Homeric poetry and Modern Greek folksongs: a second essay

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This is a companion piece to an article on a related topic published in *Greece & Rome* in 1992.[1] The two papers rely on the same presuppositions but, as I cannot count on my readers' having read the earlier paper, I must reiterate here my basic methodological principles while trying at the same time to avoid repetition as far as possible.

My interest in the subject of possible survivals of Homeric poetic elements in the modern folksong tradition of Greece was prompted by the recent publication of I.K. Promponas' two-volume work on the subject.[2] Promponas incorporated in his work results of previous research, but also added hundreds of new parallels, which would constitute an extremely impressive collection if they were to be accepted as real Homeric survivals in the body of modern folksongs. However, many of them should be dismissed outright, because they do not testify to any continuity of poetic tradition but are better explained as simple verbal parallels. The fact, for instance, that certain lines in Homer may begin with the same word as lines in folksongs (e.g. ἦλθε / ἦρθε, 'he or she came'), or that both the Homeric poems and modern folksongs contain expressions such as κλαῖον ὀδυρόμενοι ('they cried bewailing', *Od.* X 454, etc.), or ἔκλαιεν καὶ ὀδύρονταν ('they cried and bewailed'), respectively, is no evidence for poetic relationship but rather for the continuity of spoken Greek, since the words or expressions in question seem to have been constantly used in everyday speech from Homeric to modern times.[3]

On the other hand, there are several examples in Promponas' materials which could be more easily and simply explained as poetic parallels or echoes, rather than as verbal coincidences. Take, for instance, the Homeric formula τανύφυλλος ἐλαίη ('long-leaved olive tree', *Od.* XIII 102, etc.) and compare it with the formula ἐλιὰν πλατύφυλλην ('wide-leaved olive tree') which occurs in folksongs of Cyprus. Neither should be understood literally because the leaves of olive trees are neither long nor wide; they both invoke the same image of the wide-stretched

DIALOGOS | Hellenic Studies Review | Number 3 (1996)
G.M. Sifakis | Homeric poetry and Modern Greek folksongs: a second essay | pp. 95-110

foliage of olive trees, *and could hardly have occurred in everyday speech.* So what we have here is identical signifieds, and partially different signifiers, as the later formula has been translated, or adapted to the requirements of the modern language.

The aim, then, of my earlier article was to identify elements of poetic language which could be taken to have survived and been orally transmitted in the same way and by the same process by which the Greek language itself evolved after the end of antiquity. If I may briefly quote from that article, 'plain language and traditional oral poetry are two overlapping systems of communication utilizing the same units of signification, except that poetry combines and binds them together into larger units (formulae, metaphors, images, etc.), operating as it does at a secondary level of meaning and communication'. It is therefore legitimate to assume that certain elements of poetic expression may have survived as such (i.e., retained their character as poetical signs), although 'they underwent transformation or even translation as verbal signs'.[4]

All these elements are conceived as double-sided units of form and content, verbal expression and meaning. This can easily be understood and, I hope, accepted as far as formulae, or metaphors and the like, are concerned; though it may be less obvious in the case of motifs, motifemes, and motif configurations, on which I shall focus in the present paper.

Motifs are difficult to define. As a term, 'motifs' has been used primarily by folklorists to refer to thematic units that result from dividing a folk narrative into its constitutive elements of *content*, and which include actions, descriptions, actors or characters, their attributes, various objects, etc.[5] Folklorists, as a rule, pay little attention to language, as folktales and other forms of folk literature usually transcend national languages (and state borders);[6] so motifs refer mainly, or only, to content, and hardly ever to verbal forms. Besides, even within the compass of the same language, folk narratives, both in prose and in verse, come in many different variations. As a result, in order to identify and refer to them as tales, motif configurations, thematic units, or single motifs, one has to summarize their content or invent descriptive titles, which necessarily ignore the verbal form and other formal aspects of the narratives, such as repetitions, symmetries, climaxes, and the like.

When dissociated from their form, folk narratives are left in a boundless and timeless limbo usually called 'folk literature', where they lose their names, assume multiple identities, and enter into a labyrinth of relationships with each

other, determined by the viewpoints, criteria and wishes of the scholars who resolve to investigate them. The *Motif-Index of Folk-Literature,* in both its original form by Anti Aarne and its later and very much expanded version by Stith Thompson,[7] offers an overview of relationships in a huge mass of materials, classified under abstract principles such as cosmogony, creation and ordering of human life, magic, tests, fights, and so forth. But despite its being a product of the Finnish-American historical-geographic school of folklore studies, it does not – nor does it attempt to – chart an historical or geographic line of development of the tales. On the contrary, it suggests the timelessness and boundlessness of folk literature I have just mentioned.

This has not deterred many students of European folklore from connecting several stories and narrative motifs found in modern ballads and folktales with Homeric poetry (the *Odyssey*, in most cases), and considering them as direct descendants from it.[8] Classical scholars, on the other hand, tend to be more conservative in their speculations; they are usually content to note similarities between ancient epic and modern narratives and refer them to the presumed universal folk literature.

Some examples at this point may be in order. In his well-known book on *Folktales in Homer's Odyssey*,[9] the late Denys Page, following in the wake of Frazer, Radermacher, Crooke, Meuli, Germain, Kakridis, and others,[10] discusses some of the stories that he assumed Homer to have adopted and adapted from actual folktales. They are the stories of the Lotus-Eaters, the Laestrygonians (man-eating giants), Circe (the beautiful witch), Aeolus and his bag of winds, the Cattle of the Sun, and the Sirens, in addition to the story of the Cyclops, the one-eyed giant, which he had treated extensively in an earlier book,[11] and, of course, the *nostos*/vengeance theme of the *Odyssey* itself, also considered to be an adaptation of a folktale.

Page compares, for instance, the story of the Lotus-Eaters in the *Odyssey* with tales from the Maoris of New Zealand, the Zulus of South Africa, the Deccan in India – from Japan, Melanesia, the Faroe Islands, as well as the Isle of Man. In all these stories, people either eat or are prevented from eating some food that has the magical power to make people lose their memory or bind them to a place, usually the underworld.[12] He applies the same method to other Odyssean 'folktales', such as the tale of Circe the enchantress, who turned Odysseus' companions into pigs but failed to apply her charms to Odysseus himself. The latter had been forewarned, and given a special root as an antidote, by Hermes; so

he was able to resist Circe's drugs, threaten her with his sword, take (or rather follow) her to bed, and eventually make her restore his men to their human form.

Page was able to find many parallels to this story from times and places as remote from each other as the *Epic of Gilgamesh* and the *Arabian Nights*, or as India and Europe. In all these stories, someone, or someone's companions, are metamorphosed into animals or devoured by a witch, who occasionally is 'on the look-out for a lover', as Page puts it. But in the end she is defeated by the heroes of all these tales.[13]

Now Page does not suggest any interdependence of the stories; he simply considers them specimens of 'universal folklore',[14] lying behind adaptations by poets such as Homer, in the eighth century B.C., or Mahānāma, the Sri Lankan poet of the *Mahāvamsa* (Great History), 'a verse-chronicle in Pāli, based on earlier chronicles and composed early in the sixth century A.D.'.[15] The latter includes a story taken by Page and others before him to be very close to the Homeric story of Circe, even though it contains no animal metamorphosis. The sorceress of this tale failed to devour the seven hundred companions of Prince Vijaya; but she cast them into a 'subterraneous abode' until the prince made her release them, after he threatened her with his sword – not to mention his taking the witch to bed, though not before she had transformed herself into a girl of sixteen. Because the *Mahāvamsa* is a narrative written in verse, a direct comparison of certain passages with specific Homeric lines is possible, and certain similarities of detail between the two stories have been observed; e.g., in both tales the sorceress spins thread or weaves at her loom and casts her victims into some kind of a prison; the hero threatens her with his sword, extracts an oath from her, and sleeps with her. Are these two stories related? Had Mahānāma, that is, read Homer? Page's reply is in the negative, but he considers it 'much likelier that the *Odyssey* and the *Mahāvamsa* have the same ultimate source (...) a story told in the remotest past, before the separation of the Indo-European peoples into their Indian and their European branches'.[16]

In a similar vein, I. Th. Kakridis considers the story of the Aitolian prince Meleagros in the *Iliad* (IX 527–599) to derive from a very old folktale (with variants, collected in modern times, from various parts of Greece, Turkey, Latvia, and Iceland).[17] A young man was condemned by the Fates to die when a log, which was in the fireplace when they came to decide his destiny right after he was born, ever burned away. His mother overheard the Fates and hid the log away but, when her son killed her brother (under a variety of circumstances), she burned the

log and thus caused her own son to die. Homer omits the log, which is a variant of the so-called motif of external soul,[18] and replaces it with the curse of Meleagros' mother, Althaia; this is interpreted by Kakridis as an effort on the part of the poet to minimize the folktale, magical, elements of the story in favour of more rational and believable alternatives. Page makes the same remark with regard to the treatment of 'folktales' by the poet of the *Odyssey*.[19]

Although Kakridis thinks it significant that the story of Meleagros should have been collected in modern times as a folktale in Aitolia (the hero now of course nameless), he does not suggest any dependence of the modern folktale on Homer, but rather assumes the opposite: the folktale belongs to an independent oral tradition that goes back to pre-Homeric antiquity; from this folk narrative tradition Homer draws his Meleagros story, while making changes to it mainly by replacing the log motif with the curse of Althaia (plus a few others necessitated by his general narrative context).

Much as I admire both Kakridis and Page as classical scholars, I find it difficult to share two assumptions they both make. The first is their tacit acceptance of the timeless and boundless universe of folk literature I mentioned earlier, to which they refer the resemblances of Homeric poetry with other folk narratives, Greek and non-Greek alike. The second assumption is a rather too sharp differentiation between folk literature, as it must have been manifested in song or tale, from high poetry as composed by Homer and other epic poets in antiquity. I doubt, that is, whether our modern distinction between folk/mythical/collective/traditional, and high/metamythical-logical/personal/original, forms of art is applicable to the world of Homer, if only because the basic difference between these two levels of culture in modern times, namely orality versus literacy, is not true of Homer. For, though not everyone accepts that Homer was an oral poet, it is generally admitted that he stands at the end of a long oral epic tradition.

In all such oral cultural traditions, it is difficult to separate the traditional and collective strains from the personal and innovative contributions of individual poets and artists (though we must assume that such contributions, greater or smaller, were always made). But reference of folk narrative motifs in Homer to an infinite universe of folk literature represents an anachronistic application of the modern dichotomy of folk versus high literature to ancient epic poetry.

Having said this, I hasten to add that I do not deny either the great antiquity or the transnational distribution of folk art forms, but wish to point out that they are precisely that, *forms*, and as such are *culture bound.* This is to say that regardless

of their origin they depend to a great extent on historical and material conditions of life, and on religious, social and political institutions, among which language is of the utmost importance. A corpus of such cultural forms, in a given historical period, constitutes a system (in the semiotic sense of the term) of collective representations, in which the ideology, wisdom, and worldview of a society and an *ethnos* are crystallized and expressed in concrete productions.

As long as various forms of literature are produced and transmitted orally, there can be no differentiation between folk and 'higher' literature, for they are both traditional; and they remain so for a long time after writing becomes the normal means of literary composition, because the public, at the receiving end of cultural communication, has always taken a great deal longer than poets to become literate to any significant degree; and an illiterate (or semi-literate) public is invariably a bearer of traditional cultural values and forms (even though often in a passive sense only). Interaction, therefore, between folk and 'higher' literature must have been extensive throughout Greek antiquity, while epic narrative must have remained alive in folk memory for many centuries after its creation – not the less so since Homer began to be read at school in classical times, and has never ceased to be since (although schooling in most Greek-speaking lands was very limited until our own century).[20]

Cultural traditions are disrupted or transformed, merge into one another, or even disappear completely, as a result of historical developments, such as wars, population movements, religious changes, and so forth. The great historical changes that took place in the eastern Mediterranean and the Greek-speaking areas around it in later antiquity and in medieval times are well known, and need not be recalled here, although we lack a reliable reconstruction of cultural life in any period during the centuries with which we are concerned. The question, therefore, essential to this discussion, is whether we could assume some kind of relationship between the medieval/modern Greek folk literature, on the one hand, and ancient literature, on the other. Is it likely that the similarities which have been observed between ancient and modern narrative motifs and motif configurations are due to survival through successive stages of cultural traditions, or should they be merely ascribed to the universal 'folk literature' referred to earlier? It seems to me that there is no easy answer to this question, and that indiscriminate acceptance of either contention would rather *amount to no answer at all.*

The difficulty in obtaining a clear answer to this question is due to the fact that we usually compare tales or content motifs dissociated from their form and

referred to by short descriptions (the story of Meleagros, the motif of external soul, and so on). We might, however, obtain more reliable results from our investigation of possible relationships between different bodies of traditional literatures separated by a great time distance or composed in different languages, or both, if we could take into account some formal aspects in addition to content.

Between Homeric poetry and modern folksong we do have both a great time distance and different languages, although the language of the latter is a linear descendant of that of the former. This is the cause of verbal similarities which may or may not be significant for our investigation (cf. p. 96 above). Verbal similarities, that is, are not sufficient by themselves to indicate *poetic* relations, but may become significant if they can be taken together with some formal elements of discourse, above the level of sentence syntax. Likewise, single motifs are not significant because they more often than not are motifemes, due to *polygenesis*.[21]

But a configuration of motifs making up a story such as the ballad of *The Love Contest* (Τὸ δοκίμιν τῆς ἀγάπης : a woman sought after by many suitors, but unwilling to marry any of them, puts them to a test of strength) is a macro-structure that recalls the *Odyssey* in terms both of its narrative shape and of certain characteristic details.[22] Also, it is a narrative *song* rather than a tale in prose, and one which is widely distributed all over Greece. The following comparison of motifs highlights its affinities with the *Odyssey*:

(*a*) **O**(*dyssey*): Penelope is besieged by a great number of aristocratic suitors (actually, 108).
B(*allad of the Love Contest*): Many noble young men (42 or 102, etc.) are in love with the same woman: '*A hundred and two noble young men are in love with one girl*' (Karpathos variant, *AA*, p. 393, B).

(*b*) **O**: Penelope is faithful to Odysseus, so she tries to win time and plays one suitor against another: 'She gives hope to all and ***promises to each of them by sending them messages,*** but her mind is set on other things' (II 91–2).
B: For reasons not revealed, the woman does not want to marry any of them, so she plays them off against each other: '***She promised her kisses to each one of them separately,*** but one evening (they got together and went to her)'.

(*c*) **O**: Penelope's suitors have frequent banquets at Odysseus' palace.
B: The much-sought-after woman offers the suitors a rich banquet.

(*d*) **O**: Finally, she can put them off no longer, and suggests that they take the test of the bow: Whoever can string Odysseus' bow and shoot through twelve axes will be the man she will marry (XXII 74–9).
B: During the banquet she suggests to them that they take a test: Whoever can lift a big rock, which is in her courtyard, and throw it behind his back will become her husband (in some variants it is implied that the rock had been put there for this purpose by her father).

(*e*) **O**: The suitors fail the test. An old beggar wants to try it, is mocked, but succeeds (he is, of course, Odysseus himself).
B: The noble suitors fail, except for a short man, a scurfy man, infested with lice, etc., who passes the test with ease.

(*f*) **O**: Odysseus then kills the suitors and reveals his identity to Penelope.
B: In some ballad variants the improbable winner marries the woman, in other he is rejected by her; in yet some other variants, he reveals himself to be her husband.

Is this ballad descended from the *Odyssey*, or has it come down to us independently, having sprung from the same sources as the *Odyssey* itself, *viz.* 'folk literature' (and hence its similarities with the latter would be inconsequential)? Although we could not possibly reconstruct the missing links in either case, a positive answer to the former question seems far more likely.

I now turn to some shorter motif sequences (or themes) which occur in different environments, but seem to fulfil similar narrative functions. This means that they are motifemes rather than identical motifs, which may nonetheless be historically related (and hence pertinent to our inquiry) because they contain very similar formulaic expressions. (I need hardly add that formulae, as well as formulaic expressions, are elements of form; but they also are elements of content because they are formulae by virtue of being repeated, and they are repeated because they carry, or each one carries – and does so in perfect form – a poetic meaning, a concept or thought or description, which is vital to the world of traditional poetry.) Take for instance the theme of 'the older brother and greater

man', which occurs in Odysseus' false account of himself that he gives to Penelope in *Odyssey* XIX; when she asks him who he is, Odysseus claims to be a Cretan and a younger brother of Idomeneus:

> ἀλλ' ὁ μὲν ἐν νήεσσι κορωνίσιν Ἴλιον εἴσω
> οἴχεθ' ἅμ' Ἀτρεΐδῃσιν, ἐμοὶ δ' ὄνομα κλυτὸν Αἴθων,
> ὁπλότερος γενεῇ· ὁ δ' ἄρα *πρότερος καὶ ἀρείων*
> But he [Idomeneus] went to Ilion on board the curved ships together with the sons of Atreus; the name by which I am known myself is Aithon, and I am younger in age; *he was the older and better man* (*Od.* XIX 182–4).

The stressed phrase is a formula (cf. *Il.* II 707, XXIII 588) which is paralleled by a very similar one from the modern *Ballad of the Pedlar.* A travelling pedlar falls victim to brigands, and when asked who he is, he states his origin and adds:

> κι ἔχουν καὶ γιὸν *τρανύτερον καὶ πρῶτον ἀπ' τ' ἐμένα,*
> κλέφτη στοὺς λόγγους, στὰ βουνά, καὶ πρῶτον καπετάνο.
> And they [i.e., my father and mother] have another son, *a greater man and older than myself,*
> who is a klepht in the woods, on the mountains, and first chieftain (Epirus variant).[23]

The two narrative contexts are, of course, very different, but in both cases a stranger is asked, in very similar terms, to state who he is:

> *Ξεῖνε,* τὸ μέν σε πρῶτον ἐγὼν εἰρήσομαι αὐτή·
> τίς πόθεν εἰς ἀνδρῶν; *πόθι τοι πόλις ἠδὲ τοκῆες;*
> *Stranger,* this question will I myself ask you first:
> Who are you among men and from where? *Where is your city and your parents*? (*Od.* XIX 104–5).

> *Ξένε, ποιός εἶν' ὁ τόπος σου καὶ ποιά τὰ γονικά σου;*
> *Stranger, which is your place and who are your parents?*[24]

And in both texts, the stranger refers to his elder brother, who is a greater man than

himself, and involved in a military enterprise. The stranger's answer in the ballad leads to the recognition of the two brothers, whereas Odysseus' tale in the *Odyssey* is false and his answer to Penelope cannot result in their recognition. Strictly speaking, then, what we have here is a sequence of motifemes rather than a sequence of motifs, but what makes a relationship between the two narratives likely is the fact that, in addition to content, they also share some similarities of form (at the level of formulaic expressions).

Similar examples to the preceding can be easily multiplied; I shall confine myself here to three. The first could be called 'the motif of the sudden appearance of a subject just spoken of'. The two groups of lines set out below constitute formulaic systems (in Milman Parry's sense), even though the first hemistichs of the modern examples are allomorphs[25] rather than identical formulae:

οὔ πω πᾶν εἴρητο ἔπος, ὅτ' ἄρ' ἤλυθον αὐτοί (*Il.* X 540).
Not all his words had been spoken, when they came themselves.
οὔ πω πᾶν εἴρητο ἔπος, ὅτε οἱ φίλος υἱὸς / ἔστη ἐν προθύροισι (*Od.* XVI 11).
Not all his words had been spoken, when his son stood at the gate.
οὔ πω πᾶν εἴρηθ', ὅτ' Ἀμφίνομος ἴδε νῆα (*Od.* XVI 351).
Not all [words] *had been spoken, when* Amphinomos saw the ship.
Ἀκόμη ὁ λόγος ἔστεκε καὶ νά τους καὶ προβαίνουν (Paros).[26]
His words were still being spoken, and here they show up.
Ντὸ λόγο τ' δὲν ἀπόσωσε, νά κι ὁ Γιάννης ποὺ ἦρτε (Thrace).[27]
He had not finished his words, and here is Yannis who came.
Ὁ λό'ος 'ἐν ἐτέλειωσεν τζ' ὁ Κωσταντᾶς ἠφτάννει (Cyprus).[28]
His words were not finished, and Kostantas arrives.
Τὸν λόγον ἀτ' 'κ' ἐπλέρωσεν, καράβ' ἐφανερώθεν (Pontos).
He had not concluded his words, a ship appeared.

In all these examples, ancient and modern, we have the same transitional point in the narrative, marked by the sudden appearance of someone (or a moving object such as a ship) right after he or she had been spoken of. Now this motifeme of miraculous timing, as it were, is most probably a universal narrative device in folk literature, but what makes the above groups of examples noteworthy is their close correspondence at the level of both content and form; their correspondence, that is, as poetic signs.[29] And because signs are units of inseparable content and form,

i.e. motifs in specific garb, the implication is that the folksong examples may represent genuine survivals of poetic discourse from antiquity.

My second case is another motifeme ('welcoming a messenger who is in a hurry'), which occurs in Homer only once, but is very common in the folksongs. Patroklos comes to see Nestor on behalf of Achilles; 'seeing him the old man started up from his shining / chair, and took him by the hand, led him in and told him to sit down, / but Patroklos from the other side declined, and spoke to him: / No chair, aged sir beloved of Zeus. You will not persuade me' (*Il.* XI 644–8, Lattimore's translation). Often in modern songs, messengers are welcomed and offered food and drink but, like Patroklos, invariably decline because their duty is pressing. Here is a Homeric line from the above passage with its modern parallels:

τὸν δὲ ἰδὼν ὁ γεραιὸς ἀπὸ θρόνου ὦρτο φαεινοῦ (*Il.* XI 644).
Seeing him the old man started up from his shining chair.
Ἅμα τοὺς εἶδ' ἡ λυερή, ἐπροσηκώθηκέν τους (Cyprus).
When the girl saw them she started up to [welcome] them.
Τζαὶ ποὺ τὸν εἶδαν ἄρκοντες, ἐπροσηκώθηκάν του (Thrace).
And when the nobles saw him they started up to [welcome] him.
Κι ὅνταν τὴν εἶδεβ βασιλιάς, ἐπροσηκώθηκέν της (Syme).
And when the king saw her he started up to [welcome] her.[30]

All modern examples are variations of the same formula, as they contain the rare poetic word ἐπροσηκώθηκεν (-αν) that is not used in common speech, and make up a formulaic system, which this time is absent from Homer. The modern lines, however, show that what we have here is again a motifeme common to both poetic traditions, which happens, quite accidentally I would think, to be represented by just one Homeric example.

My third and final case is yet another pair of similar motifs rather than two instances of the same motifeme, because they not only occur in different narrative contexts but also function in different ways. However, they are related by closely matching formulaic expressions. In *Iliad* XVII, Ajax, recognizing Zeus's support to the Trojans as the armies battle for the body of Patroklos, prays to him to lift the fog that has enveloped them, so that they can see while they fight even if they are to be killed:

Ζεῦ πάτερ, ἀλλὰ σὺ ῥῦσαι ὑπ' ἠέρος υἷας Ἀχαιῶν,
ποίησον δ' αἴθρην, δὸς δ' ὀφθαλμοῖσιν ἰδέσθαι (*Il.* XVII 645–6).
O Father Zeus, draw our armies clear of the cloud, / *give us a bright sky, give us back our sight!* (Fagles' translation).

The stressed phrases in the preceding quotation recur virtually word for word (in translation) in a lament from Epirus, in which a mother begs God to make her son see and hear again:

Θέ μου, καὶ πάψε τὴ βροχή, *σκόρπισε τὴν ἀντάρα,*
νὰ ἰδοῦνε τὰ ματάκια του, ν' ἀκούσουνε τ' αὐτιά του.[31]
My God, do stop the rain, *disperse the fog,*
so that his eyes may see, his ears may hear.[32]

I shall conclude this examination by quoting and comparing passages whose similarity is of a different nature: they are all shaped on the basis of the same underlying pattern:

ἠῷος γεγονὼς μέσῳ ἤματι ἐγκιθάριζεν,
ἑσπέριος βοῦς κλέψεν ἑκηβόλου Ἀπόλλωνος
(*Hymn to Hermes,* 17–18).
Born at dawn, at mid-day he played the kithara,
in the evening he stole the cattle of Apollo.

τὴν ταχινὴν ἐγέννησε κι ἀργὰ τὸν ἐβαφτίσα
καὶ τ' ἀποξημερώματα ζητᾶ ψωμὶ νὰ φάει (Crete).
Early in the morning [his mother] was delivered, *late in the day* he was baptized
and [next day] *at dawn* he asks for bread to eat.

Παρασκευγ' ἐ'εννήθηκεν, Σαββάτον ἐβαφτίστη,
τὴν Κυριακὴ ἀπολείτρουα τὴ μάνα ντ' ἀνερώτα (Naxos).
On Friday he was born, on Saturday he was baptized,
on Sunday, after the mass, he was asking his mother [about his father].

'ποσπέρας ἐγεννήθηκεν κι ὁλονυκτὶς ἐβούραν
'τσὰ τὰ γλυκοχαράματα ψουμὶν ζητᾶ νὰ φάει (Cyprus).
On the evening he was born and all through the night he whirled,
then, *as daylight was breaking,* he asks for bread to eat.[33]

All the above passages are preludes to great deeds that are described by what follows in the songs, including the exploits of Hermes which are foreshadowed in the above first group of lines. The identity of the hero and the character of his exploits are different in each case (so this is clearly a motifeme). However, there is a feature common to all of them, namely, an underlying pattern of versification and structuring of meaning sometimes called '*tricolon* crescendo',[34] which is here mutated into what I have elsewhere called 'pattern of formula traces.'[35] This pattern consists of three sections corresponding to the two half-lines of the first verse and the whole length of the second verse respectively. All these sections (or *cola*) begin with an adverbial expression signifying a point in a time sequence, the three clauses follow each other in a climactic progression. Although this time we cannot identify any closely resembling expressions shared by the Homeric and the modern examples, we do have in all of them this particular kind of *tricolon* pattern, which is dominant in modern Greek folk versification and very common in Homer. Motifeme and versification pattern may not be sufficient to suggest a direct relationship between the ancient and the modern examples, but they do suggest a relationship between the two different poetic traditions as *systems* of oral composition.

My objective in this inquiry has been to steer a middle course between two extreme and opposing views, namely, (*a*) that similarities between Homeric and modern folk poetry should be simply understood as survivals of Homeric poetry into modern times, and (*b*) that all such similarities should be referred to a timeless and universal folk matrix on which traditional poets (and other narrators) working in different eras, places, and languages, drew their inspiration and materials. My contention is that, because art production is culture bound, it should be possible to be more precise as to presumable relationships between art forms from different periods, provided they are analysed into their formal components and compared with regard to such components. In the preceding pages I discussed a handful of instances; though many more could be adduced – both whole modern ballads (such as the *Return of the Expatriate Husband* or the *Abduction of Akritis' Wife*) and shorter sequences of motifs, or mini-motifs coinciding with typical expres-

sions. For this kind of inquiry, if the reader is interested in pursuing it further, Professor Promponas' material offers a starting base both firm and wide.

However, no matter what comparisons between ancient and modern traditions can be made, and no matter what similarities between them can be pointed out, the missing links will remain as elusive as ever. In this respect, it may be useful to remember what Stilpon Kyriakidis used to argue, namely, that the origins of modern Greek traditional literary forms should be sought in later antiquity, just as the origins of the modern Greek dialects are located in the *koine* language of the same period.[36] I hope, then, that I may be forgiven if I conclude this paper (which is partly devoted to epic poetry) with a simile:

As the melting snow and the rain falling on the mountains form innumerable streams and rivulets and rivers that run into lakes and subterranean caverns, whence the water finds its way through secret conduits and passageways until it penetrates the slopes of rocky mountains to spring forth eventually as many sources of clear water, so the poetries of ancient Greece converged in the lands around the eastern Mediterranean in late antiquity, in a variety of forms and media, at public festivals and on various other occasions, by the agency of school-masters and itinerant poets, actors and singers, dancers, mimes, 'Homeric performers' (ὁμηρισταί),[37] musicians, and many other kinds of entertainers, as well as common people who were nonetheless important folklore bearers; references to such performers abound in Greek and Roman authors of late antiquity, inscriptions, papyri, and the works of the Church Fathers, although we know very little about their performances and activities, and lose their tracks entirely in early Byzantium; but the folksong must have kept flowing, like water, until some of it began to be collected – too little and too late, to be sure. And now that we are looking desparately for its springs and sources, we can locate with great difficulty a few places where some of them may have been, close to the sources of the modern Greek language itself – but only a few.

NOTES

1 'Homeric survivals in the medieval and modern Greek folksong tradition?', *Greece & Rome*, 39 (1992) 139–54. The present essay has been greatly improved by the careful editing and many valuable suggestions on the part of the editors and anonymous reader. I am grateful to them.

2 I.K Promponas, Τὰ ὁμηρικὰ ἔπη καὶ τὸ νεοελληνικὸ δημοτικὸ τραγούδι, i–ii (Athens 1987–9).

3 Variants of the idiom consisting of forms of the above two verbs, referring to crying and wailing, occur in Aeschylus (*Septem* 656), Herodotus (iii.119.3), Plato (*Rep.* 388 b), the *Septuagint* (*Jer.* 38.15), the Church fathers (Basil and John Chrys., Migne, *Patrologia Graeca,* 32. 1236, 48.1020, 1056, 55.76, 57.374, 61.318, etc.), and so forth. Various forms of the same expression are commonly used in modern ordinary speech without being felt as archaisms. It might be added in this connexion that none of the song variants referred to in this paper is suspect of being non-genuine, that is to say, composed by literate imitators of folksongs (known to have existed in the previous century).

4 Sifakis, 'Homeric survivals', 142–3. Poetical signs consist of verbal signs (i.e. units of literal meaning), but the meaning of poetical signs is, and connotes, something more than the sum of their parts. For instance, the poetic expression ἐλιὰν πλατύφυλλην (discussed above) consists of an unusual juxtaposition of two verbal signs (olive tree and wide-leaved) which means 'an olive tree with wide-stretched foliage' and connotes a place of shelter. The same is true of its Homeric equivalent, τανύφυλλος ἐλαίη, which grew 'at the head of the harbour' of Phorkys at Ithaca, where the Phaeacian sailors carried the sleeping Odysseus (*Od.* 13. 102, 346), and at the courtyard of Odysseus who fashioned his nuptial chamber around it and chiselled it into a pole for his bed (*Od.* 23. 190, 195).

5 A cursory look at Stith Thompson's *Motif-Index of Folk-Literature* (6 vols., Bloomington, Ind. 1955–58) will confirm the diversity of subjects classified under various motifs.

6 The origins of traditional cultures almost always antedate the formation of modern states all over the world.

7 See n. 5.

8 See E. Seemann, 'Widerspiegelungen der μνηστηροφονία der Odyssee in Liedern und Epen der Völker', *IV. International Congress for Folk-Narrative Research, Athens 1964* (= *Laographia* 22, 1965), 484–90; E. Seemann, D. Strömbäck, B.R. Jonsson (eds.), *European Folk Ballads* (Copenhagen 1967), 90–1, with bibliography including, among others, S. Banovic, *Motivi iz Odiseje u narodnoj hrvatskoj pjesmi iz Makarskog primorja* (*Zbornik za narodni zivot i obicaje* 35, Zagreb 1951).

9 D. Page, *Folktales in Homer's Odyssey,* (Cambridge, Mass. 1973).

10 For references see Page, *Folktales in Homer's Odyssey*, 117 ff.

11 Page, *The Homeric Odyssey* (Oxford 1955).

12 *The Homeric Odyssey* 5–21.

13 *The Homeric Odyssey* 58–69.

14 Cf. *The Homeric Odyssey* 10, 32.

15 *The Homeric Odyssey* 62.

16 *The Homeric Odyssey* 64.

17 I.Th. Kakridis, Ὁμηρικὲς ἔρευνες (Athens 1944) 7.

18 So named by J.G. Frazer, *The Golden Bough* (London, 3rd ed.), vii.2, 95 ff. Cf. K. Hadjioannou, 'Four types of external soul in Greek and other folknarratives', *IV. International Congress for Folk-Narrative Research* (n. 8 above), 140–50.

19 Page, *Folktales in Homer's Odyssey*, 20, 29–30, 57.

20 For a fuller treatment of this topic, cf. Sifakis, 'Homeric survivals', 140–2.

21 As a term in ethnology and folklore, *polygenesis* refers to multiple and unrelated origins of similar cultural elements. For instance, 'Odysseus's journeying until he finds someone who mistakes the oar he carries for a winnowing fan (*Odyssey* 11.119 ff.) finds a parallel in the weary Yukon resident who longs to "tie a snow shovel to the hood of my car and drive south until nobody had the faintest idea what the damn thing was" (*San Francisco Chronicle,* 31 December 1982)', quoted by M.W. Edwards, *Homer, Poet of the Iliad* (Baltimore, 1987), 61. This is a clear case of a motifeme whose instances are (most likely) quite unrelated.

22 N.G. Politis, Ἐκλογαὶ ἀπὸ τὰ τραγούδια τοῦ ἑλληνικοῦ λαοῦ (Athens 1914), no. 79; G.K.

Spyridakis – G.A. Megas – D.A. Petropoulos (eds.), Ἑλληνικὰ δημοτικὰ τραγούδια (Academy of Athens 1962), 393 (henceforth abbreviated as *AA*).

23 H. Lüdeke, Ἑλληνικὰ δημοτικὰ τραγούδια (Athens 1960), 29; Promponas, Τὰ ὁμηρικὰ ἔπη, ii, 139–40.

24 See previous note.

25 For this term, see Sifakis, Γιὰ μιὰ ποιητικὴ τοῦ ἑλληνικοῦ δημοτικοῦ τραγουδιοῦ (Herakleion 1988), 112 ff.

26 *AA*, 387.

27 *AA*, 367.

28 References to this and the following example in Promponas, Τὰ ὁμηρικὰ ἔπη, ii, 53–4, who quotes additional examples and discusses the pattern they illustrate. He also gives credit to G. Zannetos, Ἡ ὁμηρικὴ φράσις ἐν τῇ καθ' ἡμᾶς δημώδει ποιήσει (Athens 1889), for probably being the first to point out the similarity.

29 Cf. Sifakis, Γιὰ μιὰ ποιητική, 42 ff.

30 For references and discussion see Promponas, Τὰ ὁμηρικὰ ἔπη, ii, 79 ff.

31 Lüdeke, Ἑλληνικὰ δημοτικὰ τραγούδια, 234.

32 The motif of a warrior praying to God to disperse the fog that has covered the battlefield occurs in Serbo-Croatian songs also (e.g., in *The Captivity of Dulic Ibrahim* and *The Wedding of Cejvanovic Meho* by Salih Ugljanin); see A.B. Lord, *Epic Singers and Oral Tradition* (Ithaca, N.Y. 1991), 86–7. See also Lord's paper, 'Homeric Echoes in Bihac', *ibid.*, 49–56.

33 The Cretan variant can be found in *AA*, 55; references to other variants in Promponas, Τὰ ὁμηρικὰ ἔπη, ii, p. 70.

34 E. Fraenkel, *Horace* (Oxford 1957), 351, n.1.

35 Sifakis, Γιὰ μιὰ ποιητική, 176 ff.

36 Reference must be made to Kyriakidis' important study on the historical origins of the modern Greek folksong, easily accessible now in his collection of essays on folksong, Τὸ δημοτικὸ τραγούδι: Συναγωγὴ μελετῶν (ed. A. Kyriakidou-Nestoros, Athens 1978), 169-207.

37 For new epigraphic evidence for the continuing performance of mimes and pantomimes on Homeric themes in late antiquity, see now C. Roueché, *Performers and Partisans at Aphrodisias in the Roman and Late Roman Periods* (London 1993), ch. 2 and esp. pp. 18 and 22.