his birthplace (and you could visit his tomb in several cities as well). In general, very little can be said with certainty about the historical Homer.

"Homer," therefore, is only shorthand for "the author of the *Iliad* and/or *Odyssey*"; and since, as I've already intimated, some scholars think parts of each epic are from other hands, we have to modify this to "possible author of most of the *Iliad* and/or *Odyssey*," which is unhelpful, to say the least, especially in view of the plethora of theories about how much of each poem this principal author is supposed to have contributed. Some scholars think he wrote all of both, while others think that later poets added large parts to Homer's original. These latter scholars quarrel amongst themselves about how large these additional parts were, and how many poets added them. Mercifully, the number of later hands is now thought to be much less than it once was, but it is this group of scholars, with their endless (and mutually contradictory) theories about the multiple authorship of the poems, that gave rise to the joke that the *Iliad* was not written by Homer but by another man of the same name. I should also report the theory that the *Odyssey* was written by a woman; this view has never caught on, but it is based on the correct observation that the *Odyssey* displays an insight into the domestic world of women not found in the *Iliad*.

The idea that the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* come from separate hands was already put forward in antiquity, and still finds a substantial amount of support today. The arguments used to support this theory are often linguistic: minute study of the Greek of both poems turns up different habits of speech and style said to be incompatible with single authorship. Of course, many elements of style can be consciously changed by an author, and one's style can evolve over time; the ancients thought the *Odyssey* was younger than the *Iliad* by twenty-five years or so, and modern scholarship tends to confirm this time spread. Consequently, some changes in style are to be expected between the two poems. However, this school of thought argues that the changes are so many, and on such a subconscious level, that the same person could not have written both poems. Other arguments are drawn from the subject-matter and outlook of the poems; it is argued that the world-view of the *Iliad* (profoundly pessimistic) and the *Odyssey* (basically optimistic) are like chalk and cheese, and no one person could possibly entertain both. But again, if the poems are separated by twenty-five years or more, the perspective of the author could have changed. Indeed, perspectives can change with the weather. So this argument does not seem cogent, and the linguistic evidence, though suggestive, is not quite decisive.

Of considerable interest, and the subject of much productive research in this century, is the whole question of oral poetry. Analysis of Homer's formulaic style has shown beyond doubt that he was schooled in the art of improvised oral composition. Even in translation this aspect of his poems is evident as one repeatedly encounters such expressions as "swift-footed Achilles" or "Hector tamer of horses". These are examples of Homer's "formulae" or ready-made phrases which conveniently fill up parts of his

verse, the dactylic hexameter. He has literally thousands of these phrases memorized and can call upon them as needed to assist in his composition. They can be used as given, or modified by expansion, abbreviation, or combination with other formulae. The skilled singer can perform this operation spontaneously and deliver hundreds of polished verses at the speed of normal spoken conversation. The art is still found in some parts of the world today, and was developed in ancient Greece during the so-called Dark Ages, between the fall of the Mycenaean world (ca. 1200 BC) and the invention of the Greek alphabet (probably in the late ninth century BC). During these centuries, the Greeks had no writing, and the practitioners of this art were illiterate. They learned from each other, and over the generations professional bards developed a vast repertory of formulae. Consequently, although every verse improvised by a singer was a completely new creation, which may never have been heard in precisely that form before, it was created out of a storehouse of thousands of traditional expressions, some of which may have been coined centuries before the singer's own time. Each singer was an individual creator, and every song was unique, but at the same time every singer was simply one particular incarnation of the common tradition.

The subjects of the songs were reminiscences of the glorious days of Mycenaean power – the days of Agamemnon, Achilles, Ajax, Odysseus, and the other great Greek heroes, originally perhaps historical figures but in time translated to the realm of legend. Stories grew of great exploits: the Calydonian Boar Hunt, the Quest for the Golden Fleece, the Labours of Herakles, the Sack of Thebes, and above all the Trojan War, subject of the *Iliad*. Homer alludes to the other stories at various points in his poems, thus confirming that, so far from starting something new, he was coming at the end of an already rich tradition.

Many scholars have thought that the model of oral traditional poetry is sufficient to explain Homer's art. Certainly it explains many aspects of it. We now understand how he can use archaic words, long since lost to ordinary Greek, in the same line as he uses a word that could not have existed much before his own day. Formulae invented centuries earlier were passed down through the generations to be available to Homer; at the same time, each generation added new formulae to the common stock, thus creating a multi-layered linguistic amalgam. The model explains how Homer can allow inconsistencies to stand in his plot (for instance, having a minor character killed on one page, and walking around a few hundred lines later as if nothing had happened): in a composition meant for oral delivery, such details would not be noticed either by singer or audience; attention would be focused on the broad outlines of the story, and there would be no opportunity to compare different parts as one can in a written text.

This model cannot explain everything about Homer, however. For one thing, *someone* wrote these poems down, freezing forever a particular version of the supposedly oral composition, and rendering it, in that sense at least, literate. It may also be literate in a more meaningful sense: the poet *intended* to produce a fixed and written version, even while composing. There are certainly many signs that the composition of these vast epics was carefully planned, which does not give the impression of someone unintentionally captured on tape, so to speak. Perhaps Homer took advantage of a new tool—the Greek alphabet—to do something completely original: to put his songs down on paper, and work them up, over time, into a definitive version. He would have new possibilities of comparing one part of the work to another, and of designing a poem on a grand scale. Certainly his epics are monumental in conception, and quite unlike other epics of the day which were very much shorter.

Homer, then, may have been schooled in the art of oral poetry, and retains many of its characteristics, but was literate himself and straddles the line between the two kinds of composition. There are still many scholars who maintain that an intricately planned, large-scale epic like the *Iliad* is within the reach of a really gifted oral composer, and hold to the theory that Homer, who never learned how to write himself, dictated his poems to someone else. Fortunately, for the ordinary reader a decision on the Homeric question(s) is not necessary in order to enjoy the epics. As they stand—never mind how they were produced—they are supreme examples of the story-teller's art, and also happen to contain some of the world's most inspiring poetry and profoundest insights into human nature. Not bad for the blind bard of Chios.