

## Researcher: No, Bob Dylan is not the Homer of our time

The image of Bob Dylan as the heir of Homer is not true. In contrast to the poetry of Bob Dylan, the epic poems of antiquity were most probably created by different singers. There was no original, only variations of tales, writes the researcher Kjell Magnusson.

[Title and introduction formulated by the editor]

The permanent secretary of the Swedish Academy, Sara Danius, compares Bob Dylan to Homer, which is not entirely convincing. Homer did not set music to already written poems, in order to sing them. He belonged – if he did exist – to an oral literature which in fundamental ways differs from the song tradition Bob Dylan represents.

In *The Singer of Tales* (1960), one of the great achievements of 20<sup>th</sup> century scholarship in the humanities, the Harvard professor Albert Bates Lord indicated a probable solution to the “Homeric question”. Lord had studied structures and themes of the epic poetry performed by illiterate singers in Yugoslavia during the 1930s. The analyses were based on a large material collected in the Sandžak area by Lord and his teacher, Milman Parry. A substantial part of the population was Muslim and like many in the Balkans at the time, they lived in an oral culture.

Lord was able to show that the songs consisted of specific building-blocks: linguistic formulas and schemes inherent to characters (roles), relations, and episodes, enacting archetypical situations and dramatic developments. The epic songs, often lengthy, were not sung by heart. Instead, typified expressions and schematic motifs constituted the very precondition for an oral literature which is being created while the audience is listening. Through long practice, starting in childhood, the singer assimilated a series of formulas and topics required to sing a tale. With the help of such a repertoire he was able, again and again, to recreate the song as if new, while playing the one-string gusle. There were no original poems, only variations of tales belonging to a given symbolic reality.

Lord shows that the same is likely true of the Iliad and the Odyssey. They reveal the same characteristics of oral literature, which are found in the epic poetry in Serbo-Croatian. Now, Parry and Lord did not employ only text analysis. Their fieldwork was a laboratory of sorts, where they studied how people learned to sing, how the songs developed, and variations were born. They also used experimental methods, e.g. when the master Avdo Međedović was able to quickly recreate and further elaborate a song he had never heard before. According to Lord, everything suggests that the Iliad and the Odyssey were oral poems which at a particular moment were transcribed. He rejects the possibility that the same person would be both a skillful traditional singer and a literate poet in our sense.

This undermines the analogy between Homer and Dylan; the idea that a poet in his solitude writes an inspired poem, then unpacks his instrument, and finally sings his text, illustrates how we are bound to a specific understanding of the concept of author, even when we turn to ancient times or to a genre different from what is usually understood as literature.

The image of a link between Homer and Bob Dylan may be beautiful, but is not necessarily true.

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*Svenska dagbladet* October 19, 2016, transl. by the author

<http://www.svd.se/nej-bob-dylan-ar-inte-var-tids-homeros/om/nobelpriset-i-litteratur-2016>