THE GENRE

Traditional Definitions of Epic

Defining an Oral Art

Ideally we should not speak of “poetry” in connection with Homer at all, for it may be prejudicial to ask Homer what “poetry” is when that good Greek word is not attested before the fifth century; it seems that it was only in that enlightened critical culture that sophists and other philosophers of language began calling what Homer and his fellows did “making” (poiēsis) and the performer a “maker” (poiētēs). Such terms imply a quite different activity from that in the word “singer” (aoidos), which Homer would seem to have used for himself. Asking the question in our terms, then, may be misdirected. Instead, let us leave the categories “poet” and “poetry” open for the time being and ask the same question less categorically: What makes a poet or “singer”? What is it exactly that he does? After we have an account of what is involved in epic “singing,” we may move on to more abstract questions such as how does the singer of themes we call “epic” differ from other singers, and indeed from nonsingers? In this way we

1The difference between an aoidos and a poiētēs was already noted by Wolf in 1795 (1963) chap. xii, p. xlii n. 9 (English ed., 72). The fifth-century context of “poet” has been discussed by Diehl (1940) 83 and Durante (1960); cf. Lanata (1963) 229–230.
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. 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.

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. 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.

2For 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.

3Alexiou (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.

4The question will be taken up in Chapter 4.
and structure and also in the way they present themselves as poetry. I think they did so in part because a text-based conception of poetry and critical terminology did not spring up overnight, and, perhaps more important, because it would have been foolish to dispense with what was familiar, proved by long use, and perhaps even considered the ritually "right" way to go about things. Hence the writer who wrote down the Iliad began "Sing, goddess," and the entire Homeric corpus refers to epic poems basically as aoidē, "singing," an action noun, a word that names poetry not as text or aesthetic object but as activity and performance. What singing had been before Homer and what it remained to some extent for performers like him and their audiences may have been very different from what it was for the scholars and bibliophiles from whose hands we have received the texts and so much of our basic literary terminology. Indeed, Albert Lord has suggested that our very conception of poetry as literature is completely alien to Homer's milieu: "The traditional oral epic singer is not an artist: he is a seer. The patterns of thought that he has inherited came into being to serve not art but religion in its most basic sense. His balance, his antitheses, his similes and metaphors, his repetitions, and his sometimes seemingly willful playing with words, with morphology, and with phonology were not intended to be devices and conventions of Parnassus, but were techniques for emphasis of the potent symbol. Art appropriated the forms of oral narrative." I think Lord makes a fundamental and valid point: what we have in Homer need not be an idea of poetry fundamentally like our own once it has been stripped of its religious and other nonliterary aspects; we should allow for the possibility that Homer had a completely non- or preliterary way of defining that activity. Nevertheless, one would not want to speak of Homer as a naif in the nineteenth-century sense, and it should not be thought that archaic oral epic was wild, unsponsored, and free or so "naive, strange and earlier than any

5The excellent article in LfrgE s.v. aoidē 2 defines it: "Song as activity . . . its character as an action noun always persists (not 'work')" ("Gesang als Tätigkeit, wobei . . . der Charakter des nöm. act. jedoch immer gewahrt bleibt (nicht 'Werk')"). See the fine analysis of aoidē in Homer by Walsh (1984) chap. 1, esp. 12–14.  
6Lord (1960) 220–221. For an extensive consideration of Lord's most important work, see Foley (1981).
rules of art” that it had no conception of itself as one among other forms of song.7 The tradition of poetry that matures in Greece with Homer had by his time developed, if not a theory of art, at least a steady and sure way of going about its business and, moreover, had evolved ways of referring to itself and presenting itself to its society. Long before Homer, in fact reaching back to his Indo-European ancestors and the ancient cultures of the Near East, poets had set apart some forms of speech that we now call poetry and had spoken about its nature, its way of proceeding, and even its structure and organization.8 Hence, while I recognize with Lord that our ideas of literary art may well be inappropriate to oral epic (and even that they are a sort of detritus of these incantations), I cannot accept his wholesale reduction of the poet to the seer, for the Greek poet at least had his own title, aoidos. An aoidos, literally, a “singer,” is not just any singer but only a professional.9 Anybody can “sing” (aidein)—goddesses on earth or on Olympus (Od. 10.254; Il. 1.604), men at arms, a boy in the fields (Il. 1.473, 18.570), or a reveler after too much wine (Od. 14.464); Achilles can even sing the “fames of men of old” to a lyre, just as Homer does (Il. 9.189). But none of these singers is ever called an aoidos.10 In addition, the singer was set apart by having his own patron deities, the Muses, and a special range of themes. We can therefore legitimately attempt to define the singer’s activity in terms of genre, as a kind of speaking that is somehow set apart from that of seers and other nonpoets; and we may ask generally what is the “art” of a poetry so defined.

7Cf. Egger (1886) 4: “une poésie naïve, étrangère et antérieure aux règles de l’art.”
8Indo-European and Near Eastern influences on the poetry of archaic Greece are explored in the works of Durante, Nagy, Schmitt, and Burkert. I should note at this point that I do not propose to treat the pre-Homeric history of many of the ideas of this book; instead, I mean to give a synchronic description of their significance within archaic Greek poetry.
9LfgrE s.v. aoidos B.1: “Gesang als Fertigkeit oder Tätigkeit des Sängers (s. aoidos), . . . kaum Gesang vom Laien” (“Song as the ability or activity of the singer (aoidos) . . . hardly ever of nonprofessional song”).
10The telling exception to the restriction of aoidos to professional singers is in Hesiod’s fable of the Hawk and the Nightingale: here the nightingale (aëdôn) stands for the singer and is addressed as an aoidos (Works and Days 208). In fact, even the verb “to sing” (aidein) is used in an extended sense here, for it is only rarely used of animals in epic, and then only as a figure of speech. So in Od. 19.519 the nightingale that “sings” is the metamorphosed daughter of Panadareus; cf. LfgrE s.v. aoidos B.2.
Evidently, to recover the ideas of what singing was and was not we must turn to the texts with a cold eye toward too-familiar literary categories. In defining the genre of epic, for example, it is necessary to avoid the reductions of formalism and its appealingly “objective” way of defining genres in terms of meter, diction, figures of speech, and so on. There is little warrant in Homer for making formal considerations so significant in defining kinds of poetry. It is more fruitful to be attentive, as the first Greek critics were, to the “ethos,” or persona, presented by the poet as a way of announcing and constituting his genre. This will help us place epic in relation to a larger category of hexameter poetry I will call *epos*, defining this term somewhat more narrowly than is now common. Epos may refer to “speech” of many kinds, and Homer’s project is that subclass of epos that offers a Muse-sponsored presentation of the past. I define his work not metrically (though most epos was in hexameters) or musically (though epos was normally not sung); rather it was a combination of a certain subject matter, the past, presented with a certain ethos.

After I have assembled the poem’s descriptions of itself as a kind of epos, it will be necessary, before attempting to translate these statements into our terms, to bear in mind the ubiquitous danger of anachronism, assuming that certain concepts now fundamental in the Western critical tradition are universally valid and significant when of course they have a history of their own (and usually one that goes back no further than the fifth century B.C.E.). It is of course impossible to have no preconceptions; so I have sought mine in the negative poetics of Lord, Havelock, and Walter Ong, that is, the constant challenge they offer to certain fundamental ideas we may wish to thrust onto the text. I take them, together with the reservations expressed by Ruth Finnegan, not as dogma to be applied a priori but as salutary warnings that this poetry may work differently from how we expect.

The conclusions that such a vigilant reading leads me to in this chapter are in the first instance negative, for it is necessary to clear away persistent but inappropriate readings of many key passages. We cannot continue to describe Homer’s idea of the poetic art in rhetorical terms, that is, as an art of form and content; on Homer’s account, poetry is not a rhetorical effect, since the past is valued for
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
either continuity or antagonism or some mixture of both.”\textsuperscript{11} To understand what the archaic poet set out to do is to put to him the same questions as Said puts to himself when he begins: “What is a beginning? What must one do in order to begin? What is special about beginning as an activity or a moment or a place? Can one begin wherever one pleases? What kind of attitude, or frame of mind is necessary for beginning? Historically, is there one sort of moment most propitious for beginning, one sort of individual for whom beginning is the most important of activities?”\textsuperscript{12} These questions are all the more worth putting to Homer because for the Greeks the beginning of anything, from song to sacrifice, was a sacred moment not to be casually passed by. Accordingly, we are not surprised to find that by the time of the composition of the Homeric poems there was what Hermann Fränkel has called “an established art of beginning and beginning anew.”\textsuperscript{13} A comparison of Homer, Hesiod, and other early hexameter poetry has revealed firmly established traditional ways to organize the beginnings, middles, and ends of these performances; in addition, certain expressions and ways of phrasing, including a number of repeated formulas, were found useful again and again to signal such moments.\textsuperscript{14} These epic beginnings are also among the most traditional parts of the texts: the repetition of phrases and patterns in poems so widely dispersed in time and place is a sign that they are derived from the period of wholly oral composition and performance that preceded our texts. Hence, insofar as these patterns imply something about the nature and structure of the poetry, they express the aspects of the poetry as it was traditionally conceived.

Though Homer is praised for plunging in medias res, he must, like any poet, take a few lines to establish a relationship between himself and his expectant audience, and the traditional form for doing this we call an invocation. Susceptible of variations, the invocation is essentially a prayer to the Muse to tell a story: for-

\textsuperscript{11}Said (1975) 3.
\textsuperscript{12}Said (1975) ix.
\textsuperscript{13}Fränkel (1973) 14, in an excellent chapter.
\textsuperscript{14}By formulas I mean specifically words that are repeated in the same place in the line with the same function in context.
mally, it is initiated by an imperative ("sing," "tell," or "hymn") and a vocative to the Muse (or Muses or goddess). So begin the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* and, among the later epics, the *Thebais* and the *Persica*. But the invocation is more than this; in fact, invocations are prayers, and they are formally based on prayers and hymns, reworked to identify and initiate a story instead of naming and evoking a god. Partly as a result of this heritage, certain elements of the invocation and their relative order were fixed within the limits of an oral art as the standard way of opening any particular epic song. First in the line comes an emblematic "title," meter permitting, signaled by its stereotyped form: most often it is a noun as the object of the imperative with a qualifier in the same line making it more specific: "the wrath . . . of Achilles"; "the man . . . with many turns" (though the genitive, the "of" case, is more common). This form for identifying the story to be sung is recurrent enough to be called the "titling" syntax, though such "titles" hardly imply that the story to follow was rigidly fixed in its details. The rest of the invocation fleshes out the story in a hymnlike series of relative clauses depending from the title-phrase. Sometimes these are read as a kind of table of contents, but the *Odyssey*’s opening does not provide a very good index of what is to follow, and announcing in advance a fixed plan might not always be a good idea for an oral poet who had to vary his song according to his audience’s interests and endurance. Rather, the function of these clauses seems to be to reassure the audience that the qualities typically expected of such songs will be forthcoming, for they regularly refer to the great scope of the action, its pathetic quality, the nations involved, and the role of the gods in all of it. The mention of the divine will (especially Zeus’s plan) is a signal that the invocation is beginning to conclude, and at this point the poet specifies where the tale is to begin. Hence the "wrath of Peleus’s son

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15 Of archaic epics, only the *Little Iliad* opens differently; see note 28 herein.
16 See Meyer (1933) 19–22 and Norden (1913) 168–176.
17 Aelian *Var. Hist.* 13.14 gives a rich list of epic "titles" in this form. For the classical ways of referring to parts of the Homeric poems, see Pfeiffer (1968) 115–116, and on the titles of archaic "books" generally, see Van Groningen (1958) 65–66.
18 On proems as tables of contents, see Van Groningen (1946), Pagliaro (1956), and Pucci (1982). The analyses of the *Odyssey* proem by Redfield (1979) and Rüter (1969) 28–52 are also valuable, though they read it ex post facto as a full table of contents.
Achilles,” which caused “many woes” for the Achaeans and was accomplished through the plans of Zeus, is to be sung “from the time when the son of Atreus and Achilles first stood apart in contention” (1.7–8);19 the Odyssey’s theme is the rather more meandering “Man of Many-turns” who saw and suffered “many, many” things while he returned from Troy and Helius took away the return of his companions; out of this rich store, “of these things,” the poet asks the Muse, “starting from some point at least, tell us now” (1.1–10). The opening of the Thebais neatly manages to compress the “title,” imperative, vocative, epithet, and relative clause into a single line: “Argos, sing, Goddess, the thirsty, whence the leaders” (1 D, K).

To draw attention to this recurrent structure in the Greek I will capitalize these typical elements in translation. Thus we can observe that when Homer depicts bards within his poems, they employ the same conventions: an invocation is recognizable behind the line and a half describing the Ithacan bard Phemius: “and he Sang the Return of the Achaeans / the Grievous one, Which Pallas Athena accomplished From Troy” (Od. 1.326–327). On Phaeacia, the poet Demodocus appears to use the same format when he sings:

the Quarrel of Odysseus and Achilles, son of Peleus,
How once upon a time they quarreled at the rich feast of the gods.

For then the Beginning of Suffering was cresting
for the Trojans and the Danaans through the Plans of great Zeus.

[8.75–76, 81–82]

Again, there is a recognizable invocation in line 75, where the noun and dependent genitives are followed by a relative clause that expands to sketch out the action (76–81). The paraphrase concludes with the mention that this was the beginning of something, some-

19 ll. 1.6 clearly indicates a starting point for the story, even if one takes ex hou dê in 6 with the previous line, i.e., “the will of Zeus was accomplished / from that point when [their strife began],” as does Redfield (1979) 96. Yet I prefer it with the imperative of line 1. “Sing . . . from that point”: the imperative may still be felt since locative phrases that conclude other invocations often depend on imperatives repeated from the opening (e.g., Od. 1.10; Hesiod Theog. 114–115).
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 (*diégèsis*). 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 alloste 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
set the invocation proper apart from the rest of the poem: the first eight lines of the *Iliad* and the first ten of the *Odyssey* are not narratives presented to the audience but prayers addressed by the singer to a god, overheard by the audience. This orientation extends to a repeated imperative or question directed to the god at the invocation's end, whereupon a character comes on and the ancient action commences. The poet is present in the *Iliad*’s invocation as the one with the right to utter the command, and in the *Odyssey*’s “tell me,” but by the end his presence has modulated into the impersonal voice of the omniscient epic narrator. This epic voice, the voice of no particular bard, continues, alternating objective narrative and speeches, in a long, unbroken strain until the poet finds it is time to “begin anew.” The invocation promises an ethos that is well enough summed up by the old term “epic objectivity”: once it is over, we will not expect to hear the voice of the poet as poet, only the voice of an omniscient narrator or the voices of his characters.

Proems and Genre

By the fifth century B.C.E., *Mênin aeide thea*, “The wrath, sing, goddess,” were already familiar as the first words of the *Iliad* and the archetype of how to begin an epic tale. Yet, the beginning of an oral performance is likely to have been more elaborate than

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20In Chapter 2 I consider passages in which the invocation is repeated in the text to focus on or make a transition to new themes: ll. 2.484, 2.761, 11.218, 14.508, 16.112; Hesiod *Theog.* 965, 1021, fr. 1.1–2 (M-W).

21On epic narration, see Edwards (1987) 29–41. It is true that the poet breaks this “objectivity” some seventeen times to apostrophize a hero or a god. Some have sought thematic motivations for these puzzling intrusions, as does Frontisi-Ducroux (1986) 21–27, but more interesting is Martin (1989) 234–236, who sees this as a performatory convention in which the poet identifies with his hero and addresses other characters from this perspective. In any case, such shifts in persona in fact bring us closer to the epic world being presented and further away from the poet as individual speaker.

our Homeric texts indicate, so that even the beginnings have a context in which they must be read. This larger context is the proem, or introductory poem, which prefaced the invocation proper in performance. Our best surviving example is the proem of Hesiod’s Theogony, which goes on for more than a hundred lines before Hesiod gets around to the invocatory imperatives. These first 104 lines are sometimes called the “Hymn to the Muses” but are better called by the classical term prooimion, or proem (Thucydides 3.104), inasmuch as one of the earliest and most important functions of proems was to introduce the kind of poetry Homer and Hesiod produced.\(^{23}\) This purpose for proems emerges from a comparison with the so-called Homeric hymns, a miscellaneous collection of hexameter poems in epic language including some pieces of archaic poetry (that is, composed within a century or two of Homer) and others of much later date.\(^{24}\) This mélange is nevertheless useful in reconstructing the archaic form of the proem since the hymns preserve much traditional language and are replete with traditional formulas.

The established word “hymn” misleadingly implies that the proem is some kind of separate genre defined by subject matter, a song in praise of gods, as distinct from epics treating heroes. And the longer Homeric hymns, approaching the length of a short epic book, seem to indicate that the proemic listing of a god’s attributes could blossom into an independent narrative form.\(^{25}\) But this categorization is alien to archaic Greek: early uses of humnos and the verb humnein can refer to any kind of song, to the Homeric hymns and to Homeric, Hesiodic, and lyric poetry as well.\(^{26}\) The specific

\(^{23}\)For the Homeric hymns as proems and epilogues to epic recitations, see Allen, Halliday, and Sikés (1936) lxxiii–xcvi; Cassola (1975) xii–xxv; and in general, Lenz (1980). For an analysis of the opening of the Theogony as a proemic hymn, see Friedlander (1914) and, more generally, Van Groningen (1946) and Janko (1981).

\(^{24}\)The longer hymns, to Apollo, Aphrodite, and Demeter, are generally agreed to represent archaic poetry. The date of the Hymn to Hermes is more controversial; I agree with Görgemanns (1976) that it is archly sophisticated and smacks of the fifth century. Of course, even very late hymns (e.g., 31, 32) can preserve valuable versions of ancient formulas, even if these are only perfunctory where they now stand.

\(^{25}\)Informative hypotheses about the early historical connections between epics and proems are in Koller (1956) and Durante (1976) 46–50, though lack of evidence makes the question of priority a chicken-and-egg affair.

\(^{26}\)See, e.g., Od. 8.429 (of Demodocus’s heroic songs); Hesiod Works and Days 662
nature and function of the proem are best defined not by its divine subject matter or by its language and meter (which are the same as epic's) but by its ethos. This distinctive ethos is evident as Hesiod begins: “From the Muses of Helicon let us begin to sing, who once.” The proem allows the poet to refer to himself, to begin by saying “I” (or a royal “we”).27 Such a liberty is not allowed in epic, which restricts itself to the less assertive “sing” or “tell me.”28 The difference between the “I will sing” of the proem and the “Sing, Muse” of the invocation summarizes a great difference in the way the poet is allowed to present himself in different stages of the performance. In fact, the function of the proem seems to have been to allow the poet to say “I” and to refer to himself as a particular poet about to perform on a particular occasion.29

Although the proem of the Theogony contains great praises of the Muses, to think of this section only as a hymn is to miss the equally important fact that it also allows Hesiod to name and praise himself.30 When Hesiod tells of his election as poet and dilates on the value of poetry in society, he is present as poet and personalized to a far greater degree than he will be once the narrative proper begins. A similar self-referring ethos can be found in a proem used to link the two halves of Hymn to Apollo (166–178): the poet names himself and where he comes from (cryptically, as the blind man of

(of his own song); Pseudo-Hesiod fr. 357 (of Hesiod and Homer); H. Ap. 161 (of a choral lyric). The differentiation of hymns to gods from “encomia” for mortals is found first in Plato (Republic 10.607a etc.). See, generally, Cassola (1975) x–xii and Wünsch (1914) 141–142 for a speculative reconstruction of the change in sense.

27 For “I” / “we” as the subject of “sing” / “shall sing” see Hymn 6, 10, 12, 15, 18, 23, 25, 27, 30.

28 The only exception is the Little Iliad which begins “Ilion I sing” (1 D, K). Here I think the poet is borrowing from proemic style, for the first syllable of “I sing” is long (áeidō), whereas it is generally short in epic. (The one exception is the acephalous Od. 17.519). In proems, however, this odd scansion of “I sing” is common (Hymn 12.1, 18.1, 27.1, cf. 32.1) and exactly paralleled in Theognis’s proem (4 IEG) and Apellicon’s “ancient” opening to the Iliad, which I quote hereafter.

29 Most of the Homeric hymns do not sound very personal now, and some of them begin with the more neutral invocation (Hymn 4, 5, 9, 14, 17, 19, 20, 31, 32, 33) or take the form of a general prayer (8, 21, 24, 29). But it is worth noting that the collection of Homeric hymns is a sort of anthology, and the usefulness of anthologies is to strip the exempla of any too particular references that would be difficult to adapt.

30 On the poetic persona projected by Hesiod, see Griffith (1983) and Nagy (1982).
Chios) and boasts of the excellence of his singing and his hopes for eternal fame. 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” (lēgō [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). 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 (kosmēsai [7.59]) or describe a chorus as “knowing how to imitate” and their song as “finely fitted together” (kalōs surarēren [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.
expression *theou arkheto*, which, in the first person, is a common way to announce proems.\(^{33}\) In addition, we hear that one “ancient” text of the *Iliad* had a “proem,” whose quoted line quite well fits the form: “The Muses I sing and Apollo famed for his bow.”\(^{34}\)

It would hardly be surprising that any such proems that Homer or his circle may have used were not included when performance became text, for proems are essentially separable from any particular theme since they were focused on the occasion. Hence literate critics such as the Hellenistic Crates of Mallos could delete the proems to both Hesiodic works on grounds of irrelevance, and he may have condemned an Iliadic proem as well.\(^{35}\) Already by the time Aristotle came to write his *Rhetoric*, *prooimion* could be used for the beginning of a show speech (those for display, the rhetorical equivalent of literature) in which the speaker indulges himself, saying “whatever he likes and then tack it onto the main theme.”\(^{36}\) For text-based critics, the proem could appear to have

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33For “I begin from” (*arkhomai* with the genitive) as a way to signal proems, cf. H. Aphr. 293; *Hymn* 25.1, 32.18; and Hesiod *Theog*. 1 with West’s (1966) note. Some scholars would break up Homer’s allusion by taking *theou* with *hornētheis*, “stirred by the god, he began.” This reading gives too little weight to the hymnic parallels and leaves *arkheto* hanging, for the finite forms of this verb usually require a nominal or verbal complement in epos; see Calhoun (1938); Stanford (1974); and Heubeck, West and Hainsworth (1981) on *Od.* 8.499. It is possible to take *theou* with both, as does Lenz (1980) 69 n. 1, but *hornētheis* is commonly used absolutely, and here Demodocus may be “stirred into action” by Odysseus’s preceding words rather than by the god.

34From the “Roman Life of Homer” (Wilamowitz-Moellendorff [1929] 32). See Wade-Gery (1952) 71–72 for a discussion. A highly literate development of this function of the proem can be found in the lines prefaced to the *Aeneid* in some ancient lives of Virgil. The poet begins by identifying himself and his origins (“ille ego qui quondam gracili modulatus avena / Carmen”: “I am he who once played my song on a slender reed” [1–2]), sketches out his works, and then turns to his present theme: “at nunc horrentia Martis / Arma virumque cano” (“But now, Mars’ bristling / Arms and the man I sing” [4–5]). With the transitional “but now” (*at nunc*), compare the “tell me now” (*espete nun moi*) in the “ancient” *Iliad* proem (line 2) and in Homeric transitional invocations (e.g., *Il*. 2. 484, 11.218; cf. Hesiod *Theog*. 965, fr. 1 M-W).


36*Rhetoric* 3.14.1141b19–26 (Kassel [1976]). Aristotle compares the proems of flute players, who begin by playing “whatever they can execute skillfully and then attach it to the key note.” Similar language can be found in Pseudo-Plutarch’s discussion of kitharodic proems, apparently lyrical versions of the kind of proems we have in the Homeric hymns: the singers would dedicate themselves to the god “in any way
little connection with what followed, but what formal classification severs could be closely joined in performance, and we may regard the proems not as a genre distinct from epic but as a subgenre or part of its full performance.

Once proems are returned to the beginnings of Homer's epics the nature of that poetry becomes clearer. With their potential for self-reference, proems provided the way for a particular singer on a particular occasion to translate his speech into the eternal song of the Muses. The theme to be introduced, being pan-Hellenic in scope, would have aspired to the quality of the universal, and the proem puts this timeless tale of the Muses in its place.\(^\text{37}\) Though one is obliged to describe ethos in formal terms, focusing on the poet's use of linguistic shifters, in performance it was not reducible only to such features. At a great festival with an international audience, the proem was an opportunity to lay claim to a large reputation; in less formal circumstances, it was the privileged moment for the poet to speak as "I" to that audience at that time and place. But once the Muses are called on to sing, the voice we hear will be divested of peculiarity and personality, and the proem, in my view, was the place for this divestiture. Short or long, it could allow these poets, whose pride, competitiveness, and self-assertiveness had made them Greek poets, to assert themselves and then sublimate themselves into the transcendental voice of the Muses. The proem carries the poet and audience from the personal to the they pleased" in their proems and then proceed to the poetry of Homer or others (On Music 1132b).

\(^{37}\)Perhaps the Hymn to Hermes plays on the proem's use of self-advertisement in its contrast of two different proems sung by Hermes. When the god first invents the lyre, he begins with "impromptu" snatches of verse, "the sort that youths bandy back and forth," and then proceeds to sing of Zeus and Maia, "naming in his proem his own renowned begetting" (59). Hermes later refines this "primitive" singing when he sings to Apollo what is in all respects a theogony (cf. 427–428). The proem to this Hesiodic theme is more correctly Hesiodic: "Mnèmosunè first of the gods he honored in his song / mother of the Muses" (429–430). Between the two performances poetry evolves from natural crudity to a well-defined form suitable for an Olympic audience, and self-reference is similarly refined. The progressive view of art implicit here is characteristic of enlightened fifth-century thought: see in general Democritus (68 B fr. 144, 154 D-K) and Aristotle Poetics 4.1448b4–27, where imitation arises "naturally" in children, and poetry evolves from "improvisations" to invective or hymns and encomia, according to the character of the singer.
traditional, from the local to the Panhellenic, from the present to the eternal.

In epic beginnings, then, we see a sequence from proem to invocation with a complex rhythm and function. By being mindful of the appropriate god on a given occasion, by "not forgetting," as they say, poets ensure the best hope of success. The conventions or "laws" operating here are clearly not of a purely literary nature, to be taken as tokens of genre. Rather, they have something of the force of ritual prescription and are repeated as a tried and secure way to start singing such themes. The careful management of ethos in these openings permits a more precise definition of epic as a genre than do purely formal properties, such as meter. And so it seems that the poets looked at things with a different set of distinctions from those formulated in W. G. Thalmann's 1984 survey of the forms of archaic Greek hexameter poetry. Thalmann grouped together the longer archaic hexameter poems as part of an extended argument for the case that "meter is not an artificial or arbitrary means of lumping together poems that might otherwise have few similarities" and that early Greek hexameter poetry has enough "homogeneity" to constitute a "poetic type."38 This grouping proved fruitful for Thalmann's readings, but in consideration of ethos, I would place archaic epic in a narrower subclass. The most basic formal class of poetry that I can discern from the scanty early evidence is that of "sung poetry," what we call lyric and the Greeks called "speech and song" or simply "song," melos, in the sense of words and music.39 Poetry that was not sung was negatively defined, essentially by never calling it melos, though it could be designated by the plural of epos: Homer uses epea for the substance of the poet's song (cf. Od. 8.91, 17.519), as do early elegiac poets (Solon 1.2; Theognis 20 IEG).40 In defining epic as a subclass of unsung poetry, it seems that the metrical difference between, say, the hex-

39Alcman 14.2 Page (melos), 39.1 (epe . . . kai melos); cf. Plato, Republic 398D.
40This broad use of the plural of epos for unsung poetry (and not only hexametric poetry) seems to have persisted into the classical period, for Herodotus 5.113.2; Xenophon Mem. 2.2.21; and Plato Meno 95D can use epea for elegiacs. This class of poems was the basis of the term "rhapsody." See Ford (1988). Koller's study of epea (1972) unnecessarily restricts the word to hexameters.
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. 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.” 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).

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

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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.
addressed to an individual or coterie (in the form we call monody) or closely attached to a ritual or social occasion and indeed defined by those moments (as in choral lyric). Although Alcman or Pindar may give fairly extensive stretches of mythic narrative, this past is always exited and one returns to the present, either via a moralizing gnome that draws a lesson from the tale or by a reference to the mythic act as founding or paralleling the present ceremony. We may observe that tragedy, heir to both epic and choral lyric, uses the ethos of both: the heroic deeds are dramatized “objectively”—any reference to fifth-century Athenian concerns is only implicit—yet in many plays and trilogies the tragic action issues in the founding of a cult or civic institution that continues into the “present” day.

Epic keeps a chaste distance from the present of performance, though it is not absolute: similes playfully evoke, if not the present, at least the quotididian, and as we shall see in Chapter 3, the occasion of performance could sometimes be evoked and exploited for ironic effects. But on the whole, epic leaves the relationship between individual poet and particular audience wholly implicit; it pretends to be an impersonal tale, universally interesting, told for its own sake. After the proem, the circumstances in which it is performed are dismissed, and once we have entered on the epic tale we are presented with action, as it was before it became poetry. But if Homer is giving us a story beyond momentary interest, without idiosyncrasy, we may well wonder exactly what the poet’s role is once the Muses begin to sing.

Art and the Muse

The appeal to the Muses is so conventional by now that we may forget that they are uniquely Greek. No other traditional heroic poetry gets its topics from similar transmitting deities. Germanic

44Some recent finds of Stesichorus suggest that a lyric in “epic” style, with sustained objective narrative, was sung at least in the sixth century; such an art form would have been a more ornamental rival for epic performance according to the suggestive reconstruction by Burkert (1987).
heroic poetry, for example, treats past glories under such introduc­
tions as “so it is said” or “the world has heard.”\(^45\) But Greek epic
cannot dispense with the Muses; they ground the definition of
epic. In fact, as we have seen, the simplest definition of \emph{aoidê} in
epos is that it is the particular singing of the \emph{aoidos}. But who then
merits the title of “singer,” \emph{aoidos}? The short answer is the one
whom the Muses have favored; hence the epithet restricted to
singers, their songs, and their voice is \emph{thespis}, “speaking like a god”
and one of their characteristic descriptions is \emph{theios}, “godlike.”\(^46\)
But it is not clear how the central role the Muses play here can be
reconciled with all the poet’s artistry evident in the poems—their
smooth and flexible meter, their elevated and cosmopolitan dic­
tion, their cunning ways with a stor­
y. How is the art of poetry
accounted for under the sway of the Muses? This question may
also be put: How literally are we to take the invocatory imper­
atives? If it is not the Muse herself who sings, for we hear the poet,
what is it that the poet does?

It is disagreeable to the romantic in us to see the poet as merely
the “tool” or “passive instrument” of the Muses.\(^47\) Accordingly,
some have read a division of labor into “tell \emph{me}, Muse,” deducing
that there is a human contribution too.\(^48\) Since the poetry is de­
monstrably traditional in its stor­
ies, the special work of the poet
has been thought to be in his style, the way he handles traditional
matter: the Muse tells the poet, he performs some operation on
what he is told, and we get his poem as distinct from what another
would give us.\(^49\) Often it is said that the Muse gives the poet the
content and he puts the form on it.\(^50\) Some go so far as to speak of
the poet’s “intellectual” relationship with the Muses,\(^51\) since, after
all, Homer’s idea of inspiration does not imply being possessed or
out of one’s wits.\(^52\) In support of such views a speech of Phemius is

\(^{45}\text{Cf. Bowra (1952) 40–41; Niles (1983) 51.}\)
\(^{46}\text{E.g., \textit{Od.} 17.385, 1.336. These terms will be discussed more fully in Chapter 5.}\)
\(^{47}\text{Glosses, respectively, of Falter (1934) 5 and Grube (1965) 2. See Lanata (1963) 1–2.}\)
\(^{48}\text{For earlier views, see Lanata (1963) 9–10.}\)
\(^{49}\text{Lanata (1963) 14.}\)
\(^{50}\text{Marg (1957) 61–63; Dodds (1957) 80; Murray (1981) 90–91.}\)
\(^{52}\text{Lanata (1963) 8–9; cf. Thalmann (1984) 127 with notes.}\)
often quoted: defending himself to Odysseus, he boasts, “I am self-taught, and the Muse has made stories / of every kind grow in my heart” (Od. 22.347–348). In various ways it has been asserted that Phemius distinguishes his own “original” or artistic work from the contribution of the god. 53

But it is anachronistic to foist upon this oral art form a clear and significant distinction between form and content. 54 To be sure, words (epea) are quite concrete entities in the Homeric world: they may have “shape” and come forth fast and thick as winter snow (Od. 11.367; ll. 3.222), but it is not clear that Homer would think of different styles of speaking as much as simply different speeches. Certainly there is no sense in Homer that there are different versions of the “Wrath of Achilles” or the “Quarrel of Achilles and Odysseus.” Such a distinction has very little use in what we know of other traditional oral poetry, where stability of theme is prior to and more important than stability of form. 55 The bards Lord studied did not claim to “compose” songs artfully; they actually repudiated originality and claimed (falsely of course) that they only reproduced them, the same way each time. 56 These claims are intelligible in practical terms: while the singer learns the songs and performs them, the story and the way it is told are united; there is no benefit or intellectual reward for separating them. George Walsh puts it well: “What a modern reader conceives to be ‘knowledge of facts’ or ‘subject of song’ . . . Homer simply calls ‘song,’ . . . the facts presumably speak for themselves. Thus there is no occasion for a specifically human verbal art to make facts into poetry.” 57

53 Lanata (1963) 14 says this passage shows that skill and inspiration are “co-present”; cf. Murray (1981) 97. Schadewaldt (1965) 78–79 gives an avowedly Pindaric interpretation: the singer says that he has not merely “learned” his songs (like the lowly handworkers in his guild) but has adapted his art from the Muses. Fränkel (1973) 19–20 interprets it as boasting that the poet not only can repeat what he has heard but can produce songs on a proposed topic. Walsh (1984) 11 takes it as “equivocally a claim also for the artistry of a god” (further references at his 137 n. 24).


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 “Homer 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 (epaoïdê) 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

58The best recent discussion of these lines is Thalmann (1984) 126–127.
59Fränkel (1973) 7, and cf. 11, 15–16.
60Marg (1957) 11–12; Maehler (1963) 9–10. For “medicine man,” see Schadewaldt (1965) 78–79.
61Kranz (1924) 67; Spercutti (1950); Maehler (1963) 17; Lanata (1963) 21.
speak of epic poetry as “society’s means of self-expression.” It is true that early Greek literature generally does not value self-expression per se, but this is not to say that epic poets were unconscious or paradisiacally unconcerned for themselves; this idea is hardly credible for Greeks, who at one time or another made competitions out of virtually every form of poetry from high tragedy to singing over wine. And it is hard to square with the praise given within the poems to poets as performers; with the names given them, Phemius (“man of fame”), for example, and Demodocus (“received by the people”); and with the obvious pride in themselves and what they do which poets display in the poems.

The point I would make is not that Homer is naïve about language or the self but, as Jesper Svenbro has shown in his study of early Greek poetics, that Homer goes out of his way to avoid speaking of the poet’s activity in terms of “art” or “skill” or “craft.” Svenbro points out that Homer does have a stock of old, even Indo-European words from the arts and crafts which can be applied metaphorically to intellectual and verbal contriving. Indeed, such metaphors often describe that pervasive and highly valued cunning summed up in the word métis. Homer speaks of “constructing” a clever trick (mètin . . . tekténaito [II. 17–19]), “fitting together a snare” (dolon . . . èrtue [Od. 13.439]), or “weaving” and “stitching together” evil plans (ll. 6.187, 18.637). But the masters of verbal cunning turn out not to include poets: it is Odysseus who “constructs a tale” (epos . . . paretektênaito) to get a robe from Eumaeus (Od. 14.131–132), beggars who “fit together lies” (pseudea . . . artunontas [Od. 11.363–366]), and councillors who “weave speeches” (muthous . . . huphainein [Il. 3.212]). As historians of archaic Greek thought, we might put the poet’s skill in the category of métis, a not quite scientific but highly effective ability to combine “all kinds of elements” (pantoìos), especially to make a snare or trick. But in trying to define Homer’s conception or representation of the place of his art among human activities, we must

62E.g., Schadewaldt (1965) 75–79; Marg (1957) 12; the quoted formula is taken from Thalmann (1984) 113.
63Svenbro (1976) 193–212. This provocative and insightful book has been controversial on some points but this is not one of them. Cf. Rito6k (1989) 344–346.
64Detienne and Vernant (1974) offer a rich study of métis.
note that his vocabulary for his art and its “product” is centered not on matter, making, and artifact but on a special singing sanctioned by divinity—*thespis aoidê*. Conceptions of poetry as performance allied to magic and religion dominate his self-presentation. If Homer tells us anything about a bard’s song beyond the mere fact that he was singing, he will tell us what the song is about; he may add that the song was pleasing or enchanting, but he takes little notice of concrete form or any other aspect of the text.

This is in part an argument from silence, but it gains force if we contrast for a moment a quite artistic description of the working poet from *Beowulf*:

> At times the king’s thane
> a man with memory for songs of praise
> who stored in his mind a vast number
> of old stories, found word after word
> bound in truth; in his wisdom he began
> to sing in turn of Beowulf’s exploit
> and skillfully related an apt tale,
> varying his words.65

We have here explicit recognition of various aspects of the poet’s personal excellence—his memory, creativity (“finding”), wisdom, skill, sense of aptness—and even references to poetic techniques specific to the scop—alliteration (so 871a may be read) and variation (874a). Search as we may, we find no comparable material in Homer, though two passages are often adduced to support a recognition of the poet’s ability as a kind of skill: Telemachus lists poets among the *dêmiourgoi*, “craftsmen” (*Od*. 17.382–385) and Odysseus is praised for telling his story like a singer, “skillfully” (*epistamenôs* [*Od*. 11.368; cf. *Works and Days* 107]). But the interpretation of each passage is strained. A “demiurge” in Homer is far from being the craftsman that he would become in Plato; as the passage itself makes clear, the word applies to anyone who offers a special service not to a single household but to the community, the *dêmos*.

Inasmuch as the ranks of demiurges mentioned by Telemachus include the prophet and the healer as well as the woodcutter any conception of an art they have in common must be very broad indeed. To call a singer a demiurge, then, only places him in a social class united by mobility rather than analogous skills. So too with epistamenós: it is tendentious and anachronistic to translate this adverb as “skillfully” or “according to the rules of his art” as if its root verb were already Aristotle’s word for scientific knowledge and Homer had a notion of art as a set of abstract rules wholly separable from the individual practitioner. In epic epistamai means “to know how” in the broadest sense, extending from special knowledge to a dancer’s dexterity. Used of poetry, it need not imply deliberative skill any more than when it is used of a herald’s penetrating call or of nimbly dancing feet; nothing more need be read into this line than that the singer sings “capably.”

Svenbro, then, is right to draw attention to Homer’s reticence about his own artistry, but his explanation is along the lines of the primitivist. On his view, Homer shies away from descriptions of his own skills because such self-assertion would be an impiety; for the same reason, he rejects signing his work. I would say, rather, that the idea of the poet as artist is not so much absent from Homer as sequestered from epic proper: it is not allowed in invocations or in representations of poets, but would have been welcome in a proem, as indeed the poet’s “signature” would have been. In fact, the one exception to Svenbro’s case shows that the skill that “fashions” heroic stories can be seen in Homer, but transposed onto the gods.

In maintaining that the Homeric poet is too pious to claim the

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68 For the Homeric idea of techne, see Kube (1969) 14–19.
71 I would add to the proemic vocabulary for “crafting” poetry noted in the previous section Pseudo-Hesiod fr. 357 M-W. In a fictitious proem Hesiod says that he and Homer “stitched song into new hymns.”
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 [aoïdê] 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.” 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., ll. 6.314; Od. 12.347) and is especially associated with the paragon of craftsmen, Hephaestus (ll. 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” (ll. 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” (ll. 6.357–358). 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

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

73With “make” (thèke kakon moron) cf. Od. 3.136: Athena “made strife” for the Atreidæ on their return. One also thinks of ll. 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.
divert ideas of verbal artistry from its singers and to have transferred them onto gods as the ultimate shapers of events.74

Thus Homer discounts and even denies the significance of the poet in shaping and defining poetry. The work of the poet is not to tell a story in a certain way but simply to tell a certain story, and the figure of the aoidos is linked not with artisans but with itinerant specialists who can do things most people cannot. Homer’s depictions of poets present a poetry without rhetoric, a pure presentation of the tale without embellishment or distortion from the teller. It seems that Homer would have the meter and dialect of his texts pass unnoticed in our conception of his art, for the form of a story is not of interest apart from the story. Genres of unsung poetry, then, are demarcated significantly by their ethos, and the invocation and the representation of poets in epic are part of that genre which advertised itself as a tale told without rhetoric. We need not think that epic poets were purely selfless or that they yielded to some larger social voice; nor need we strike a fine balance between the “I” and “you” of invocations, primitivizing or historicizing the poet’s “I.” What we have is a convention: we are not in some period before the discovery of the self, but we are in a genre in which it was expected that the poet would remove himself from the text and speak not as an artisan of words but as transmitter of stories.

These negative conclusions throw into more prominence those tales that are presumably told without art. To know more about the art of poetry, then, we should look more closely at these stories and at how they are classified. Of particular interest is a system of metaphors centrally important to the poet in organizing his tradition in his mind and in relating himself to that tradition. We will find that just as Homer has projected poetic artistry onto the gods, he has projected narrative structure onto the deeds themselves.

74A further parallel can be found in Hesiod fr. 273 M-W if one reads the manuscript’s edeiman, used of house building (instead of eneiman): “Sweet it is to find out all those things the gods have erected for mortals, as a clear mark distinguishing the coward and the brave.”
A Topical Poetic

Invocations tell us obvious things about epic tales—that they are large, that they are about sorrowful deeds of heroes, that the gods’ plans work through them. But the very care and consistency with which these things are repeated is significant, for as stories are a primary and constant interest of the poet, they are the one element in this fluid, variable art of performance that is given stability, identity, and a name. In its regularized way of defining and announcing particular stories, this oral art comes closest to establishing fixed, essential elements of the singer’s profession. To be sure, the “Wrath of Achilles” doesn’t fix the story into a single, unalterable verbal form like a written, titled work, but identifies only a flexible constant behind the oral performance. Certainly it could not be told so that it contradicted major events of accepted heroic history, but beyond that, it was little more than a flexible plan of events to be presented as the occasion demanded.\(^75\) Nor is the distinction between one theme and the next or between a theme and a subtheme rigid and easy to demarcate: stories belonging to the same general area of mythic history may be shaded into one another or isolated for individual treatment.\(^76\) For example, in book 8 of the _Odyssey_ Homer first calls what Demodocus sang the “Quarrel of Odysseus and Achilles, son of Peleus” (Od. 8.75); later Odysseus refers to this same song in more general terms as the “destruction of the Achaeans, / all that they did and suffered and wrought at Troy” (8.489–490); yet later, Alcinous seems to subsume this song and Demodocus’s subsequent “Fashioning of the Wooden Horse” (Od. 8.500–501) under the larger title of the “Destruction of the Argive Danaans and of Ilion” (Od. 8.578). The focus on painful action is constant, as is the awareness of just who’s getting the worst of it at each moment, but beyond that, the title gives no precise definition of the contents and limits of the story.

Yet it is fair to think of varying performances as centering on a

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\(^{75}\)See Lord (1960) 68, 96–97, 119–120, and cf. M. Parry’s definition of “theme”: “the groups of ideas regularly used in telling a tale in the formulaic style of traditional song” (Parry [1971]).

\(^{76}\)Excellent remarks on this in Finnegan (1977) 107.
single, fixed story insofar as they recount determinate incidents that befell determinate heroes, and these in a determinate sequence. In addition, these individual stories are also more abstractly “fixed” together, for invocations tell us that each tale must take a starting point in a larger frame of memorable acts. The basis for this genre of singing, then, is the fiction that behind the telling of each story exists one divinely superintended tale, one connected whole that never alters, though parts of it may be performed in this or that time and place.

That Homer and Hesiod conceived of a larger realm of interconnected stories is clear from two technical terms or terms of the trade. One is the word for an individual theme, oimê, and the other the word for changing from one theme to another, metabainô (which occurs only once within epic, though is very well attested in proems). Taken together, these quasi-technical terms suggest what Walter Ong calls a “topical poetic,” a poetic that identifies individual themes as having a determined place in relation to other themes along a road or path. The stability and continuity of individual stories are metaphorically expressed as paths, and the tradition is figured as the great tract in which these stories may be joined end to end. How the poets imagined this total structure of stories is significant for defining epic, for the metaphorical shape the poets give that matter is a map of poetic genres within epos. We will see that the final shape of these tracts of song is the entire world of the past, the “deeds of gods and men to which bards give kleos,” including Homer’s poetry but also Hesiod’s theogonic poetry as well.

Both technical terms are found in Homer’s longest sustained portrait of a bardic performance. Early in book 8 Homer describes an after-dinner performance by Demodocus:

After they had put aside the desire for food and drink,  
the Muse then stirred up the singer to sing the famed of men [klea andrôn]  
from that path [oimê] whose fame at that time reached broad heaven,  
the Quarrel of Odysseus and Achilles, son of Peleus.  
[Odyssey 8.72–75]
The term here that has attracted most attention is the "fames of men," the *klea andrōn*. But I will reserve an analysis of that phrase for the next chapter and first look at its constituent parts. An *oimē* 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 *oimē* is perhaps the source of the word "proem" (*pro-oimion*), meaning something like "the portion of the performance that comes before the main theme." 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. 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." To proceed from one topic of heroic song to another was to "move

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77 So Chantraine (1977) defines *prooimion*, s.v. *oimē*: "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. *oimē* judge this connection uncertain ("unklar"). See the next note.

78 The etymology and original meaning of *oimē* 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 *aoidēs*, "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 *oimē* 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 . . . epebēsan *aoidēs*; cf. *H. Hermes* 464–465: "I do not begrudge you, Apollo, to walk upon [the path] of my art."
along” the paths of song, expressed in another apparently technical word, *metabainô*, to pass from one place to another. After Demodocus’s “Quarrel of Odysseus and Achilles,” Odysseus asks Demodocus for a different epic story:

But come, move along [on the path of song] and sing the Fashioning of the Horse,
the wooden one that Epeius made together with Athena,
which godlike Odysseus once brought to the acropolis as a trick filling it with men who sacked Ilion.

and he brought forth the song,
taking it from that point when the Greeks embarked on their well-benched ships and sailed away.

[Odyssey 8.492–495, 499–501]

This is Homer’s only use of *metabainô*, but it has the same sense it has in the conclusions of some hymns, where it signals their change of theme: “having begun with you I will move along to another hymn.” Like *oimê, metabainô* metaphorically conceives of song as spatially extended, and it belongs to the same quasi-technical language of early epos. The choice of themes is therefore a choice of a place, as invocations choose where to start the story.

When a singer selects a particular theme, he is said to be stirred within his heart or mind (his *thumos* or *noos*) to go in a particular direction: “The Muse has given *aoidê* to the singer / to give pleasure, in whatever direction [happei] his heart moves” (Od. 8.44–45); “why do you begrudge the noble singer / to give pleasure wherev-

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80 E.g., *Hymn* 5.293, 9-9. See Weber (1934) 445–448. This formula may even be used at the end of “longer” hymns. See Richardson (1974) on *H. Dem.* 495, against Böhme (1937) 76 n. 78.

81 The same metaphor appears in lyric: Alcman 1.12 Page; cf. Pavese (1967). Xenophanes begins a song: “Now again I will enter on another story, and I will show the way” (*allon epeimi logon, 7 IEG*). A similar metaphor is in what Aristotle quotes as the first line of Chorilus of Samos’s epic on the Persian War, but which is actually a transitional opening: *hégeoallon logon*, “lead for me another story, how from the land of Asia / a great war came to Europe” (fr. 316 L-J–P). In prose similar metaphors mark a change of topic: Gorgias *Helen* 10, “Come now, I will move from one speech to another” (*prosalonap’alloumetastôlogon*); cf. Herodotus 2.382, 6.39.1.
er his mind is stirred to go” (Od. 1.346–347).\textsuperscript{82} The moving of the poet’s mind is like a ranging over space; conversely, a god shooting speedily through space to Olympus “darts like the mind of a well-traveled man / whose mind [noos] flies . . . as he thinks, / ‘I wish I were here, or there,’ and he thinks of many places.”\textsuperscript{83} What we have here is a “topical poetic.” This term from Ong’s useful discussion (1977) nicely allies the identification of particular subject matter, particular “topics,” with the figure of a theme as a particular place. The topics of epic are imagined as extending in space and their relation to each other is a matter of coming before or after. Within the “fames of men” the organization will appear to be genealogical-sequential: one tells a story straight through, the parent before the child, the first before the last, and so the Fashioning of the Horse before the Sack of Troy, but after Achilles’ stories. But on the basis of this topical poetic we may also identify the special place for heroic song as a whole in relation to other songs with the same ethos, for the ends of our texts indicate that the tales of heroines and heroes have their place after but continuous with the stories of cosmogony and the rise of the gods.

Thalmann has shown particularly how the idea of “the poems and their larger unity” was more than an abstraction for poets, how it often resulted in individual “songs” being linked together when they were made into texts.\textsuperscript{84} This process is most evident in the later-named “epic cycle,” in which variously dated stories about the Trojan War were joined together to form a continuous history reaching from the origins of the war to its aftermath in the returns. But Thalmann notes too that the Theogony was linked (by Hesiod or another) with the Catalogue of Women, stories of gods’

\textsuperscript{82}Cf. H. Ap. 20: “In every direction [pantêi] the range of your song extends, Phoebus.” Perhaps we should also give locative rather than instrumental force to peî in such phrases as “there is no way [i.e., direction] in which to remember song if I forget you,” Hymn 1.17–18, cf. 7.58–59. The two adverbs are combined in Choerilus 317.4–5 LI-J–P (= 1 K), discussed in Chapter 2.

\textsuperscript{83}Il. 15.80–82. Apollo can fly off to Olympus “quick as thought” (noêma [H. Ap. 186]). For further examples, see Allen, Halliday, and Sikés (1936) on H. Hermes 43.

\textsuperscript{84}Thalmann (1984) 75–77; on 77 he comes close to detaching, as I would, the Works and Days and its “sequel,” the Ornithomanteia (“Bird Divination”), from his sense of epos. I would not follow him when he links this larger order to “the poem’s structure, the paratactic linking of discrete passages that conform in shape to the traditional compositional patterns” (124).
pairing with mortal women and producing the great heroic lines. This seeming editorial violence was only realizing the vision such poetry had of itself, as can be seen from the *Theogony’s* proem, when the Muses sing such a continuous tale:

> Sending forth their immortal voice,
> the Gods’ Revered Race they celebrate first in song
> from the beginning, whom Earth and broad Heaven begot,
> and the gods who arose from these, givers of good things,
> and next Zeus, the father of gods and men,
> as they begin and end their singing
> how he is mightiest of the gods and greatest in power,
> and next the Race of Men and of the Strong Giants
> they hymn, and they please the mind of Zeus on Olympus
> 
> *[Theogony 43–51]*

The titling syntax draws attention to the various themes the Muses perform: their first song is devoted to the birth of gods and goddesses; then they sing a song devoted exclusively to Zeus; finally they proceed to tell of early generations of men. In this of course they anticipate the sequence of topics found in the *Theogony* and its sequel, the *Catalogue of Women*: gods from the beginning, Zeus’s exploits, then mortal matters.85

Logically then, the *Iliad, Odyssey*, and all of what we call “epic” belonged further along on the same continuum. And so it appears if we gain a perspective outside of epic, from the *Hymn to Apollo*. It describes a Delian women’s chorus who begin “from the gods” before moving on to heroic matters:

> When they first hymn Apollo
> and next Leto and Artemis who delights in arrows,
> calling to mind the men and women of old,
> they sing their hymn and enchant the tribes of mortals.
> 
> *[Hymn to Apollo 158–161]*

The chorus’s proem (n.b., “first,” as in *Theogony* 44) acknowledges the presiding divinities on Delos; this proem may have included an

85Though the *Theogony* does not (now at any rate) give us the Muses’ Giants, it is supplemented with the matings of gods and mortals as announced in 963–968 and 1019ff. (fr. 1 M-W). See West (1966) on *Theog. 44.*
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" (mnēsamenai) the men and women of old, that is, to invoke the Muses, daughters of Mnēmosunē. 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 andrōn are the "fames" only of men and women of old. 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. 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).
them is not generic but topical. In his *Theogony* Hesiod no less than Homer is a poet of the past, and he calls his *Theogony* by the same name, *aoidē* (e.g., 22, 104). Each attributes the same repertoire to the *aoidos*: in Hesiod he “chants the names of men of former times / and the blessed gods who hold Olympus” (*Theog.* 100–101); Homer’s Phemius sings “the deeds of gods and men” (*Od.* 1.338), and Demodocus performs both Trojan saga and the affair of Ares and Aphrodite. Hence in the imagination of the “epic” genre, the *klea andrōn* as a whole are after but connected with stories of the birth and deeds of the gods. Epic is not a secular story about men as opposed to a divine story about gods but a later story in a continuous sacred history. Within this continuum one certainly knows the difference between tales purely about the gods and tales of heroic men and gods, but the “line” between them is not a generic line inscribed by literary considerations as much as one written across cosmic history. Within the poetry of the past Hesiod demands a special place by claiming that his is the first tale; Homer’s poetry cannot claim that place but does announce that each tale is set under the same Olympian skies.

This whole is what I call the poetry of the past, a presentation of ancient but ever real and valid stories about gods and early mortals. The conventions of epic performance, the need for a *prooimion* before *oimiē*, are not simply a matter of courtesy but define the place of epic in the order of things. This order, at once spatial and chronological, ritualistic and narratological, is the canon against which to define Homeric epic. Hence it is in a literary, religious, and cosmological sense that Homer’s epic may be defined as poetry of the past.

The metaphors that establish the topical poetic have led us into the dark region of how poets imagine their art. It may seem natural to picture changing poetic themes as moving through space, but the idea as applied to epic seems to have a particular, if obscure, history. Karl Meuli has linked the poet’s path of song to shamanistic ideas of journeying to hidden realms of knowledge. 88

The widespread but elusive figure of the shaman, who combined

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88 Meuli (1938) moots the shamanistic origins of epic on 164–176 and adds the path of song on 172–173.
the roles of sacred singer, seer, healer, and visitor to the underworld, has more than once been adduced as the prototype of the poet, and similarities between poets and these inspired seers could be multiplied—as could differences. Such parallels are as tantalizing as our historical knowledge of Greek shamans is scanty, so that to adduce them here would be to explain *obscurum per obscurius.* But it would be reductive to dismiss the magical notions near the heart of the ancient idea of epic, and an inspired figure who knows certain paths may be found closer to hand in the Homeric seer. It has long been noted that Homer’s description of Calchas’s god-given power to “know the things that are and will be and were” (*Il.* 1.70) is close to the Muses’ gift to Hesiod to sing “what will be and what was” (*Theog.* 32). Indeed, Homer himself seems to suggest the parallel between poet and prophet, for the first words Calchas speaks in the poem are “Achilles, you bid me to tell / the Wrath of Apollo, the far-darting lord” (*Il.* 1.74–75): the titling syntax in line 75 suggests that the Wrath of Apollo is a seer’s account of events that are later reincorporated into the poet’s Wrath of Achilles. And we may further note that the proto-poet Calchas is also a pathfinder: his gift of prophecy enables him not only to see deeply into the present and future but also to lead the Achaean ships to Troy (*Il.* 1.71–72). It does seem as if special ways of knowing are also ways of navigating along seas whose measures can not be taken by human skill. Prophet and poet are seers of what is not apparent, and both know paths we do not.

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89 For a cautious and informed assessment of Greek shamanism, see Burkert (1972b) 162–165.
90 Dodds (1957) 81, 100 n. 118; cf. Thalmann (1984) 225 n. 53 for discussion.
91 We may note too that as Homer took up his tale in the ninth year of the war, Calchas intervenes in the plague after nine days. Martin (1989) 40 says of Calchas’s use of “tell” (*muthēsasthai*) that it introduces a “discourse that has a formal nature, often religious or legal; full detail is laid out for the audience, or is expected by the interlocutor in the poem.”
92 So Teiresias will reveal to Odysseus “the road and the measures of the path” toward home (*Od.* 4.389 = 10.539) and an Apolline oracle says it knows “the measures of the sea” (*Herodotus* 1.47.3). The poet Solon claims to know the “measure of lovely wisdom” (13.52 *IEG*). Cf. Snell (1924) 7.
The Purpose of Poetry: Vividness

The final question to answer in defining the poetry of the past is what all this was for: Why rehearse the past? Why rehearse it in this impersonal way? The answer would seem to be simple: Homer and Hesiod speak constantly of the pleasure of poetry and its enchantment. But pleasure has rarely been seen as a sufficient justification for poetry in the history of criticism, and so a promise of the truth or instructive value of poetry has often been found in these texts. Here, the central dilemma of classical and neoclassical criticism threatens like Scylla and Charybdis: Is the purpose of poetry to instruct or to delight, to give us truth or pleasure? For on the one hand, to say that the purpose of poetry is only to stimulate aesthetic contemplation seems highly anachronistic and implausibly suggest that poetry was given and received as a recognized fiction and judged for the beauty and ingenuity of the artist’s transformation of his material. Yet, on the other hand, it is not easy to attribute a strict ideal of historical truth to an age without documentation from the past, and to say that poetry provides us with moral instruction may be to read more into the texts than is there. Yet it is possible to avoid either of these impositions and take Homer and Hesiod at their words when they describe the purpose of poetry as pleasure; it is necessary, however, to understand such pleasure not as aesthetic appreciation but as an experience of what I will call vividness, a sense that the past is somehow present before us.

The only time epic mentions truth in connection with poetry is the notorious claim of Hesiod’s Muses: “We know how to tell many lies that are like what is really so [etumos], and, when we will, to proclaim true things [alēthea]” (Theog. 27–28). Because Mnemosune, the mother of Hesiod’s Muses, is interpreted as memory, and because Homer prays that the Muses may “remind” him, or “bring to mind” (mnēsaiath’ [Il. 2.492]) the names of those at Troy, some scholars would find in epic a claim that the art and value of the poetry is to be “accurate,” to convey “historical” truth.93 Accord-

93The views, respectively, of Maehler (1963) 19 and Setti (1958) 144.
ingly, invocations are taken essentially as appeals for "information." 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." 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 *alêteia* (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, *alêtheia* and its congerates are used only of accounts by human speakers about matters of which it is difficult to know the facts. 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." 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


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 *alêteia* 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" (*géruiomai*), 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).

was not history. It was narrative, detailed and precise, with minute
descriptions of fighting and sailing, and feasting and burials and
sacrifices, all very real and vivid; it may even contain, buried away,
some kernels of historical fact—but it was not history.”\footnote{Finley (1975) 14–15. I think the Homeric phrase for such a style of narrative
would be \textit{kata kosmon}, which I will discuss in Chapter 3.}

Looking for historical truth as the primary virtue Homer claimed
for his poetry, then, may be anachronistic. Alternatively, the mentio
of the “hateful song” of Clytemnestra and the “pleasing song” of prudent
Penelope in \textit{Odyssey} 24.196–200 are cited for the belief
that poetry provides moral instruction. If one adds Homer’s Sirens,
who promise Odysseus that if he listens to their song he will return
“knowing more and taking pleasure” (\textit{Od.} 12.188), one may read
into Homer the neoclassical blend of \textit{dulce} with \textit{utile} and say that
his poems contain both truth and delight.\footnote{Walsh (1984) 5–6, citing Maehler (1963) 33. Lanata (1963) 30 says, “If the end of
poetry is delight its object is truth,” but makes the point against her case that none
of the names traditionally given to the Muses (e.g., “Enchanting-voice,” “Radiance”) evokes truth.}
Certainly there is nothing incongruous in taking pleasure from a true tale, as Thalmann
notes, but it is a great inference to say with Walter Kraus that
Homer’s pleasure refers to the satisfaction of “the human desire to
know.”\footnote{Thalmann (1984) 129–130; Kraus (1955) 71.}

Homer certainly became the moral educator of the Greeks, but
that is an entirely separate issue from whether Homer himself saw
his poetry as instructive. The evidence suggests that it was specifically
in the fifth century that, in James Redfield’s words, the poet
“lost the standing of a prophet and acquired the standing of a
teacher,”\footnote{Redfield (1975) 42. Cf. Harriott (1969) 107 and Snell’s (1953) tenth chapter,
“Aristophanes and Aesthetic Criticism.”} and there is a Socratic ring to such questions as What
does the poet know? and What can he teach? I at least do not sense
that these stories are presented to point to some “higher” truth, to
reveal a moral or intellectual order underlying the appearance of
things. Nevertheless, recent commentators have found Homer
hinting at the moral uses of poetry and have even gone on to read
into Odysseus’s tears at the Trojan songs in book 8 of the \textit{Odyssey}
an essay on what makes the ideal poetic auditor. But Kraus long ago raised telling objections to this line of thought: poetry is consistently portrayed in epic as a passing enchantment or momentary pleasure; its audience is rapt in silence. To interpret the tale for its moral lesson would break the spell, and there is no mention of anyone’s doing so. Just because Phoenix uses the heroic tale of Meleager to instruct Achilles in *Iliad*, book 9, does not mean that the singer presents his tales for the same reason. If we are compelled to allow that any poetry, whatever its claims for itself, cannot fail to teach us something, the truest and most profound teaching that epic poetry may have done in its time would appear to have been the very indirect and unconscious persuasion of its audiences to enjoy and admire a directly presented and unexplicated image of heroic life.

At least there is no doubt among commentators that the one goal of poetry that Homer mentions, a dozen times at least, is pleasure (*terpein*), even enchantment. Our only insight into that emotion is a much-discussed passage from Hesiod:

> Happy is he whom the Muses love
> sweet flows the voice from his mouth.
> for if someone has pain and fresh grief in his soul
> and his heart is withered by anguish, when the poet,
> the servant of the Muses, chants the fames of men of former times
> and the blessed gods who hold Olympus,
> then straightaway he forgets his sad thoughts and thinks not of his grief,
> but the gifts of the gods quickly turn him away from these.

*Theogony 96–103*

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102 So Walsh (1984) chap. 1. Thalmann (1984) 147–148 on the *Theogony* draws a distinction between the working of song and of anodyne drugs: “Poetry does work forgetfulness of the pain and sorrow that are part of being mortal, but it does so by turning its listeners toward a vision of ultimate truths that make their immediate pains seem trivial by comparison.” This sounds to me a better description of the poetics of Parmenides.


104 On this deep level Vernant (1982) has credibly read a lesson to the citizen in the epical image of the “beautiful death.”


Hesiod implies that it is at least in part because the songs are from the past—that is, not about ourselves—that they have their assuaging power. To put our minds on the deeds of others (especially when these deeds, as usual, entail great suffering) is to turn our minds away from our own griefs. The experience, then, which Plato called “turning the mind elsewhere” and which he confined to impersonation actually belongs to the whole of epos.\textsuperscript{107} This is poetry that turns its listeners away from present cares to contemplate events of long ago: the happiness of the gods and the woe of other human beings are what turn us away from our own sorrows.

It is in this connection that we should appreciate the sacred nature of memory as Jean-Pierre Vernant has expounded it.\textsuperscript{108} When Hesiod says the Muses are daughters of Memory, what mnemosunē implies is less recollection or retrieval from storage than “mindfulness.” The function of this memory is not simply preservation of the past but a psychological experience, to change the present frame of awareness.\textsuperscript{109} As the passage from Hesiod puts it, when the poet sings, a man forgets sad thoughts and doesn’t remember his grief (oude . . . memnētai). Hence, when Hesiod describes the birth of the Muses from Zeus and Memory (mnemosunē), he immediately riddles their name as “the forgetfulness [lēsmosunē] of woe and the cessation of worry” (Theog. 54–55). Vernant’s insight is all the more comprehensible for a topical poetic in which time is space: sacred memory moves us not back in time but to another place, au delà, not “back” but elsewhere, along the tracks of memorable action.

Given this special power of memory, the audience is interested in epic song not because it happened but because it happened to others. The delight in the tale is not the satisfaction of accuracy or the communication of some higher truth but the pleasurableness of a convincingly full picture. From the poet’s point of view we call this epic objectivity; but it has an equally important effect on the

\textsuperscript{107}Pucci (1977) chap. 1 calls attention to Hesiod’s metaphors for the ability of language to “deflect” the mind.


\textsuperscript{109}Mnē̂ςkosmai is used of “being mindful of dinner” or “being mindful to defend your fellows”; cf. Snell (1964). Unlike Moran (1975), I would not separate from such uses a special “literary” sense of the verb for “remembering epic stories.”
audience, something that we would not want to define as a purely aesthetic pleasure.\textsuperscript{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 \textit{enarges}, “vividness.”\textsuperscript{111}

In Homer the adjective \textit{enargēs} 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 (\textit{Od.} 4.841), but usually the word is used of the gods when they condescend to take on a form visible to men (\textit{Od.} 3.420, 7.199–200, 16.161; \textit{Il.} 22.131).\textsuperscript{112} The Greek critics adopted this word to describe poetry that puts its incidents clearly before the audience’s eyes.\textsuperscript{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.\textsuperscript{114} Longinus connects it with the poet’s powers of visualization, \textit{phantasia} (\textit{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” (\textit{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” (\textit{Ion} 535E). The awe that the rhapsode provokes is

\textsuperscript{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 \textit{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.


\textsuperscript{112}\textit{LfrgE} s.v. \textit{enargēs} takes its association with epiphanies for its original meaning, translating “in splendor” (“‘im Glanz,’ sc. e \textit{Epiphanie}”).

\textsuperscript{113}On “vividness” as a term in rhetorical criticism, see Ernesti (1962) 106 and Zanker (1981).

\textsuperscript{114}\textit{Poetics} 17.1455a22–26, 24.1462a16–17.
neither instruction (though learning comes from wonder) nor pure delight. It is the uncanny effect of the power of language to represent a hidden world merely by the accumulation of statements.\footnote{Demetrius’s prescriptions for achieving rhetorical vividness are interestingly close to the fullness of “true” epic style: it arises from “exact narrations, omitting nothing and abbreviating nothing . . . from everything that happens being said and nothing omitted” (On Style 209).}

I rehearse these passages because it is important to stress that the background of vividness is magical and epiphanic; we should not reduce it to an aesthetic notion, thinking of it, for example, as a compelling sensual impression as opposed to the clear and distinct ideas of logic. It is vividness as a feature of divine epiphanies that is involved in poetry’s power to make the invisible past appear to its hearers. The first words of each poem effect this appearance by calling on the Muses: because we are granted their perspective, when the great speeches are given we seem to be on the edge of the assembly, and when the heroic actions are performed we seem to be present as onlookers.\footnote{Cf. Griffin (1980) 6: “The ancient commentators remark regularly on Homer’s ‘graphic’ power, his skill at producing memorable scenes, and certainly this is a characteristic of Homeric writing that strikes the audience at once.”} Though epic is by definition poetry of the past, it is poetry that claims to transport us to an \textit{au delà}, not a beyond buried in the vault of recollection but a place as present as our own, though elsewhere. According to Homeric eschatology, after death the heroes’ bodies are destroyed in one way or another, and their souls fly off to Hades, the realm of the unseen.\footnote{The “helmet of Hades,” which bestows invisibility in ll. 5.845, shows that this disputed etymology of Hades was operant for the poet; see Burkert (1985) 462 n. 13.} The fundamental promise of his poetry is the paradox of restoring through mere voice these vanished heroes and rarely appearing gods to visibility. We may illustrate it simply by comparing again the power of Calchas with the power of the poet: Calchas reveals to the plague-stricken Greeks that what is really happening is that they have been beset by an angry Apollo; he can see and make known what they could not. But a similar skill also belongs to the poet himself, who in a few sublime lines has made Apollo, coming down from Olympus, appear to his audience, “with his bow, and the arrows clanged in his quiver as he went like night” (ll. 1.44–47).

The art of epic poetry which Homer inherited, then, was well...
defined in certain moments of the performance, even if not quite defined in a literary way. Proems situated these performances in a particular place and time and also defined the singer and audience. The invocations then moved from that occasion to a timeless and universal realm in which the stories subsist with ideal integrity. In this transcendent realm presided over by the Muses, the stories of men are made permanent and are fixed as sequels to the stories of gods. The Muses are tightly bound up with this kind of poetry; indeed, they are central and make the difference between poets and nonpoets, so that the “art” of poetry is finally to be favored by the Muses. In the notion of genre which Homer constructs out of the oppositions of past and present, presence and absence, his singing, like much of Hesiod’s, was a special presentation of the past, manifested in the effect I call vividness. In the next chapter we will see how this defining difference of the poetry of the past was rooted in a kind of seeing attributed to the Muses. Their seeing lies at the very heart of the difference between poetry and other tales of the past; a survey of celestial forms, it made the past appear in a way no other speech could. It is not surprising that we are permitted to hear such poetry only after prayer upon prayer.