INTRODUCTION

He was their servant (some say he was blind),
Who moved among their faces and their things:
Their feelings gathered in him like a wind
And sang. They cried "It is a god that sings."

—W. H. Auden, Sonnets from China

After reading the Homeric poems, and indeed after reading interpretations of them, I cannot help asking about Homer and wondering what he thought he was doing. For to the extent that the poems themselves or interpretations of them persuade me that they are aesthetic objects, that they are cunningly wrought artifacts with a coherent literary meaning governed by a command of rhetorical effects (that is, that they are like what academic criticism since the nineteenth century has taken poetry to be), I am troubled by what we know of the history and origin of these texts. Though much is cloudy, it is now generally acknowledged that our Iliad and Odyssey represent only the final outcome, a fixing by writing, of a long-standing art of oral performance and composition. For centuries before this transcription took place (and we are not sure whether it was in the eighth century or the sixth, or whether a master poet wrote it himself or dictated it or stood in line to give his contribution before some tyrant's art committee), the sum and substance of these poems and of all their antecedents, variants, and sequels, were only a series of changing oral performances by many singers in many parts of Greece. It is not difficult to conceive that the very idea of poetry may have been profoundly different in a milieu where stable texts were never the primary and definitive form of a song and where each performer presented himself only
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-
ing anachronistic literary categories on them, keeping the discussion in terms derived from the epics themselves or at least in terms not obviously inappropriate to an oral poet's milieu. This caution is necessary because our own ideas of what poetry is have been deeply influenced by nineteenth-century romantic idealism and eighteenth-century aesthetics. And if we seek a critical perspective closer in time to the epics, we can get no further back than the fifth century B.C.E., a time when the oral culture of Greece was waning and its earlier productions were being reseen through new sciences of language such as rhetoric and philosophy.¹ But if we are willing to question our most fundamental literary categories as we proceed, a vigilant reading of these poems in their archaic context can yield the Homeric chapter in what Robert Curtius called the "history of the theory of poetry"; on the basis of a close study of the terms for "poetry," its kinds and parts, we can follow Curtius and study Homer's theory of poetry, his "concept of the nature and function of the poet and of poetry, in distinction from poetics which has to do with the technique of poetical composition."²

Valuable as work on Homeric and archaic Greek poetics has been, I cannot agree with a colleague who has charmingly remarked, "Most of what can be said about the significance of De- modocus and Phemius, the so-called bards, and Odysseus, bard manqué, has been said by now, some of it thoughtfully."³ For I have found that what has been said suffers from incompleteness: too often it focuses exclusively on those words and statements in Homer that look like criticism to us and views them apart from the entire world of epic in which they are fully defined. But to extract from the poems obiter dicta about art and poetry as we define them is to limit our evidence in advance and to beg the central question of what belongs in a theory of poetry. Moreover, such ideas of poetry as Homer implies in his poems are inextricable from the entire imaginative world of epic; they must be read in relation to it.

What I am saying is that the idea of poetry is itself finally a poetic

¹This is one of the significant implications of Havelock (1963). For the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century foundations of modern criticism, see Eagleton (1990) and Abrams (1989).
²Curtius (1953) 468.
idea, because it was at first an idea of poets. For this conception I take support from Wallace Stevens, a poet closer to us in time. “One of the functions of the poet at any time,” he claimed, “is to discover by his own thought and feeling what seems to him to be poetry at that time. Ordinarily he will disclose what he finds by way of the poetry itself. He exercises this function most often without being conscious of it, so that the disclosures in his poetry, while they define what seems to him to be poetry, are disclosures of poetry, not disclosures of the definitions of poetry.”⁴ When Stevens came to collect his quasi-critical essays in The Necessary Angel, he prefaced them with a warning that he had already been writing about poetry in his poems, though not exactly writing definitions of poetry. And he quietly insisted that any poet at any time must do as much, must have first discovered—in part logically and in part aesthetically—what poetry should be. Thinking of Homer, we may be inclined to dismiss Stevens as too romantic in his belief that the idea of poetry needs to be continually recreated and in projecting onto all poets his own concern with poetry as an expression of the idea of poetry. Such demands may seem not to apply to a poet like Homer, whose vocation was evidently to receive and preserve a heroic tradition the unquestioned value of which would have freed him from the need to work out for himself some new approach to beauty and truth and also from the rather sophisticated project of presenting such abstractions to his warrior audiences. But this is just where Stevens’s reminder that the idea of poetry is not an unchanging Platonic essence becomes indispensable: it is all too clear that poetry is at best a sum of what many different poets in different times and places have decided to do with their different languages. If we realize that there is no universal and eternal definition of poetry, we see that even the sturdiest poetic tradition depends on a series of poets who must each embrace, and perhaps reinterpret, this collective idea. Furthermore, if this idea of poetry was originally and for a long time remained an idea of poets, it cannot fail to be embodied in the poems, consciously or not. It is indeed part of the function of the poet at any time to take up or make up an idea of poetry and to communicate it along with what-

⁴Stevens (1942) vii.
ever else he or she tells the audience. The necessary angel, after all, proves to be another godchild of the Muse, and I think Homer gives his audiences (including us) an idea of poetry and its ambitions in more ways than are commonly realized.

If Homer’s idea of poetry is inevitably a poetic idea, I have tried to set what we know about the terminological and technical aspects of his art in the wider context of the world he represents. Guided by the words and phrases repeatedly used in connection with poetry, I have been especially concerned to bring to bear other passages that have not been read in this connection. I do so not in the expectation that all poetry is about poetry—a tiresome allegorization that reduces all texts to a single monotonous message; rather, I think that any poetry must give or renew for its audience an idea of what it is, if only as a way of telling them how to receive it. But it is also clear that the “idea of poetry in Homer” will be not a doctrine, an illiterate’s notes toward Aristotle’s *Poetics*, but a way for a working poet to explain to his society, and perhaps to himself, what he was doing and what it was for. Accordingly, I have tried to listen to the authors speak but also have kept in mind what they leave open and what they might be evading or disguising. In addition, I have interpreted such passages as seem to bear on the singer’s art not solely in relation to the texts but also as statements made in the concrete context of an epic poet performing or composing in the eighth century. Homer’s ideas of poetry must first be read in relation to his fictional cosmos and then reread in relation to the world in which he performed. Only on this fuller view will we get a sense of how Homer represented poetry in relation to all other forms of *human* endeavor and how such a view worked and made sense to the poet and his audiences.

Thus the fact that the idea of poetry is always changing and the fact that all poets must take up one such idea and in some way embody it in their work combine to make it necessary for us to consider Homeric epic on its own terms, to make clear what basis, purposes, and methods this art claimed for itself in its time and place. If we want a sense of that poetry as it was, we must look behind the fertile but now aging modern consensus of poetry as the fashioning of aesthetic artifacts. My formulation—the poetry of the past—is intended to encapsulate the two central claims that
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 presence at a divine epiphany or a necromancy.

In grounding itself in magic and enchantment rather than rhet-
oric or history, epic again forecloses certain aesthetic and rhetorical questions. In particular, the relationship between the audience and the work of art is transformed into a relationship between the present and an invisible past evoked. Accordingly, questions we as critics may wish to raise about how poetry works and what makes it unique must be answered in psychological terms, such as memory and forgetting, combined with phenomenological ones, the seen and the unseen. By connecting itself with these ideas, epic manages not only to efface poetry as a set of linguistic effects but even to efface the importance of poetic performance as a confrontation between poet and audience, song and psyche, text and reader.

Since we know that poets lie, it is easy for us to diagnose the dialectic playing here to shore up this idea of epic. The poetry of the past first of all pretends that it is only an emanation from a prior, distant but potent world and then claims to be the sole way for that world to become fully apparent to us. Like other language we may call fictive, epic assumes a power by creating a reality that it pretends only to disclose. But these are our concerns because we want to know why epic will not finally declare its allegiance to either history or rhetoric. For their rapt audiences and for their successful poets, as long as the dialectic remained unraveled, epic could remain a speech without rhetoric and a history without distance from the past. The poetry of the past fulfilled its design as long as audiences forgot the performing poet, and themselves, and everything but the vivid and painless presence of heroic action of old. The idea of such a poetry was satisfying and intelligible long before the rise of technically skilled rhetorical critics and historians in the fifth century B.C.E.; but from the first it was not achieved and sustained without what Curtius calls “tensions,” the conceptual contradictions and compromises required so that any such thing as poetry can be postulated. I have made these tensions the focus of each of my individual chapters, which treat the genre of epic, the status of the poem, the role of the poet, the nature of the text, and the idea of poetry itself. I begin by examining the tensions inherent in defining the genre of poetry, which involves laying down an always-disputed border between poetry and nonpoetry. If the poet grounds this central distinction in the Muses, who supervise the realm of poetry and keep its borders intact, another
tension may thereupon arise between the idea of an individual poem and the supraindividual tradition on which it depends and against which it must claim some sort of autonomy. Similar difficulties may face the poet in an agonistic culture as he attempts to define himself as an individual against other poets, who are, at least in theory, equally favored by the Muses. And for later poets at least, there may be a conflict between the songs they sing and the texts made out of them. Finally, these fruitful compromises can be resumed in the tensions that inhere in the very word Homer uses for his poetry.

To approach the Homeric conception of poetry it is first necessary to define as far as possible the form in which Homer was working, for it was within or against such a view that he was a poet. Accordingly, in my first chapter I have set out to give the traditional definition of *epic*. Here it is necessary to synthesize earlier scholarship that has looked at the terms for poetry, its kinds and functions in Homer and other early hexameter verse. On this basis I ask how what we call epic was defined in relation to other poetry, including a larger class of unmelodic verse to be defined as *epos*, and also in relation to nonpoetic speech. From this I go on to articulate, as far as possible in the poets' own terms, a common "poetics" of oral epic—a basic view of the poet, his role, and his activity to which Homer, his peers, and his audiences would have generally assented.

The definitions of epic and the larger category of poetic epos lead me in the second chapter to reflect more deeply on the greatest abstraction we use when speaking about Homeric poetry, tradition. To ask of Homer what precisely is involved in making a poetry out of phrases and legends that one's society has developed for centuries is to ask about his relation to his Muses. Yet this personification is far from simple, and glossing the Muses as "memory" or "tradition" can be a way of settling all too easily the problematic attachment of modern criticism to literary "property" (as the common metaphors for tradition as a "storehouse" or "treasury" attest). A writerly accounting of tradition might assign to the poet as "his own" any language in his poem that has not been recorded as another's elsewhere; but in an oral tradition such bookkeeping is not possible, and not every view of language and
poetry would value most highly the speaker who is the original enunciator of a given idea. We will see that the Muses' function is more complex than to be the repository of themes and language for the poet.

Whatever uses the fiction of the Muses had for Homer, it falsified the way poets actually learned and taught, and my concern in Chapter 3 is to redress this balance by asking about the poet's relationship to other poets. The symbolic use of the Muses for "the tradition" must be set against the actual workings of transmission, the reconstructible processes by which Greek epic was disseminated and handed down from generation to generation. If all poets serve the same Olympian goddesses, how does one differentiate himself (as excellent, worth rewarding, worth protecting) from another poet, perhaps his peer, rival, or even teacher? For this distinction I turn to the so-called bards whom Homer has placed in his heroic world. Though Phemius of Ithaca, Demodocus of Phaecia, and the handful of other poets glimpsed but not named must be regarded as fictional characters no less than Achilles or Agamemnon, we can learn much about Homer's sense of his own role from their ostensible place and function in the world. Balancing these portraits against what we can divine from comparative and historical evidence about the relations among poets in archaic Greece, we can explore how the poet reconciled two of his most imposing obligations: the imperative to establish himself as a superior singer and the expectation that the good singer presents the past without idiosyncrasy, only in the Muses' impersonal view. If these singers are not to be completely identified with actual working bards, their portraits can be interpreted for what they say about an ideal relation of the poet to his society and to his material, to the past.

The fourth chapter takes as its starting point the simple fact of the existence of the epic texts. Whether Homer himself wrote or dictated to a scribe, his songs passed across what we think of as a great gulf into literature, to become objects that last through time. Even if we assume the two great poems were crystallized early as oral "texts" and then handed down by memorizing bards until writing became available, there is already in this process of crystallization (or "monumental composition") an attempt to fix a song permanently which is not far from writing. The question then
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
speak when he has nothing to say. Yet he does volunteer some information, and I at least hope that I have not put words in his mouth. If it be asked who exactly do I think held these views, to which of the many Homers are they to be ascribed, the answer must be the same weak answer to any question tracking Homeric origins. At the most, to the extent that we arrive at a general and coherent account of poetry, it may be assigned to that “hypothesis” Homer, the last bard through whose mouth or pen these texts passed and presumably passed muster; at the least, they can be assigned to the one who made by uttering the passage in question. Some ideas, as in the first and final chapters, I have adduced as general views, embodied in traditional language and tropes that extend across poems. Other readings, like that of great invocation to the Muses in Chapter 2 or of the Phaeacian games in Chapter 3, can at the least be assigned to the poet composing the passage in question, or to the one who gave it final form. My own view, as I make clear in Chapter 4, is that even as the poems took their last form, the oldest problems of poetry were alive for that shaper and provide a resonant undertext to the monumental compositions we now have.

I conclude with a word on the purpose and intended audience of this book. I have tried to recreate a sense of Homer’s view of poetry not so that we might set down an alternative, antiformalist aesthetic that would tell us how we must read his poems. For my part, I find that a sense of the historical context of a work enriches reading and indeed that poetry (even of the most revolutionary posture) is never made out of thin air but out of earlier poems; but criticism will always have to follow the questions that interest it, and no text demonstrates better than Homer’s that each age will wrench its inheritance into a form it can use and respond to. For classicists and for any who enjoy thinking of poetry in terms of its past, I have hoped to offer something more than thin and bloodless Homeric “conceptions” of poetry, not a kitbag of bizarre and archaic superstitions combined with crude rules of art but a sense of how Homer and his peers persisted in and were rewarded for that peculiar and enduring activity. This is the final sense of my title, which orients this book: Homer and all the authors of classical literature are part of the poetry of our past, and the ways that they
defined what poetry could be had a fundamental influence on Western poetry and criticism. Twenty-five centuries of reading and rereading Homer have made this centrality an inescapable historical fact, though its workings have not always been wholly benign for readers or critics, as some recent criticism has suggested. It seems that some today would like a poetry without a past, or at least without the past of the Greeks. I hope that such readers might wish to consider a Homer who did not yet think of himself as the father of Western literature, who was a poet contending with difficulties in defining poetry that are in many ways like our own and in some cases ancestral to them. Other readers would readily embrace the classics as the unsurpassed best in art, but in finding “real” poetry only in what can be pronounced definitive because it is past, they may lose the life these classics once had, seeing them as distant and isolated in their achieved success. The very centrality and canonicity of classical works can be unfair to works felt to be outside that tradition; it can also be confining to the classical works themselves: for a too assured reader, poetry may become recognizable only when it is in the past, when it is canonized and understood within a canonical tradition of interpretation. It would be very unfortunate if the classics should have the effect of weakening instead of vitalizing our sense of this ancient and persistent human behavior. This book finally aims to aid the work of the poets and readers among us who must discover once more what poetry is in our time.