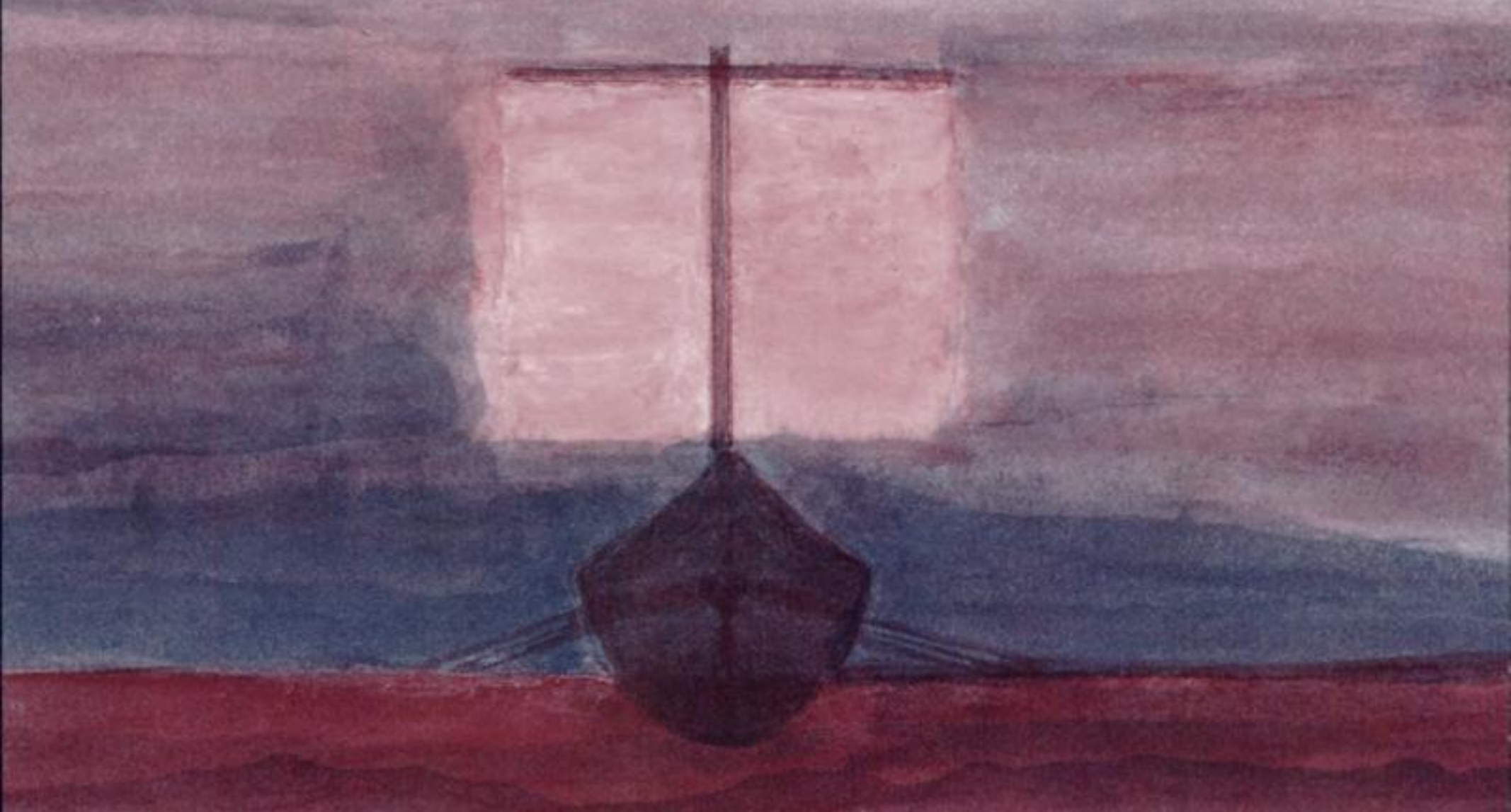
HOMER

The Poetry of the Past

ANDREW FORD



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AUTHOR'S NOTE

Inasmuch as my inquiry depends on appreciating Homer's ideas in his own terms, I have transliterated some Greek words and phrases. I have generally Latinized the consonants (e.g., *chi* becomes *ch*), and used *ê* and *ô* to signal Greek *eta* and *omega* respectively. I have omitted accents where the form is unambiguous. But I have not been consistent where the literature on a word uses predominantly its Greek form (e.g., *kleos*). I have primarily sought readability, with the idea that the Greekless reader would be able to continue with less distraction (even perceiving English cognates more clearly) and the classicist would divine the form in question with little discomfort. The same applies to the transliteration of Greek names, where I have often preferred the more familiar Latin spellings.

All translations are my own and are designed simply as an aid to the reader. It will be quickly seen that any resemblance between my translations and verse is purely illusory. Eloquence had to be sacrificed to an attempt to repeat in English significant words that the Greek repeats and sometimes to reflect the order of words in the line. It is my hope that interested readers will want to check my interpretations against the Greek or better translations; thus I have tried as far as possible to make the lines of my translation correspond to the lines of the original, even at times reproducing in

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as the spokesman of a tradition and not as an artistically gifted individual.

Along such lines Eric Havelock and Albert Lord have powerfully claimed that we misread our Homer as a literary text when it was originally nothing of the sort. Their work has been controversial in some respects, but it is at least certain that we cannot assume a priori that such an art, answering the needs of such a different society and formed in what was to some extent a different medium, should have intuited the same values and aspired to the same effects as we see or seek in poetry now. Hence, calling Homer for the moment the one poet, or the two poets, through whom, speaking or writing, rough but recognizable approximations of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* first came into being, I cannot help wondering what on earth he was about and whether "poetry" meant for him and his audiences what it has meant for us.

Provoked by Homer, the reader of poetry then turns historian of the idea of poetry and returns to the poems to ask what it was to be a singer of songs in that world. But of course Homer is hardly to be found: beyond the notorious historical problems of his identity and even existence, there are major theoretical difficulties in looking for the poet behind the poem. New Criticism has long forbidden us to consult the putative author for the meaning of a text; structuralism has added that we can never emerge from the labyrinth of words to reach our author; and deconstruction warns us that if we got there nobody would be home. Yet if we must forgo trying to find the flesh-and-blood bard who, in any of the dozen or so Ionian cities that claimed him in antiquity, once sang these songs, it is possible to derive from these texts a good deal of information about the nature and function of poetry in that time and place. In fact, the Homeric "view" or "idea" or "conception" of poetry, as it must be cautiously named, is by now a well-established subfield in Homeric studies and in histories of criticism.

Once the question about Homer becomes a question about the view of poetry found in the poems, we are able to follow many philologists, historians, and students of comparative epic who have secured from these nearly anonymous poems an inventory of important statements about poetry and its place in society. The best of these studies manage to interpret these passages without impos-

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this poetry made for itself and by which it established, dialectically, its special place and function.

First, epic is poetry of the *past* in the obvious but significant sense that it defines itself by its heroic subject matter. Indeed, it is noteworthy that epic prefers defining its subject matter to defining any other aspect of itself. This sustained and nearly exclusive emphasis on the tales at the expense of the telling has the effect of bestowing a prestige and reality on a past which the poetry pretends merely to disclose. Thereby questions about the rhetorical form and literary structure of epic poetry are evaded, for form and structure are not located in the account of the past but are projected onto the heroic deeds as their real, natural, and permanent articulations. Epic thus resists rhetorical analysis by collapsing the form and content of heroic poems into a notion of past actions as the substance on which poetry offers us a transparent window: the poetry of the *past* is constituted as a genre whose laws and forms pretend to have been written by heroes on the indelible surface of divine memory.

Second, however, epic is *poetry* of the past; although it pretends to be a mere unrhetorical rendering of ancient deeds, it does claim to give a unique access to those events and to bring them especially close to us. This claim—lodged with the Muses—distinguishes epic from all other discourse about the past: only the version they sponsor is "poetic" and can bring the past fully before us. To reduce this promise of closeness to a claim for historical accuracy would be anachronistic and feeble. The poets' tales are of course presumed true—after all the past is real—but the Muses are less an archive than divinities presiding at a performance, a presentation of deeds as they happened and still happen under their divine purview. Yet it would be equally anachronistic to translate poetry into a purely aesthetic activity, seeing it, for example, as an artistic representation of painful deeds that makes them pleasurable through the imposition of order and meaning. In a mysterious way, the Muses do make the experience of poetry so wholly persuasive and absorbing that it becomes an emotional transport, but this experience is less like aesthetic contemplation than like being present at a divine epiphany or a necromancy.

In grounding itself in magic and enchantment rather than rhet-

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arises about the poet's relation to his poem as a fixed and lasting structure of his own words. A wholly oral poet may view singing as something he does, but one who produces a text or who causes a text to be produced may consider his art as *making* something, perhaps something that he owns or can sell. In Homer the best way to approach this question is through his one reference to writing, which he calls "signs" (*sêmata*). Setting these signs in the context of the poems' many other signs, we can discuss in his terms the question of what is the right device to preserve fame. In particular, funeral markers, also called *sêmata,* will be seen to have a function analogous to that of the epic song, to preserve the name and memory of a great hero through time. If we can get some idea of the poet's notion of signs, we may supply something of his views on the poem as artifact and the possibility of its survival as text into posterity. The relationship of song to sign, *aoidê* to *sêma,* may describe the relationship of singing to text, bard to poet, performance to posterity. Though Homer may well never have been so self-consciously troubled about these matters as we in this great century of language, yet words were his work too, and evidently work in the world.

The final chapter resumes these matters and asks what poetry meant for Homer and his contemporaries. There I take a close look at the traditional word for what a poet does, "singing," *aoidê*. "Singing" may seem so natural an expression for this art as to be hardly significant, but the etymology of *aoidê,* supported by a number of texts, leads me to explore its relation to a word for the human voice, *audê*. The trope of singing as voicing suggests tensions between reducing poetry to substance, the timbre and volume of the oral poet's voice as his instrument, and allowing it to dematerialize into meaning, voice as an expression of thought. The epithet common to the poet's singing and voice, *thespis,* "god-spoken," will resume these and the other problems raised in the near contradiction of an art of "a god-spoken human voicing."

My outline may indicate that I have not forborne to press questions of importance to me and to any historically minded reader, even though the poet's interest in them may have been oblique or even unconscious; and it may seem to some that I at times interrogate the witness too harshly, twisting his replies or forcing him to

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may construct from Homer's terms the "genre," or special kind of speaking, to which epic belonged.

It is surely a delicate, even paradoxical business to define a genre of poetry that stands on the verge of orality and literacy, for closely attached to any literary description are notions of texts, forms, and authors that may well be irrelevant to the "song culture" of archaic Greece: at a time when few, if any, people would read poetry, the text of a song was a rare thing, and always of less importance than the vivid but fleeting and variable performance.[2] In such a context "genres" will be defined not by rules of art but by the protocols of socially constructed occasions. Such occasions may indeed prescribe aspects of the performance that we would assign to the "literary": in burial songs (*thrênoi*), for example, singers would be expected to strike certain themes and to interact with their audience in certain ways. Hence it is possible to think of distinct, defined, and named kinds of singing in a song culture provided that we remember that such kinds were not constructed from the rules of an autonomous art of poetry but belonged to the entire organization of social life.[3]

When texts are made out of such performances, the words gain permanence and may be subjected to precise formal analysis and classification, but at the price of being severed from the contexts that gave them their fullest form and meaning. The words we read, when spoken in performance, belonged to a larger context that vitally depended on the mood of the audience, the persona of the poet, even the day of the year. We would like to know just when and how the Homeric poems passed from the oral performances out of which they grew into the monumental texts we now have, but we are pitifully in the dark; it may have been as late as the sixth century or as early as a manuscript or dictation by Homer himself.[4] But it is clear that as they made this crucial passage they retained marks of their oral heritage in many features of so-called oral style

[2]For the "song culture" of archaic Greece, see Herington (1985) chap. 1. On the importance of context in oral performance generally, see Finnegan (1977) 28–29, 121–126.

[3]Alexiou (1974) is a study of the traditional forms of the Greek lament. Martin (1989) 43–88 uses anthropological and comparative material to elicit a number of "heroic genres of speaking" from the poems.

[4]The question will be taken up in Chapter 4.

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itself, not for the way it is told, and the poet presents himself not as a proprietor or craftsman of words but first and foremost as a performer and enchanter. Nor can we convert this "unrhetorical" poetry into a kind of history, for its declared aim is always and only pleasure. This pleasure needs special definition, for to convert it into aesthetic contemplation would be as anachronistic as the other views rejected here. Understanding this pleasure permits us to define epic as the *presentation* of the past, without moralizing; it was a pleasure simply to represent the past "as it was" and still is for the Muses, without pointing to the presence of the performance. Lord seems to be right in saying that Homer has no art of poetry in our sense; at least on the traditional view, the "art" of poetry is to be inspired by the Muses and a poet is a poet not because he is skilled or truthful or improving but because he is sacrosanct.

We can approach Homer's idea of his singing in three ways: the first is to consider how the texts present themselves to us, especially how in their openings they announce what they are and indicate their structure and aims; the second way is through the poet's terms for poetry and related concepts, including a few highly suggestive metaphorical expressions for poetry and its processes and even some words that must have served as terms of the singer's trade; the third way is by considering the depictions of poets within the poems, comparing them with Homer's own self-presentation and with representations of nonpoets to see what sustains the special place of the epic singer. The place to begin must be the beginning of the poems we have.

Beginnings: Invocations and Ethos

The beginning of a work of art must also in a sense be its definition, since it acts like a frame to set that work apart from others and to enclose it as a single thing in itself. As Edward Said observes in his book *Beginnings*, "A beginning immediately establishes relationships with works already existing, relationships of

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thing that involved massive human pain (cresting like a wave, *kulindeto,* in 81), and finally that all of this was the plan of Zeus.

The ideal full form of the invocation is very clear, as is the kind of poetry it announces. It is a heroic story involving suffering, and the gods take a part in it. It is itself a massive and complex action and yet also part of a larger story. In this much at least Homer's definition of his art coincides with our definition of epic according to "content"—a long, traditional heroic story. But more can be understood if we look at the invocation in terms of the persona or, in Greek, the ethos adopted by the poet.

The earliest Greek critics classify poetry, and indeed all imitative art, not only according to its form (e.g., meter and music) and content (the "objects" of imitation), but also by ethos. In the *Republic,* Plato analyzes the tales of poets and "mythologues" by looking first at *what* they say and then at *how* they say it (392C). The "how" turns out to be a matter not of diction or arrangement but of the way the poet's persona or character (*ethos*) appears in the poems. Ethos divides poetry into three classes (392D). In pure narrative a poet simply recounts or "goes through" a story in his own person (*diêgêsis*). In drama the poet impersonates his characters and speaks speeches as if he were Agamemnon or Calchas; here he "conceals" his own identity (393C) and tries to "turn the audience's attention away" from what they see (*dianoian allose trepein* [392D]). Finally in poetry such as epic "simple recounting" is mixed with speeches. Aristotle follows Plato in considering "*how* one imitates" as marking poetic genres in a separate way from how formal properties such as music or rhythm might do so (*Poetics* 1448a19–29). This classical Greek analysis, I think, describes what would have been a real and significant aspect of oral poetic practice, for projecting a certain persona would have been an important way for an oral performer to establish the terms of his relationship to the audience and to constitute his own special authority. But the epic poet's ethos also implies a great deal about what each kind of poetry is and can do, so that examining the ethos presented by Homer will help us both to define his genre as distinct from other forms of poetry that may treat the same matter and to understand the role of the poet in the poem, or the poet's place in performance.

The distinctive ethos of epic is epitomized in the imperatives that

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Chios) and boasts of the excellence of his singing and his hopes for eternal fame.[31] In addition, proems allow the singer to refer objectively to his performance and its structure: he can explicitly call attention to his "beginning" and "leaving off" (*lêgô* [*H. Ap.* 177]) or "moving along" to another song (*Hymn* 5.293); he can ask the gods' favor for *his* song, or at least for the song as performed by him. Like prayers, proems conclude with petitions, but these are very much a poet's petitions: the "grace" (24.5), wealth, or excellence (15.9, 20.8) that he prays may attend his singing are not simply indirect self-praise but requests for the things by which he sustains his livelihood (cf. 2.494, 30.18, 31.17). The poet's sense of himself as individual singer among other singers is never stronger than when he prays for "victory in this poetic contest" (6.20).[32] Finally, and most significant, proems sometimes use language that calls attention to a certain artistry in singing which is not found in the epic poems themselves: only in proems do we hear poets speak of "adorning" or "ordering" song (*kosmêsai* [7.59]) or describe a chorus as "knowing how to imitate" and their song as "finely fitted together" (*kalôs sunarêren* [*H. Ap.* 163–164]).

At the end of the proem this "I" is transformed into a "thou" and the individual poet is fading from view, so that by the end of the invocation the poet's individual personality is submerged. Like the invocation, then, the proem effects a crucial change in the speaker's stance, and the special function of the archaic proem seems to have been to situate the performance, the speaker, and the occasion. If the invocation gets the tale going, the proem makes the invocation possible.

Although Homer's epics have been transmitted to us without proems, he could not have failed to know a practice that was already well developed in Hesiod, and indeed he once refers indirectly to a proem, under its archaic formulation of "beginning from the god": Homer says that the poet Demodocus, embarking on a song about the fall of Troy, "was stirred and *took his beginning from the god* and he brought forth the song / taking it from that point when. . . ." (*Od.* 8.499–500). Uniquely here in Homer, we find the

[31]On the transitional passage in the *Hymn to Apollo*, see Miller (1986) 57–65.

[32]On the agonistic context of the hymnic passages, see Aly (1914) 246 and Svenbro (1976) 78–80.

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ameter and the elegiac couplet, was less significant for the archaic vocabulary than was the ethos epic presented. On this basis, though Hesiod's *Works and Days* is presented in "epic" hexameters, I would set it apart from Homeric epic, Hesiod's *Theogony* and *Catalogue of Women*, and other "Hesiodic" poetry that proceeded with epic objectivity (such as the *Shield of Heracles*). The *Works and Days* I would classify as parainetic epos, as (unsung) advice poetry.[41] My warrant in the text for this distinction is first of all the ethos of the *Works and Days:* its proem turns from the gods to an individual, Perses, and his individual circumstances; the rest of the poem continues to address itself to him or to a "you."[42] Second, it is hardly a connected story: though at times it relates bits of divine and heroic history (e.g., the story of Pandora), its fundamental "ethical" difference from epos is in its constant oscillation from sacred time back to its present auditor in order to draw lessons about the human place in the moral order of the world. This class of hexameter poetry, to which we should add other works attributed to Hesiod, such as the *Bird Divination*, *Astronomy*, and *Precepts of Cheiron*, was from an ethical point of view quite distinctive and later found heirs in the "philosophical" hexameters of Parmenides (frequently recurring to a "you") and Empedocles (addressed to a certain Pausanias).[43]

Thus Homer's epics and Hesiod's extended narratives belonged to a subclass of epos whose function was to present stories of the past impersonally and not for immediate application to their auditors' lives. This ethos, together with a difference in mode of presentation, also separated what I call the poetry of the past from the contemporaneous poetry we call lyric, for lyric could present mythic and legendary stories, but these were either personally

[41]Cf. Martin (1984), who also shows how parainetic poetry could be incorporated into the Homeric poems as a separate "genre of discourse" used by certain characters in certain situations.

[42]For the addressee in wisdom literature (cf. Theognis's Cyrnus), see West (1978) 33–40. The proem of the *Works and Days* is also the reverse of that in epos, proceeding from an invocation (1–2) to "*I* would tell" (10).

[43]The ethos of Parmenides' "On Truth," as it is called, is actually hybrid: though the words purport to be those addressed by goddesses to the neophyte philosopher (the "youth" of B 1.24 D-K), they are (over)heard by the audience as parainetic poetry, urging them to correct their false beliefs.

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Thus the poet's conception of his art as an impersonal telling and the way the oral verse technique was learned would not have contributed to any distinction, fundamental though it is for our rhetoric, between form and content, the poet's polish and the Muse's memory. Invocations may be read simply as the poet's claim that he didn't simply make up the stories he is about to sing. Hence in Phemius's proclamation the two clauses are synonymous: an inspired poet gets his song from the Muses and so is self-taught in the sense that he gets them from no one else.[58]

We should not then let a romantic interest in the creative artist distort the absolute dominance given to the Muses, and we must agree with Fränkel that "Homeric epic arose under conditions under which one cannot speak of literary property in our sense."[59] Yet a different if equally fallacious romantic idea threatens if Homer's indifference to verbal artistry is embraced as his sensitivity to the primeval power of language, working autonomously merely by being uttered, like magic spells. On this view, this impersonal poetic would represent a stage of thought before the fatal fall of form away from content, when the poet is still less an artist than a medicine man.[60] It seems to be true that the origins of poets and seers lie close together, and Homer certainly has faith in magical language, such as the "incantations" that can heal (*Od.* 19.457). Yet, by Homer's time the poet's role and name have been growing apart from that of the seer or magician, and the word for incantation (*epaoidê*) can be distinguished from that for song (*aoidê*). Alternatively, one might posit that the notion of the self is still inchoate, so that the poet's minimal role in singing is explained by the early stage of a gradual evolution toward proud, self-conscious artistry, an evolution in which Hesiod's boastful proem marks the next step and lyric (romantically conceived as self-expression) the culmination.[61] But this kind of explanation mistakenly sees Homer as less self-reflexive than Hesiod just because his texts have no proem and hence none of the conventional self-advertisement. Finally, some

[58]The best recent discussion of these lines is Thalmann (1984) 126–127.

[59]Fränkel (1973) 7, and cf. 11, 15–16.

[60]Marg (1957) 11–12; Maehler (1963) 9–10. For "medicine man," see Schadewaldt (1965) 78–79.

[61]Kranz (1924) 67; Sperdutti (1950); Maehler (1963) 17; Lanata (1963) 21.

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status of artist, Svenbro has to reckon with Agamemnon's words about Penelope in the underworld:

> the fame [*kleos*] will never die
> of her excellence, and a song [*aoidê*] for men on earth
> the gods will fashion [*teuxousi*], one pleasing to prudent Penelope.
> [*Odyssey* 24.197–198]

Svenbro appeals to the lateness of book 24 and also tries to dilute the sense of *teuxousi* from "fashion" to a vaguer "furnish."[72] But I am trying to take the whole poems as we have them, and it is hard to wring out all sense of artistry from the verb. *Teukhein* is very often a word for building or crafting (e.g., *Il.* 6.314; *Od.* 12.347) and is especially associated with the paragon of craftsmen, Hephaestus (*Il.* 2.101; *Od.* 8.195, 276, 18.373). It seems indeed that Penelope's song has been shaped by art, just as another artist intervened decisively in the Trojan War: the man who built the fatal ship that brought Paris to Greece is "Famebearer, the son of the builder / Fitterson, who knew how to fashion [*teukhein*] all intricate things with his hands" (*Il.* 5.59–61). We cannot then deny that the singing about Penelope has been artfully contrived, but note that the contriving has been done by the gods, not by poets. The idea of epic plots as the product of divine artistry can also be found in Nestor's account of the Greek returns: Zeus first "planned" (*mêdeto*) a baleful return for the Achaeans and then "fitted evil [*kakon êrtue*] upon them" (*Od.* 3.132, 152). So Helen makes the gods the ultimate creators of the epic in which she and Paris will figure: "Zeus has made an evil fate for us, so that hereafter / we might be a subject of song for men to come" (*Il.* 6.357–358).[73] The thought must be that poets simply present stories of the past, which have been directed and shaped by greater powers. Epic, then, seems to have chosen to

[72]Svenbro (1976) 194, citing *Od.* 10.118, among other passages.

[73]With "make" (*thêke kakon moron*) cf. *Od.* 3.136: Athena "made strife" for the Atreidae on their return. One also thinks of *Il.* 1.2 where the Wrath of Achilles "made" countless woes for the Greeks through the plan of Zeus. For the use of the verb (cognate with Latin *feci*) in divine creation, cf. *Works and Days* 173d, with West's (1978) note.

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The term here that has attracted most attention is the "fames of men," the *klea andrôn*. But I will reserve an analysis of that phrase for the next chapter and first look at its constituent parts. An *oimê* is an individual story within the heroic repertoire, which can in turn be conceived as a series of *oimai* (pl.): "The Muse has made *oimai* / of every kind grow in my heart" (*Od.* 22.347–348). To be a traditional poet is to "have learned" from the Muses (i.e., to know by inspiration) many *oimai:* "For among all men on earth singers / have a share in honor and respect, because the Muse has taught them / *oimai,* for she loves the race of singers" (*Od.* 8.479–481).

The way this word is used in early Greek indicates that it was a technical term for the individual themes of epic, and this sense of *oimê* is perhaps the source of the word "proem" (*pro-oimion*), meaning something like "the portion of the performance that comes before the main theme."[77] Apparently, *oimai* meant "paths" to the poet, so that the relative fixity and stability of themes was figured in Homeric language by describing them as if they were tracks cut into some landscape.[78] The process of singing was thus a progress, and Hesiod could sum up his election as poet by saying that the Heliconian Muses "made me walk upon [the path] of singing."[79] To proceed from one topic of heroic song to another was to "move

[77]So Chantraine (1977) defines *prooimion,* s.v. *oimê:* "That which is found before the development of the poem, prelude" ("ce qui se trouve avant le developpement du poème, prelude"). But an aspirated version of this word, *phroimion,* makes Frisk (1960–70) s.v. *oimê* judge this connection uncertain ("unklar"). See the next note.

[78]The etymology and original meaning of *oimê* are unclear, and it is not easily to be equated with *hoimos,* "path, road." But if it was a "technical" term adopted by singers (as both Frisk and Chantraine recognize), they may have distorted or not known its original sense. I take it as meaning "path" to Homer because the many spatial metaphors adduced here suggest that the poet has already assimilated it to the very similar sounding *(h)oimos aoidês,* "path of song," first attested in *Hymn to Hermes* 451; so Schadewaldt (1965) 74–75; Svenbro (1976) 36 n. 103. The "path of song" is an Indo-European metaphor (Durante [1958]), and is consonant with many well-established Homeric metaphors for the path or "way" of speech. Cf. Becker (1937) 36–37, 68–69. The same evidence, and the fact that archaic lyric rings so many happy changes on the metaphor, make it unwise to pronounce *oimê* a "dead metaphor" in Homer, meaning no more than "song," as does Harriott (1969) 65. Pagliaro (1951) 25–30, followed by Lanata (1963) 11–12 and others, has read the metaphor as "the thread of narrative," but his aim of distinguishing epic (as "connected story") from lyric is misplaced and anachronistic.

[79]*Works and Days* 659: *me . . . epebêsan aoidês;* cf. *H. Hermes* 464–465: "I do not begrudge you, Apollo, to walk upon [the path] of my art."

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extended narration of the birth of Apollo and Artemis, a favorite theme of such poetry. When they turn from proem to heroic tale, they are said to "call to mind" (*mnêsamenai*) the men and women of old, that is, to invoke the Muses, daughters of Mnêmosunê. Though proem and heroic tale are markedly distinct, they are also continuous along the path of song and belong to a single "hymning." Pindar (*Nemean* 5.25ff.) represents the Muses obeying this protocol even in those early times when gods were not yet set apart from mortals: singing at the wedding of Peleus and Thetis, the Muses' wedding song will perforce be a heroic song too, and needs a divine preface: "They, after first / beginning with Zeus [*Dios arkhomenai*], hymned Thetis / and Peleus, how Hippolyta wanted to ensnare him."

The paths of song are very extensive, but they do not go on forever: the continuum of stories pulls up at a time somewhat short of the present. As both texts make clear (*Theog.* 100; *H. Ap.* 160), *klea andrôn* are the "fames" only of men and women of old.[86] The "epic" poet, then, is essentially a poet of the past, not a poet of heroes or gods in particular. For his past he may turn, as Homer does, to the noble heroes who fought beside gods at Troy, four dark centuries before his day; or he may move further back in time, to even earlier themes, to the women who, mating with gods, founded the great royal lines, as Hesiod does, in a *Catalogue of Women*.[87] What defines this "heroic" poetry is time: these mortals are earlier and closer to the powerful origins of the world order. Finally, the poet of the past may, without changing "genre," focus on the affairs of the gods themselves, the earliest born of all, in a theogony.

Just as in performance the gods must be acknowledged before mortals, so in the abstract conception of the range of song any heroic tale implicitly follows and continues the history of gods and earlier heroes. Though for some kinds of (chiefly stylistic) analyses it may be useful to distinguish Homer's poetry from Hesiod's as epic from didactic, in the largest context the distinction between

[86]One might compare Bakhtin's notion of epic's "absolute past" in his "Epic and Novel" (1981).

[87]I presume that "the hymn of ancient men and women" in *H. Ap.* 160 refers to such poetry as the *Catalogue of Women* (cf. fr. 1.1 M-W).

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ingly, invocations are taken essentially as appeals for "information."[94] E. R. Dodds explains the reasoning behind such views: "But in an age which possessed no written documents, where should first-hand evidence be found? Just as the truth about the future would be attained only if man were in touch with a knowledge wider than his own, so the truth about the past could be preserved only on a like condition."[95] This is well observed, but "truth" of course has a history all its own. Our best guide to what the Muses mean when they claim to be able to say "true things" may be A. T. Cole's important reconsideration of the concept of truth denoted by *alêtheia* (1983). Cole notes that in the archaic period this word names a different kind of truth from historical accuracy (a sense better expressed by *etumos*). In Homer, *alêtheiê* and its congates are used only of accounts by human speakers about matters of which it is difficult to know the facts.[96] Hence, as an evaluation of a speech, it is not a judgment on the reality of what is told as much as on how it is told. Literally, "unforgetting," a "true" speech was one that reported precisely and in detail, with scrupulous attention to what one has said before and the consequences of what one is saying. Cole defines it in Homer as signaling "completeness, non-omission of any relevant detail, whether through forgetting or ignorance."[97] This sense of truth is strikingly close to the description an historian, M. I. Finley, has given of what he found in Homer: "Yet, whatever else it may have been, the epic

[94]A very common view: Kranz (1924) 72; Minton (1960) 190; Lanata (1963) 13–14; Maehler (1963) 16–19, 190; Murray (1981) 91, 96–97; Thalmann (1984) 224, and cf. 128.

[95]Dodds (1957) 81, who adds: "The gift, then, of the Muses, or one of their gifts, is the power of true speech . . . it was detailed factual truth that Hesiod sought from them."

[96]In fact, the only exception to this restricted use of *alêthea* in archaic epic is its use (instead of *etumos*) of the Muses' divine discourse at *Theog.* 28, which Cole (1983) 21–22 simply notices as "un-Homeric"; but perhaps the word is used there to suggest that, for the human recipients of their song, its "truth" will still be of the human, problematic sort. This interpretation may be implied in the rare verb used here for "proclaim" (*gêruomai*), suggesting that the Muses are translating the truth for their human public, as when Justice sits beside Zeus and "proclaims" his inscrutable mind to mortals (*Works and Days* 260; but cf. *H. Herm.* 426).

[97]Cole (1983) 10; cf. Krischer (1965a) 167. Detienne (1967) offers an overview of the evolving concepts of truth in archaic society.

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audience, something that we would not want to define as a purely aesthetic pleasure.[110] This effect has been variously named as a sense of "participation" or "Vergegenwartigung," but I prefer to take a name out of Homer, via the Greek literary critics, *to enarges*, "vividness."[111]

In Homer the adjective *enargês* describes something or someone appearing convincingly and presently before one's eyes, especially a vision that others might not be able to see or that may not always be apparent to view. A dream may be vivid (*Od.* 4.841), but usually the word is used of the gods when they condescend to take on a form visible to men (*Od.* 3.420, 7.199–200, 16.161; *Il.* 22.131).[112] The Greek critics adopted this word to describe poetry that puts its incidents clearly before the audience's eyes.[113] Aristotle says the poet can achieve vividness by composing with his plot "placed squarely before his eyes," and he finds it especially keen in drama, even when read and not performed.[114] Longinus connects it with the poet's powers of visualization, *phantasia* (*On the Sublime* 15, 26). Again, I think that this is not pure theory on the part of these critics but the theorization of what was apparently a real psychological effect of epic performance, as can be seen in the testimony of Plato. His Socrates ventures that when a rhapsode performs Homer his soul is a little outside itself, and he "thinks that he is present at the events he is describing, whether they be in Ithaca or Troy or wherever" (*Ion* 535B). His interlocutor, a rhapsode, agrees with this "vivid point" and says that the audience "looks on me with awe and feels amazement together with me at what I say" (*Ion* 535E). The awe that the rhapsode provokes is

[110]As Setti (1958) 162 warns. Though I have profited much from Redfield's discussion of the "epic distance" I think he goes too far in saying (1975) 38: "The *kleos* of the song is the mark that, in it, history has been transformed into art. . . . A reversal then takes place. It seems that the event took place in order that a song could be made of it." Rösler's article (1980) reading a sense of "fictionality" into Hesiod's duplicitous Muses seems to me to fall into this mistake.

[111]Respectively Fränkel (1973) 15; Latte (1946) 159. Cf. Walsh (1984) 13 and Macleod (1983) 6–7 who adduces the later uses of *enargeia*.

[112]*LfrgE* s.v. *enargês* takes its association with epiphanies for its original meaning, translating "in splendor" ("'im Glanz,' sc. e Epiphanie").

[113]On "vividness" as a term in rhetorical criticism, see Ernesti (1962) 106 and Zanker (1981).

[114]*Poetics* 17.1455a22–26, 24.1462a16–17.

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story from the past, not just those purveyed by poets. The phrase is indeed significant for defining epic, but for defining it from the outside, for Homer takes pains to distinguish his singing from "mere *kleos*." The distinction of "singing" from other forms of oral tradition (of *aoidê* from *klea*) serves instead of categories like poetry and prose to explore how epic claimed a unique and valuable place among the many discourses of the past.

The key ingredient that separates poetry from the fames of men or from any other discourse is expressed as a vision the Muses have of the past which serves to elevate the account they sponsor above other reports. We will find in Homer not a formal distinction between verse and prose but a claim for the superiority of sight over hearing which is converted into the triumph of singing over mere report. But this victory—achieved, after all, through language, not sight, and made by a singer traditionally portrayed as blind—is not easily won. In fact the great vision and scope of the Muses shadow the poet, and the comprehensiveness of their knowledge may threaten the integrity of his single song.

Here arises in Homeric form the problem of unity, the mainstay of all classically influenced criticism and the bugbear of Homeric studies since the Enlightenment. To demand strict unity of an oral work has long been regarded as problematic. We may again take our provocation from Albert Lord:

> We have exercised our imaginations and ingenuity in finding a kind of unity, individuality, and originality in the Homeric poems that are irrelevant. Had Homer been interested in Aristotelian ideas of unity, he would not have been Homer, nor would he have composed the *Iliad* or *Odyssey*. An oral poet spins out a tale; he likes to ornament, if he has the ability to so do, as Homer, of course, did. It is on the story itself, and even more on the grand scale of ornamentation, that we must concentrate, not on any alien concept of close-knit unity.[1]

If it was not Homer's endeavor to weave a seamless garment or to fashion a well-wrought urn, the problem of epic unity may nevertheless be found in his work, expressed as a tension between the

[1]Lord (1960) 148. Similar claims had been made by Perry (1937); Van Groningen (1958); and Notopoulos (1949).

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the world of report. The fiction of the Muses serves to distinguish heroic poetry from other oral traditions: it elevates such poetry above mere "report" into a contact, mediated to be sure, with an actual witness to the events.[10] By contrast, the selection from the fames of men that Phoenix "remembers" and communicates to Achilles is only what "we learn of" or "find out" (*epeuthometha*) from mere report (*Il.* 9.524, 527).[11] Most of oral tradition consists of such secondary reportage, as when Agamemnon speaks to young Diomedes:

> Alas, son of shrewd Tydeus, breaker of horses,
> why do you cower, avoiding the turbulence of war?
> Not indeed was it Tydeus's way to cower so
> but far in the forefront of his friends to fight the enemy.
> So they say, the ones who saw him about the work of war; for my part,
> I never met him or saw him; but they say he excelled over all others.
>
> [*Iliad* 4.370–75]

The point of such a qualification is surely not to cast doubt on the speaker's veracity; it is rather to categorize this story within the structures that the society recognizes for old tales and their uses.[12]

In this context Homer uses his all-seeing Muses not only to exalt epic but even to disparage other accounts of the past as "mere"

[10]Cf. Dodds (1957) 100 n. 16: "I take it that what the poet prays for here is not just an accurate memory—for this, though highly necessary, would only be the memory of an inaccurate *kleos*—but an actual vision of the past to supplement the *kleos*. Such visions, welling up from the unknown depths of the mind, must once have been felt as something immediately 'given,' and because of its immediacy, more trustworthy than oral tradition." To this extent I would agree with Nagy (1979) 95: "The conceit of Homeric poetry is that the sacred mnemonic power of the Muses is the key to the *kleos* of epic."

[11]For the association of "finding out" and "hearing" (*p(e)uth-* and *akouô*), see *Od.* 2.118, 3.193, 4.94, 688, 15.403 and Clay (1983) 13 n. 8.

[12]A close parallel to this passage has been noted in an archaic poem by Mimnermus (14.1–4 *IEG*), stirring up his audience with the recollection of a great warrior two or three generations earlier: "His was not such might and warring spirit, / so I learn (*peuthomai*) from my elders, who saw him / scattering the crowded ranks of Lydian horsemen / On Hermus' plain, a spearman." For the historical context see West (1974) 73–74, though it is just possible that, as Bowie (1986) 29 suggests, the lines come from a fictional battle narrative.

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Aeneas concludes his catalog of ancestors by again downgrading oral report and calling for the test of arms:

> Such is my lineage and the blood I claim to come from.
> But Zeus is the one who gives men might or takes it away,
> as he wishes, for he is most mighty.
> Come then let us no longer talk back and forth like children
> standing in the midst of hostile battle.
> There are many things we might say to insult each other,
> so very many, a hundred-benched ship couldn't carry the load.
> For the tongue of mortals is slippery, and there are many tales in
> it,
> all kinds of tales, and the great rangeland of words reaches far and
> wide.
> The kind of thing you say is what you are likely to hear.
> But what need have we for quarreling and abuse,
> standing her insulting each other, like women
> who fall into a rage over some soul-destroying quarrel
> and heap abuse on each other when they meet on the street,
> some of it true, some false, and some provoked by anger.
> I am bent on valorous action and you won't put me off with words
> before fighting face to face with bronze. Come then
> and let us try each other's strength with the bronze of our
> spearheads.
>
> [*Iliad* 20.241–258]

Aeneas's speech might raise questions about how we get our heroic stories. Do our heroic lines come from the slippery tongues of mortals, men who can say anything, who can say everything? There are no Muses guaranteeing this genealogy here; it is mere oral report, shifty, uncontrollably large, its truth subject to the mood of the speaker.[16]

Reliance on oral traditions alone, speech without the test of strength, is consigned by Aeneas to unheroic categories: it is womanish, childish, weaker than action. When, in the event, Achilles discovers that Aeneas's genealogy is true, it is by action and not words. After Achilles shatters Aeneas's shield with his spear and moves in to dispatch him, Poseidon intervenes to save the Trojan, actively and verbally confirming his lineage, "so that the race of

[16]The notion that what you say determines what you hear in return is proverbial; cf. Hesiod *Works and Days* 721; Alcaeus 341 Voigt.

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vergent tales, synthesizing thereby a massive mythic history embracing the whole Greek people.[27] This interweaving was thorough and extensive: local accounts of local heroes were entwined with those of other heroes from other places and other times until they meshed and eventually covered the expanse of unknown history. Reading Homer, one soon realizes that the mention of any proper name almost invariably brings with it a patronymic; the father's name in turn may evoke recollection of his place of origin or of some characteristic exploit, and these tales may involve yet other characters (and their patronymics) in various times and locales, until the history of a single hero begins to entwine with that of all the other heroes in the dense undergrowth of tradition.

At such a moment in a tradition, the problem of making a song was not how to say something new or in a new way but what to say in the face of so many endless tales. The highly literate but deeply Greek Aristotle seems to know this too, for the final motive he ascribes to Homer in shaping the *Iliad* is not a search for novelty or artistic expression but the necessity to reduce a too-vast tradition to an intelligible part:

> Homer, as we have said of him before, on this point too might seem divine in comparison with the others, in that, though the war had indeed a beginning and an end, even so he did not attempt to make the whole of it the subject of his poem, since he realized that, if he did so, the narrative was going to be too vast to be easily embraced in one view, or if he limited its extent, the variety of incidents would make it too complicated. As it is, he selected one part of the war as his theme and used many of the other parts as episodes, the Catalog of Ships, for example, and the other episodes with which he spaces out his poem. [*Poetics* 23.1459a30–37, after Hutton]

Surely we may agree that the *Iliad* was shaped in this conscious way: its beginning and end trace but a small arc on the larger cycle of legends; its middle is copiously filled out, yet filled only so much. But from Aristotle's discussion we can see that selection is also reduction. For him, though the legends of Troy's fall compose a unified action, the poet must forgo this unity because it would be

[27]See Nagy (1979) 6–10.

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view of the problems a narrator faces. Consider Helen in the *Odyssey* when she tells Telemachus a story about his father; she begins with a prologue like a poet's:

> I could not tell nor could I name them all,
> as many trials as stout-hearted Odysseus had;
> but such a great deed was this the mighty man did and dared
> in the land of the Trojans where you Achaeans suffered woes.
>
> [*Odyssey* 4.240–243]

In the same words with which Homer refused to name the multitude, Helen declines to tell all Odysseus endured. (The wording is the same, with the innumerable *plêthun* replaced by the ineffable *panta*, "all.") Helen then solves her problem by selecting (*all' tode*) one episode from the Trojan campaign—Odysseus in the Trojan horse.[32]

Nestor is put in the position of narrating poet when Telemachus asks him for news of Odysseus. His *recusatio* is, not unexpectedly, more ample:

> O friend, since you have put me in mind of the woe
> we suffered in that land, we sons of the Achaeans, unconstrained
> in rage,
> how much in ships upon the misty sea,
> wandering after booty wherever Achilles led,
> and how much about the great city of lord Priam
> we struggled; when as many as were best of us were slain there.
> There lies Ajax, man of Ares, there Achilles,
> and there Patroclus, equal to god in council,
> and there my own son, both strong and fair,
> Antilochus, excellent runner and fighter;
> and many other evils we suffered in addition to these;
> what man among mortal men might tell them all?
> Not if you were to stay here five years—not six—
> could you ask about each thing, as many evils as the Achaeans
> suffered there;
> before that you would go back home wearied out.
>
> [*Odyssey* 3.103–117]

[32]Nearly identical is *Od.* 11.516–519, in which Odysseus recounts to Achilles one among the many exploits of Neoptolemus.

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not, say, the Fashioning of the Horse, but he needs the Muses at this point to give him entrée into this unutterably long story at the right point.

Three other times the poet of the *Iliad* stops his narrative to summon the Muses, and readers have wondered what gives rise to them in these places.[37] It seems to me less necessary to formulate a rule that infallibly predicts when a poet will reinvoke the Muses than to note that on each occasion we find a certain similarity of scene: the poet is confronted with a tumultuous battle, with swarms of soldiers running pell-mell; among this confused and confusing action the poet raises his voice above the din and asks, "Who first came to face Agamemnon?" or "Which Greek first won his spoils?" or "How did fire first come to the ships of the Achaeans?"[38] We might add to these passages *Iliad* 12.176, where the poet aims to describe a massive attack on the Greek defensive wall:

> Some men were fighting at one gate, some at another.
> Hard it is for me to say all this, as if I were a god;
> for everywhere around the stone wall the god-kindled
> fire arose.
>
> [*Iliad* 12.175–178][39]

The warriors rushing about indiscriminately are like the many traditions that crowd a poet's mind, seeking expression.[40] A god might tell them all, but hard indeed is it for the mortal poet to say

[37]Minton (1960) is most often cited now. He rightly notes the close connection of invocations and catalogs (293, n. 3, citing Gilbert Murray); but his claim that they mark turning points in a pattern of "crisis-struggle-defeat" is finally no less subjective than earlier views of invocations as "heightening attention" which he seeks to replace.

[38]*Il.* 11.218ff., 14.508ff., 16.112ff. Sometimes the organizing question occurs without mentioning the Muse, e.g., *Il.* 5.703–704, and sometimes the poet simply proceeds to make his way through a welter of slaughter by saying who was killed first, and next, 16.306–307. Pindar (*Pythian* 4.70ff.) and Bacchylides (15.47ff.) direct similar questions to their Muses in similar contexts.

[39]On the athetesis of this section, see van der Valk (1963–64) 1:579–580.

[40]Very similar is *Il.* 17.257–261, where the poet breaks off a catalog of Greeks fighting in defense of Patroclus's corpse: three heroes are named, but "of the others, who might, relying on his own wits, say their names?" This passage too has suffered athetesis; see van der Valk (1963–64) 2:39.

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Here that same verb that in Homer combined the Muses' knowledge and vision is used of the Muses with their mother and inscrutable father. Their great scope of vision has been "ordained" for them as a law of nature (*tethmos*), and contrasts with Pindar's limited powers; it is human mortality that presses on this poet, as in *Nemean* 4.33–34, when "the pressing hours and my *tethmos* prevent me from telling the story [of Heracles at Troy] at length."[43]

Whether we wish to think of these later poets as indebted to Homer or to a traditional posture that he among others adopted, we should not miss the note of anxiety at confronting the realm of songs when one opens a long tale. Plato did not miss it; he has his Socrates break into a long account of a philosophic conversation in epic style (*Euthydemus* 275c): "As for what happened after that, Crito, how could I give you a good account of it? For it is no small task to take up and go through a wisdom so unmanageably great [*amêchanon*] as theirs. So I, at any rate, must begin my tale like the poets, calling on the Muses and Memory. At that point then Euthydemus began, as I think, from. . . ." The sublime epic Muses, then, proved to be a recurrent way of depicting the selective process, an appropriate response of Greek oral poets during the Panhellenic synthesis of large poetic traditions in the early archaic age. Though he refused such knowledge for himself, to envision it and attribute it to the gods was a major gain for the epic poet, and the Muses in the second book of the *Iliad* are what enables Homer to get on with his story, to keep speaking truly in the face of an overwhelming tradition. But we return to Homer and ask how such a singing can be ended, how a can shape be imposed on this song?

The Whole Poem

If the Muses connect the poem to a larger order, they do not make it whole. They may help the poet begin, putting his feet

[43]On *tethmos* in this passage, see Norwood (1945) 167–170 and Miller (1982); cf. the *brachu metron* that restrains Pindar from telling "all the contests that Herodotus and his horses won" (*Isthmian* 1.60–63). On the many passages where Pindar cuts down the long account he might give, see Hubbard (1985) 27–32.

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foolish poet Margites (the "glutton"), "who knew many things, but all badly," would be so stupid as to try to count the waves of the sea.[51]

The poet then selects and reduces not with the confidence of an artisan who fashions the well-wrought urn, tossing off the dross, but in a spirit of resignation. Whatever the Muses give the poet, they withhold the all; there is an inevitable reduction from divine knowledge to *kleos*, which may be poetry or rumor or hearsay but never vision. The true account is still the total account, and who would happily forgo the sweet, complete, and fatal song of the Sirens?

How did Homer hope to recoup the grave losses of selection? Let us return to the *Iliad*, book 2, and look at the selection he makes to see what it entails. Homer's principle of selection is evident and may be termed aristocratic: out of the innumerable masses who came to Troy he chooses to name the chiefs and to ignore the *plêthus*. In this, Homeric aesthetics mirrors heroic politics: epic heroes and nobles are those who step out of the ranks into the forefront of battle; thus foregrounded they fight single combat to win fame and a name. To hang back is to remain obscure and to be swallowed up in the confused din of the mob. The great "marshaler of heroes," *kosmêtôr herôôn*, as Homer was styled in epitaph, is in league with the marshaler of men.[52] But if Homer is aware of the power of this organization, he knows too that it is not achieved without some suppression. Before it is possible to muster and name the troops a voice from the *dêmos*, that of Thersites, must be silenced. Not only does Thersites threaten the political order by challenging Agamemnon, but the rabble-rouser is an aesthetic offence as well: ugly and misshapen, his speech is abundant but without order (*akosma epea, ou kata kosmon*). The order he violates is at once political and aesthetic. His lack of measure in speech (*ametroepês*) and lack of distinctions (*akritomuthês*) threaten the hierarchies that make heroic action possible and the ordering that makes an account of that action possible. So he is drubbed by

[51]See 2, 3, 4, [4a]b *IEG*.

[52]For Homer's epitaph, *Certamen* 238.337 Allen (1946) vol. 5 and cf. 237.310; on *kosmos*, which may mean "marshaling," "arrangement" or "decoration," see Chapter 4.

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