I have given an idea of how epic defined its place among other forms of Greek poetry and how it constructed an internal organization for itself, setting its themes within a comprehensive order and its singing within the larger field of unsung poetry. The difference that the presence of the Muses makes I have found not in artistic shaping or in factual truth but in that especially convincing and absorbing quality I have called vividness. But insofar as I have specified the “outside” limits of poetry, its differences from nonpoetry, I have repeated Homer’s own definition, which is a vicious circle with a god in the middle: the Muses are what make the difference between a singer and a teller, but a singer is simply someone favored by the Muses. The central Muses, then, merit a closer examination since they define singing as a whole in relation to other uses of language, for the nature of poetry also depends on how it is different from other discourses.

My approach to this limit of epic will be through the phrase klea andrôn, the “fames of men.” Clearly a traditional term for what the poet sings, it has been taken by some as Homer’s word for poetry, or as epic’s word for itself. But we will see that klea can designate the entire range of oral tradition, and klea andrôn is any traditional
story from the past, not just those purveyed by poets. The phrase is indeed significant for defining epic, but for defining it from the outside, for Homer takes pains to distinguish his singing from “mere kleos.” The distinction of “singing” from other forms of oral tradition (of aoidê from klea) serves instead of categories like poetry and prose to explore how epic claimed a unique and valuable place among the many discourses of the past.

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

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

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

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

¹Lord (1960) 148. Similar claims had been made by Perry (1937); Van Groningen (1958); and Notopoulos (1949).
coherence of the single song he performs and the totality of songs the Muses "see." For the poet, the tradition is the Muses, and so the relationship he establishes with them in his invocations is the place to find out how he managed to settle this problem. If we eavesdrop on Homer’s prayers, we cannot fail to learn something about the poet’s project as he conceived it and in particular about a crisis he faced which needed gods to overcome. The solution to this question, which is also the anchor of the special nature of his singing, I will call the Muses’ sublime.

**Klea Andrôn and Oral Tradition**

To define the singer’s art, aoidê, from the outside, let us contrast it with a traditional expression for the themes poets treat, klea and ranô. Etymologically, kleos, means “what is heard” and hence “fame”; and this phrase seems to attest to an ancient association of epic with Indo-European praise poetry, characterized as conferring “fame” on its subjects. In Greek the connection is strong: Demodocus sings to a lyre the “fames of men” in the *Odyssey* (8.73), as does Achilles when he has withdrawn from battle (II. 9.189); the phrase is also associated with singing in Hesiod and the Homeric hymns (*Theog.* 100–101; *Hymn* 32.18), and the verb kle(i)ô means “to celebrate,” especially through poetry, as when Penelope speaks of “the deeds of men and gods, on which bards confer fame [kleiousi]” (Od. 1.338; cf. *Theog.* 32). But it has been further argued, in particular by Gregory Nagy, that “kleos was the formal word which the singer himself (aoidos) used to designate the songs which he sang in praise of gods and men, or, by extension, the songs which people learned to sing from him.”

Yet it must be realized that the etymological sense of kleos is still quite active in epic: simply as “what is heard,” kleos may be report, reputation, or rumor. And neither is the formula “fames of men”

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2Schmitt (1967) 61–102. For kleos in Homer, see Murnaghan (1987) 149. n. 6, with references.


confined to traditions handed down in poetry: when Phoenix tells Achilles the Meleager story from the "fames of men" (ll. 9.524–525), he is no bard, any more than Achilles was when he sang the klea andrōn in his tent. Perhaps Phoenix heard this tale from a poet, but he doesn’t say so, and it is given not as epic poetry but as exhortation.

Literally, klea only implies that the stories of heroes have descended through time in an oral tradition: what bards sing is indeed kleos, but fame or tradition may also be handed down in other ways. Indeed, we should not properly speak of oral tradition in the singular, for there are always many ways of passing down information in an oral culture, with various officers and styles. (Eric Havelock, in speaking of Homer’s epic, uses the unfortunate metaphor “oral encyclopaedia,” as if it were the single, comprehensive embodiment of all one needed to know.) Even in Homer it is clear that there are many people apart from poets who know about the past, and some figures specialize in it: Nestor has lived through three generations and is not reluctant to share his experience with younger men; in the Odyssey we can compare Echenous (“keeping intelligence”), who functions as a kind of “prose” epic historian: oldest among the Phaeacians, he surpassed them in speaking (muthois) and he knew “many ancient things” (Od. 7.156–157). Homer’s task is not to define poetry against prose but to set his own art apart from the oral histories of these others, the “mythologues” that Plato refers to, or “men of tales” (logioi) as they are called by Pindar and Herodotus.5

Homer singles out the singers’ presentation of klea andrōn not on formal grounds (as poetry versus prose) but by defining his Muses as lifting that song above the realm of mere rumor or hearsay:

Tell me now, Muses, who have your homes on Olympus—
For you are goddesses, and are present, and know [iste] all,
but we hear only kleos and do not know [idmen] anything—

[Iliad 2.484–486]

In a line of nearly incantatory assonance (2.485: este, pareste te, iste te) Homer attributes three things to the Muses: first of all, they

5Pindar Pythian 1.94, Nemean 6.52, and cf. 33; Herodotus 1.1.1.
exist, and they are goddesses and immortal; second, they are present, to the poet as he calls them and also presumably present as spectators at the events of which he wishes to speak; finally, they “know” these things, in the special sense compressed in the Greek verb, by having seen them. With this repeated word (istel idmen) the poet emphasizes the direct, unbroken contact that the Muses maintain with heroic history, as opposed to Homer and his generation (= “we”), mere mortals, who do not know, have not seen, but only hear the report (486).

The Muses, then, have an eyewitness knowledge of the past, and for Homer, in the Greek tradition, the surest and clearest knowledge is of that which you see yourself: it is not only a philosopher who says, “The eyes are more accurate witnesses than the ears,” but a popular historian too: “The ears are less trustworthy than the eyes.” The opposition between sight and hearing of course became a part of sophisticated Greek epistemology, but I am not attributing advanced skeptical thought to the early Greeks if I say they knew the difference between what they saw with their own eyes and what they only heard, and were cunning enough and wary enough of being deceived to guard the distinction. This commonsense skepticism need be no more or less significant than the aphorism of a literate culture “Don’t believe everything you read”; but we should listen closely when an oral poet says, “Don’t believe everything you hear.”

“Poets are always chattering that we neither see nor hear anything accurately,” Plato complains, but Homer seems to have used this opposition to situate his own poetry as uniquely privileged in


7Heraclitus 22 B 101a D-K; Herodotus 1.8.2; cf. Thucydides 3.38.4, 1.20.2 and Clay (1983) 13, in a valuable chapter: “This kind of cognition (sc. eye-witness knowledge), as opposed to knowledge through hearing, was considered by the Greeks the highest possible form of knowledge.” Further references at her note 8.

8For the later philosophical development of this opposition, especially in reference to Xenophanes, see Fränkel (1974) 118–131. The idea is reversed for paradoxical effect by Empedocles (31 B 3.9 D-K) and by a literate poet who cherished texts before recitations, Callimachus fr. 282 Pfeiffer.

9Phaedo 65B; cf. Phaedrus 250D, 274. Plato may have in mind many reflexes of the idea in tragedy, e.g., Aeschylus Persians 266; Sophocles Oedipus the King 6, 1238, Trachiniae 747; Euripides Suppliants 684, Trojan Women 481–482, Iphigeniea in Tauris 901, Hippolytus 86, Medea 652.
the world of report. The fiction of the Muses serves to distinguish heroic poetry from other oral traditions: it elevates such poetry above mere “report” into a contact, mediated to be sure, with an actual witness to the events. By contrast, the selection from the fames of men that Phoenix “remembers” and communicates to Achilles is only what “we learn of” or “find out” (epeuthometha) from mere report (ll. 9.524, 527). Most of oral tradition consists of such secondary reportage, as when Agamemnon speaks to young Diomedes:

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

[Iliad 4.370–75]

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

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

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

For the association of “finding out” and “hearing” (p(e)uth- and akou) see Od. 2.118, 3.193, 4.94, 688, 15.403 and Clay (1983) 13 n. 8.

A close parallel to this passage has been noted in an archaic poem by Mimnermus (14.1–4 IEG), stirring up his audience with the recollection of a great warrior two or three generations earlier: “His was not such might and warring spirit, / so I learn (peuthomai) from my elders, who saw him / scattering the crowded ranks of Lydian horsemen / On Hermus’ plain, a spearman.” For the historical context see West (1974) 73–74, though it is just possible that, as Bowie (1986) 29 suggests, the lines come from a fictional battle narrative.
kleos. This theme may be seen particularly clearly in relation to the oral tales that are heroic genealogies. Genealogy was one of the most important uses of the past for both Homer’s characters and his audiences, and yet it is not to be thought that the basis of genealogy as words, discourse, escaped the Greeks. When Athena asks Telemachus whether he is really Odysseus’s son, he expresses a skepticism of genealogies that sounds proverbial: “My mother says I am Odysseus’s son, but for my part / I don’t know. No one knows firsthand [autos] his own begetting” (1.215–216). In fact, the more important and impressive a genealogy is, the more it will have to reach back into the past and ground itself in what has not been seen but can only be claimed, whether this be a great founder many generations back or a scene of divinity descending to mate with a mortal, often in secret or in disguise.

Naturally enough, then, heroic poetry interests itself greatly in genealogies, but it claims a superior knowledge of them. From his Olympian Muses, Homer knows which foundational stories are true, and he lets his audience know (e.g., ll. 5.541–549; Od. 15.225–226); but he puts his characters on a plane of limited knowledge about the past, so that for them, as for Homer’s audience, genealogies are only a matter of what people say. As a consequence we often see heroes preface a recitation of their ancestors with a dismissal of the use of what people say (e.g., ll. 6.145–151, 21.153–160), and heroes often dispute the genealogies of their foes as part of the flying preceding an engagement. A simple case is when Heracles’ son Tlepolemus challenges Zeus’s son Sarpedon: “They lie when they say that you are the son of aegis-bearing Zeus / since you fall far short of those men / of former times who were begotten of Zeus.” (ll. 5.635–637). Dramatically, of course, this is a piece of bravura and not an epistemological essay, but it is also an ironic statement in that the abuse of genealogy is put into the mouth of a son of Heracles himself. If heroes can challenge a tale of ancestry only a single generation long, the problem in Homer’s day may be only that much greater. Such moments allow Homer to make points for his own audience about the special place of song in

13A similar phrase is Menander fr. 227. Martin (1990) chap. 2 examines the rehearsing of genealogies as a kind of speech act.
preserving the past and, indeed, to assert a very noble “genealogy” of epic.

The most extensive genealogy offered us in Homer is also the one most hedged by reservations about the trustworthiness of traditions. Indeed, the flyting here is so intense and extended that it reaches beyond condemning a particular boast and casts aspersions on the entire realm of oral tradition. In book 20 of the *Iliad* we are shown an encounter between Achilles and Aeneas which proves also to be a confrontation of two divine genealogies, an inconclusive match between the son of Thetis and the son of Aphrodite. The genealogical theme emerges at the start, when Apollo, having taken human form, urges Aeneas to take Achilles on:

> They say you are born from Aphrodite, daughter of Zeus
> and Achilles only has Thetis, the daughter of the old man of the sea,
> don’t therefore turn back.

[*Iliad* 20.104–106]

This is to be a test of divine parentage, and the issue of genealogy dominates the subsequent flyting. Very much in the style of Tlepolemus, Achilles taunts Aeneas by asking how he dares to come to the forefront of battle, reminding him that he had only barely escaped the last time they met; Achilles suggests that Aeneas has possibly been mislead by that piece of luck into thinking he enjoys divine favor (20.178–198). The poet knows, and has earlier (*Il*. 5.311ff.) let the audience know, that Aphrodite, Aeneas’s “mother who had borne him,” is indeed willing to snatch her child from a threatening foe. But Achilles remains to be convinced of the hero’s relationship to the gods. Aeneas counters with an interesting speech on the uses of genealogy:

> Son of Peleus, don’t expect to frighten me with words as if I were a child,
> since I too know quite well how to wrangle and insult.

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14Nagy has a rich chapter discussing this scene (1979) 265–276, though I think there is no warrant for saying (271–272) that “Aeneas and Achilles . . . have complete poetic access to each other’s lineage” (emphasis mine).
We know [idmen] each other's lineage, we know [idmen] each other's parents.
by hearing the sayings [epea] that have been heard before [prokluta] among mortal men;
but as for actually seeing them, you have never seen [ides] my parents, nor I yours.
They say that you are the offspring of blameless Peleus
and that your mother was fair-tressed Thetis of the sea;
for my part, I claim to be son of great-hearted Anchises
and my mother is Aphrodite;
one of these pairs will mourn their child
today, since I don't think that with mere childish words
we will separate from this encounter and go back from battle.
But if you wish, listen to this, so that you may well know
my lineage, many are the men that know it.
Zeus the cloud-gatherer first begot Dardanus. . . .

[Iliad 20.200–217]

Aeneas dwells on the frailty of our knowledge of the past in the same terms that engage the poet: we "know" about heroic genealogies only through "hearing" the tales passed down in oral tradition (prokluta epea); it is not something that one has seen (ides). Aeneas's anaphoric pair, "we know" (idmen, 202), resounds hollowly against the "you know" / "we know" (iste/idmen) that the poet had addressed to the Muses, and it puts such recitations in the category of "mere kleos." Hence he specifies that "they say" Thetis was Achilles' mother. As far as his own heritage is concerned, he is willing to lay claim to his title and to go on for fifteen hexameters tracing his royal line back to Zeus-born Dardanus; but he adduces this genealogy only as a "claim" or a boast, something generally acknowledged, what "all men know."¹⁵ Even for these god-sprung heroes genealogies are a matter of kleos. They get them the same way Phoenix got the Meleager tale, by hearing the words that have been spoken before.

¹⁵On the importance of Aeneas's "I claim" (eukhomai), see Muellner (1976) 76–78. Cf. ll. 14.113–127 (Diomedes in council): "Hear me, though I am young. I claim to be of a good father"; he justifies this claim by reciting three generations but adds "you are likely to have heard whether these things are true" (14.125).
Aeneas concludes his catalog of ancestors by again downgrading oral report and calling for the test of arms:

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

[Iliad 20.241–258]

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

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

16 The notion that what you say determines what you hear in return is proverbial; cf. Hesiod Works and Days 721; Alcaeus 341 Voigt.
Dardanus shall not die, without seed, obliterated, / Dardanus whom Cronus's son loved most of all his sons” (II. 20.303–304). Poseidon spirits Aeneas away in a mist, and when the clouds clear, Achilles is astonished to see his spear on the ground but Aeneas gone. He then concludes: “Aeneas after all was dear to the immortal gods. / I thought what he said was empty boasting” (20.347–348). A generation of Dardanians has been saved, and along with it a genealogy has been proved to go back to the gods; this kleos proved to be true, but it needed proof. But the poet's song is also indirectly validated, for he knew the true story that even a goddess's son could doubt. Deriding all but his own divine lineages is the privilege of one behind whom the Muses stand, somewhat as Poseidon stood by Aeneas.

The Unity of a Traditional Song

Perhaps the most striking metaphor in Aeneas's description of oral genealogical tradition is his characterization of it as a “great rangeland of words” (epeōn . . . polus nomós [II. 20.249]). The figure of the “range” of things said as a spatially extended field or pastureland (nomós), like Homeric metaphors for poetry, depicts language as an extended field, and it seems not to be idiosyncratic. This idea of words as spread out like a grazing land for flocks is also found in the Hymn to Apollo (19–21) but applied to song:

How shall I hymn you, who are so completely well-hymned? For in every direction, Phoebus, the range of your song has been extended [nomós beblèat' aoidës], on the mainland and through the islands.

17Bacchylides 17 Maehler (1982) is a notable instance of a similar test of divine descent. Midas asks his father Zeus to prove his paternity with a “sign that can be clearly seen” (sēma arignōton [57]); and the god consents to make his status something all can see (timan . . . panderkea [69–70]). Theseus in turn gets a miracle from his father, Poseidon.

18 Hesiod's Works and Days says that the lazy man (who is unwilling to farm, n.b.!) may go off begging; but soon “you say much, but in vain / and the range of your words will bring no profit” (402–403). Cf. Pratinas for the metaphor of “ploughing the furrows of poetry” (neōn arouron [712 Page]).

19 I have modified Allen's (1946) text of line 20: nomós beblèatai òidës. The manuscript's nōmos . . òidës is not to be read; see Càssola (1975) 485–486 for a discussion.
To say that the “range” of Apolline song extends everywhere means that hymns in his honor have been dispersed throughout Greece. This seems to have been a regular topos for glorifying Apollo (it is repeated at 207–208), but here the poet’s pose of aporia before a rich tradition invokes the same image as Aeneas used of the field of genealogies. In this proem, then, the poet, like Aeneas, charges oral traditions with being too immense. The verb beβελέατο here may be taken as “strewn,” in which case the field of song is seen as littered with hymns, covered over or filled up with tradition. Both resemble the Iliad’s Glaucus, who prefaced the recitation of his lineage with an unforgettable simile on genealogy as a forest of symbols.

Great-hearted Tydeus, why ask after my genealogy?  
Like the generations of leaves are those of men.  
The wind sweeps the leaves to the ground, but the wood  
in bloom grows them again, when spring returns.  
But if you wish to know these things. . . .  

[Iliad 6.145–151]

The significance of imagining the poetic tradition as a crowded or littered field can be better appreciated if we contrast a later, literate poet’s use of the same motif. When the tradition had become increasingly available in definitive, authored texts, mentioning the already great “expanse” of existing song in a proem was also a way for a new writer to define his own hoped-for achievement against a written canon. As these poets looked jealously at the abundant and quite tangible texts of their predecessors, we may sense in their conscious nostalgia for an earlier, simpler, and more fertile time what Harold Bloom has named an “anxiety of influence.” In the proem of Choerilus’s fifth-century epic on the

20For more on the “aporetic mode” here and at lines 207–208, see Bundy (1972) and Miller (1983).
21Diehl (1940) 94 compares the description of a distracted Laertes sleeping outdoors (Od. 11.193–194): “In every direction along the knoll of his vineyard / leaves were strewn [beβελέαται] as beds on the ground for him.”
23I may cite Bloom (1973), though I am anxious enough to say that I have found all his work stimulating and, mutatis mutandis, relevant to Greek poetry, as will appear especially in Chapter 3.
Persian War, the field of song appears too crowded, and the poet longs for clearer ground:

Ah happy was he, who knew singing in that time,  
a servant of the Muses when the meadow was still uncut;  
but now when everything has been divided up, and arts have reached their furthest limits,  
we have been left behind like the last runners on the track, and there is not any way,  
though searching in every direction, to drive the chariot, newly yoked.

[317 Ll-J-P (= 1 D, K)]

The difference between this text and Homer is instructive. In an age when texts are being more widely produced and collected, a new song can be measured against preexisting ones, and the singer may feel impelled to become an author, a maker of a unique and different song. Lost in a dense overgrowth of tradition, Choerilus has to peer anxiously in every direction to claim some place as his own (paptainonta, peî . . . pantēi [4–5]). For an oral poet, by contrast, tradition was common property, and there was no point in putting one's name on any part of it; so we do not hear any anxiety about making an original contribution in Homer or Hesiod.

But Homer already viewed his tradition as a very large field, even if it was not carved up by authors: Phemius "knows many deeds of gods and men" (Od. 1.337–338), and other bards know "all kinds of things" (pantoia). The words have more force if we consider that the triumph of the Panhellenic poetry that Homer represents was to weave into one another a variety of local, di-

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24I interpret the formula "everything is divided up" on the basis of ll. 15.189, where it refers to the division of the sky, the earth, and the sea/underworld among the three greatest Olympians, and Od. 15.412, which refers to the division of lands between two cities.

25Often in epic paptainô describes the worried search for some way out of a desperate situation, e.g., ll. 14.507; Od. 12.232–233, 22.43. A comparable text is Theocritus idyll 17, esp. 9–12. On the influence of "books" on Hellenistic literature, see Bing (1988).

26Hesiod says the Muses make a man "capable of saying or conceiving many things" (poluphradeonta [fr. 320.1 M-W]) and says that Linus the Kitharist "had learned wisdom of every kind" (fr. 306 M-W). In H. Herm. 484 the lyre, if approached with skill, "speaks, and teaches all kinds of things [pantoia] pleasing to the mind."
vergent tales, synthesizing thereby a massive mythic history embracing the whole Greek people.\(^{27}\) This interweaving was thorough and extensive: local accounts of local heroes were entwined with those of other heroes from other places and other times until they meshed and eventually covered the expanse of unknown history. Reading Homer, one soon realizes that the mention of any proper name almost invariably brings with it a patronymic; the father's name in turn may evoke recollection of his place of origin or of some characteristic exploit, and these tales may involve yet other characters (and their patronymics) in various times and locales, until the history of a single hero begins to entwine with that of all the other heroes in the dense undergrowth of tradition.

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

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

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

\(^{27}\)See Nagy (1979) 6–10.
impossible to represent: it would be either too long or too com-
pressed to be comprehended.\(^{28}\)

It is finally because the tradition is so unwieldy that the poet
must be selective. Selection is both necessary to the traditional
poet's art and crucial in giving coherence to his performance, but it
is also a less simple matter than it may appear after the fact. What
belongs essentially to the Wrath of Achilles and what lies outside
the story may seem clear to us, but would it have seemed so to the
traditional performer? On the one hand, the traditional poet abso-
lutely depended on the mass of stories that his society had accept-
ed, approved, and enjoyed; a "true" traditional poem presupposes
the tradition and situates itself within it. On the other hand, if any
single poem is to be a self-standing whole, it must dispense with
most of tradition as peripheral, even though the tradition may not
easily yield to such omissions. The unique lineaments of these
poems had to be painstakingly detached from tradition, removed,
ideally without severing any vital connecting thread, from the total
concatenation of events of which they were a part.

What the poet gains in intelligibility he pays for with a loss of
totality. Such a sacrifice may seem trivial and is surely inevitable,
human powers being what they are. But there is more going on in
Homer than that. In fact, his invocations show that the greater
whole that cannot be contained in the individual wholes may
threaten to encroach on them. It is, after all, in the nature of tradi-
tion to be repeated, not to be forgotten. To make one story whole,
to remember a tale, one must forget much, and be sure that what
one forgets does not belong.

Selection then is a crisis: it is a judgment, a reasonable measure
taken to ensure intelligibility; but it is also a troubling point at
which the whole truth must be reduced to the essential. How does
an oral poet come to terms with his tradition? How did Homer—
that is, the maker of our *Iliad*—come to terms with the problem of
what to include and what to leave out of his epic? Was he troubled
by the double-edged process of selection, which gains unity and at
the same time sacrifices totality? I believe that Homer had an
awareness of the perils and power of selection in his poet's way. In

\(^{28}\)On the necessity of an intelligible size in art, see especially *Poetics* 7.1450b32ff.
fact the crisis of what to leave out, recurrent for Greek poets, finds its first and most influential statement in Homer, most strikingly in his address to the Muses in the second book of the *Iliad*.

The Muses’ Sublime

The longest and most revealing of Homer’s invocations is the ten lines introducing the catalog of ships in the *Iliad*. The passage is well known: after the intense close-ups of Greek leaders in the first book, we are presented with the entire Greek army marshaled together for the first time in the poem; Homer stresses the enormity of the host in a series of splendid similes (to which I will return), and then proposes to list the names of the chiefs. At this point he stops and invokes the Muses to help him with this daunting task:

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Tell me now, Muses, who have your homes on Olympus—
For you are goddesses, and are present, and know all,
but we hear only *kleos* and do not know anything—
who were the leaders and the lords of the Danaans;
the multitude [*plēthun*] I could not tell nor could I name
not if I had ten tongues and ten mouths,
and a voice unbreakable, and a breast of bronze within,
unless the Olympian Muses, daughters of Zeus of the aegis,
should bring to my mind how many came under Ilion;
but the chiefs of the ships I will tell and all their ships.

[**Iliad** 2.484–493]
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The poet says the Muses can “bring to mind” (*mnēsaiath’* in 492) the names of those at Troy; but the invocation is not simply a demand for information. Apart from anachronistically imposing a clear distinction between form and content on this oral art, such an interpretation misses a key point: Homer also mentions his need to be selective in what he will represent. Crucial to understanding this passage is the translation of *plēthun* in line 488. Many commentators (e.g., G. S. Kirk) rightly take the word here in its common sense, referring to the plebeian multitude, the *dēmos* as opposed to
the leaders. Accordingly, Homer says that he cannot name “all those who came under Ilion,” but he can name the leaders. Often, however, *plêthus* is rendered as referring to the multitude of leaders, as in Richmond Lattimore’s translation: “Tell me Muses . . . who were the lords and chiefs, I could not tell the multitude of them nor name them, not if I had ten tongues.” But this reading gives too little weight to the passages in which, as here, *plêthus* is explicitly opposed to the leaders, the *hêgêmones.*

Furthermore, taking *plêthus* as the multitude of leaders is senseless in context, for there is no physical impossibility in naming all the leaders of men—Homer proceeds to do just that with his one mouth and his mortal heart—but it is quite conceivable that naming every last soldier that came under Ilion, naming what he elsewhere calls the “boundless demos” (*dêmos apeiron* [II. 24.776]), would wear him out.

The logic of this passage seems to be something like this: Homer proposes to name the Greek leaders and tell who they were, and he asks the all-knowing Muses to inform him. But as for naming the entire host, that would be beyond his physical powers. He then adds, somewhat parenthetically, that even if he had superhuman physical stamina to go on naming forever, even if he were some kind of sounding bronze, he would still require the Muses to bring the names to mind. Then by ring composition he returns to his main theme: the leaders, nevertheless (*arkhous d’ au*), he will tell.

Homer’s invocation, then, contains not only an appeal for knowledge but also what turns out to be his special form of *recusatio,* a refusal to give a full presentation of complex things.

This interpretation is supported by a number of passages in which one or another of Homer’s characters recounts some exploit, for the need to be selective attends all human storytellers. In comparing a few of these we will come to appreciate the poet’s complex

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31I use *recusatio* beyond its limited application to Roman Augustan poets because I believe, along with Nannini (1982), that the Latin practice ultimately derives from archaic Greek literature (though Nannini does not notice the Homeric *recusatio*).
view of the problems a narrator faces. Consider Helen in the *Odyssey* when she tells Telemachus a story about his father; she begins with a prologue like a poet’s:

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

* [Odyssey 4.240–243]*

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

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

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

* [Odyssey 3.103–117]*

32Nearly identical is *Od. 11.516–519*, in which Odysseus recounts to Achilles one among the many exploits of Neoptolemus.
“You have put me in mind of the woe we suffered”: like the Muses' promptings, Telemachus’s questions have brought to the old man’s mind many tales of woe, whose multitude is emphasized by the polar “on sea . . . on land.” Like a poet, Nestor then indulges himself in a short catalog of fallen Greeks. But mercifully he pulls himself up short and does not quite name “as many of the best”—hossoi aristoi—as died. He says that no mortal could ever tell all the woes, the many in addition to the ones he has named. How long this might take is left unclear: more than five years, more than six, and still the listener would fail before he got the full account.

These speakers seem unable to tell all they know; they have seen too much and there is too little time to tell it in. Even after Odysseus kept Eumaeus up for three nights and three days, he still didn’t come to the end of his stories (Od. 17.513–517). And when asked by Queen Arete to give an account of himself and where he came from, he confesses he is unable to recite his personal Odyssey to date: “Hard it is, O queen, to relate my cares full through, / for the gods have given me very many; / but this which you ask me I will tell” (Od. 7.241–243). None of these speakers can recount their experiences fully, and each, including the poet, takes time to mention this.

In all these passages there is a gap between the multifariousness of experience and an account of it in speech; and this gap is repeatedly portrayed by Homer as a gap between the powers of sight and speech. The truest account of experience would replicate all one has taken in. But the problem arises because sight includes its objects in a comprehensive sweep, whereas speech is basically a catalog, kata-legein, a naming that articulates each element of what is seen. Sight can represent a complex reality to the mind at once, whereas to tell things requires a sequence, which takes time. Such is the nature of speech, and it is no problem until people contemplate a full speech, a full account: this is always “refused,” for it would take a full time, and mortals have only so much of that. Human representation may have to stop before we have quite come to the end of our tale. This is exactly Odysseus’s difficulty when he tries to tell the Phaeacians about his journey to the under-

33For this sense of kata in kata-legein, see Krischer (1971) 102, 104.
world. He starts a full catalog of the noblewomen he saw there, but he cannot finish his catalog of women, and breaks off:

All the women I could not tell nor could I name
as many wives and daughters of heroes as I saw;
before that ambrosial night would wane.
It is time now for sleep.

[Odyssey 11.328–331]

To name every woman he saw would outlast even the longest nights; it is time to close the eyes in sleep.\textsuperscript{34}

The gap between seeing and saying what you saw reaches its extreme for the epic poet, who wants knowledge of an immense action in a vanished past, and the invocation in \textit{Iliad}, book 2, confronts this gap. Homer invokes Muses whose unlimited gaze takes in all epic tradition in a magnificent panorama, but he must add that he could not set it all down. To tell everything that happened at Troy would take a more than human poet. The poet’s problem is not simply the finitude of human existence; it is also an aesthetic problem, a difficulty with representation itself, with the project of recounting experience. The issues of representation at stake here are illuminated if we note that the invocation enacts a drama that Kant analyzed as the mathematical sublime.\textsuperscript{35} For Kant, this sublime is prepared for when the mind is confronted by an immeasurable multitude in nature, in his example the innumerable sands on the shore. Before such an infinite object the mind cannot represent to itself each thing in its individuality, and there is a momentary blockage, a checking of powers, as the world outruns the

\textsuperscript{34}Odysseus twice seems to tell a tale full through, though not directly to us, and in each case the time it took is mentioned. On Aeolia, amid constant banquets (8–9) the wind god delays Odysseus a month asking him “each thing” about “Ilion and the Argive ships and the return of the Achaeans”; Odysseus claims to have “recounted all [\textit{katelexa}] according to its proper portion [\textit{kata moiran}],” perhaps meaning that he tailored his story to his host (\textit{Od.} 10.14–16; see Fränkel [1973] 13). In book 23 Odysseus and Penelope trade their stories in a more magical setting as Athena holds back the dawn (241–246); she tells him “as many things as she endured” (302) and he tells “all, as many pains as he made / for others and as many woes as he suffered” (306–307). The poet notes that “she listened with pleasure and did not close her eyes in sleep until he had recounted all” (308–309).

\textsuperscript{35}In Meredith’s translation, see esp. 90ff.
representative powers of mind. At this point a sublime elevation may occur. Reason steps in and comprehends the whole, and the mind is uplifted by having represented an infinite reality to itself. So in the *Iliad* the poet is faced with an ineffable number of men; in his similes leading up to them he says that they are like mingling flocks of birds, like swarms of insects. He observes that Agamemnon and his chiefs marshal this mass into order “like goatherds who segregate their flocks, which have been grazing together” (2.475–476); he would like to order his characters as well. But at this moment he stops, thinking like other human narrators of the limits of his frame. Here not reason but the Muses enter. It is in them that all history is comprehended into a whole. Note that the Muses do not appear in order to organize the material for the poet, for he has his organizing question ready beforehand (“who were the leaders?”). What the Muses do for the poet is to take on the burden of knowing all and representing all, first, presumably to themselves, for whom seeing and knowing are one, and then somehow to the poet. They sustain the totality to which his poem may belong; if he speaks with them, his poetry, though only a part of theirs, will have the great Homeric aesthetic virtue of being *kata kosmon*, in accordance with the order of things.36 They enable him to give a true account of an uncountable reality.

The Muses play a similar role in their other appearances in Homer. When they are invoked at the beginning of each poem, this is the moment at which the poet must intervene in the immense cycle of tales which extends from the beginning of the world to beyond the end of Troy. Hence at the opening of each epic the poet first mentions the many traditions—the myriad woes that were heaped on the Achaeans, the many, many sufferings of Odysseus—and asks the Muses to help him start: the Wrath of Peleus’s son Achilles might ultimately be traced to the twin egg of Leda, but Homer will start “from the time when the son of Atreus and Achilles first stood apart in contention” (Il. 1.6–7); Odysseus suffered much on land and sea, but of this rich store, the poet asks the Muse, “of these things, starting from some point at least, tell us now” (Od. 1.1–10). Again, the poet knows he wants to sing the Wrath of Achilles and

36This phrase is discussed in Chapter 4.
not, say, the Fashioning of the Horse, but he needs the Muses at this point to give him entrée into this unutterably long story at the right point.

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

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

The warriors rushing about indiscriminately are like the many traditions that crowd a poet’s mind, seeking expression.\(^\text{40}\) A god might tell them all, but hard indeed is it for the mortal poet to say

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

\(^\text{38}\)I.1.11.218ff., 14.508ff., 16.112ff. Sometimes the organizing question occurs without mentioning the Muse, e.g., II.5.703–704, and sometimes the poet simply proceeds to make his way through a welter of slaughter by saying who was killed first, and next, 16.306–307. Pindar (Pythian 4.70ff.) and Bacchylides (15.47ff.) direct similar questions to their Muses in similar contexts.

\(^\text{39}\)On the athetesis of this section, see van der Valk (1963–64) 1:579–580.

\(^\text{40}\)Very similar is II.17.257–261, where the poet breaks off a catalog of Greeks fighting in defense of Patroclus’s corpse: three heroes are named, but “of the others, who might, relying on his own wits, say their names?” This passage too has suffered athetesis; see van der Valk (1963–64) 2:39.
what was there to be seen, as the old man in the *Hymn to Hermes* notes:

Hard it is to say as many things as one sees with one’s eyes
for many travelers pass back and forth on the road,
some good, some bad,
and it is difficult to know each one.

[Hymn to Hermes 202–205]

The appearance of the Muses in the *Iliad*, book 2, then, is not simply a scene of instruction but also one of selection: it is the point at which both the immense Greek host and the ineffable oral tradition must be cut down to manageable, significant figures. For poets embarking on great tales or in the midst of them, to grapple with an enormous tradition and call in the Muses as saviors was a grand gesture that managed to augment their song without increasing it. Without exactly imposing order themselves, the Muses assure the poet that his account, incomplete though it be, is yet part of the total account they intend. As a man must make a partial poem, but it may also be a part of the sum of all poems, which is the past as reality.

Excursus: Later Appearances

Kant’s mathematical sublime illuminates these passages with its emphasis on the incomprehensible multitude that provokes an appeal to the transcendent, and his illustrations of sublime phenomena are strikingly similar to Homer’s: when the Greeks are marshaled, Iris takes human form and reports the spectacle to the Trojans, “never have I seen so great an army as this; / for very much like leaves or grains of sand they cross the plain” (*Il.* 2.799–801). Kant is also useful in drawing attention to the uneasiness that accompanies Homeric invocations in their metaphors of vision and blindness, timelessness and decay. It is not the way that Hesiod, for example, handles similar situations. In the *Theogony* (367–370) he manages to cut short a catalog of river gods simply by referring us to local traditions:
So many other rivers are there, noisily flowing,
sons of Oceanus whom Lady Tethys bore,
their names it is hard for a mortal man to tell,
but the people who dwell beside each of them know them.

Here the appeal is not to the Muses but to epichoric traditions,
which cannot be included in a Panhellenic river catalog. But in its
context the function of this muffled *recusatio* is the same as that of
Homeric invocations: with these words Hesiod is able to leave
water divinities and turn to the topic of sky gods.

In calling invocations instances of the Homeric sublime I wish to
draw attention to the way that the triumph of knowledge is pur­
chased by an initial anxiety in which the greatness of the tale and
the powers of the Muses are so magnified as to reduce human
narrative to the blind and ephemeral. But it is not a question of
imposing Kant on the text or of postulating a universal feature of
the human mind. It seems to be rather that Kant’s idealist formul­
tion is only a later version, in its own context, of an old, especially
epic way of understanding representation. For the peculiarly Ho­
meric note of the sublime, the somewhat daunting evocation of an
infinity, a cosmic order within which the poet blindly seeks his
way, is often struck in the invocations of later poetry and in similar
contexts.

The clearest reflex (and perhaps imitation) is in the sixth-century
lyric poet Ibycus. One of his fragments opens with a long list of
themes and characters from the Trojan War that the poet will *not*
sing about. He simply lists them, in language redolent of epic,
saying he has no desire to hymn them (10ff.). But when he comes
to the heroes whom Agamemnon led in their hollow ships (16–22),
lack of desire becomes impossibility of execution:

As for these things, the Muses of Helicon,
skilled in song, might embark on such a tale,
But a mortal man, a man of flesh and blood,
could not say how each thing happened,
how great the number of ships, having set forth at Aulis
and crossing the Aegean, made their way
from Argos to Troy, nourisher of horses.

[282 Page = SLG 151.23–30]
Like Homer, Ibycus is stopped at the point of counting the ships and saying how each thing happened; and it is here that the poet mentions the Muses and their superiority to mortal men.

The crucial opposition between sight and blindness comes into play when Pindar opens a song with a prayer for “resourcefulness,” that is, abundance of material:41

I pray to the fair-robed daughter of Uranus, Mnemosunè, and her daughters, to grant me resourcefulness. For blind are the wits of those men, anyone who, without the Heliconian ones, walking in wisdom (?), searches along the steep road; but to me they have handed over this immortal task.

[Paean 7b.1–7]

The Muses can lift him out of the condition of blind-witted men by granting him resourcefulness (eumachania).42 But so great is their wisdom that for the mortal to whom they transmit it (diadidomi) poetry becomes an “immortal task” (ponon athanaton). In another poem Pindar asks for a starting point for a tale (Apollo’s defense of Troy against Hera and Athena); here limited human “resourcefulness” must be aided by the Muses and Mnemosunè who “know” far more:

And whence the immortal [struggle?] began, about these things the gods can persuade wise men’s minds but mortals have no resources [amachanon] to discover it; But since you maidens, Muses, know [iste] all, together with your father of black clouds and Mnemosunè, you have this power ordained [tethmos] for you. Hear my prayer now.

[Paean 6.50–58]

41Cf. Bundy (1986) 13–17 and (1972) 57–77 for many examples from Pindar and epideictic oratory in which we find the more general topos of praise in which “the merits of the laudandus provide material in such abundance as to make it impossible for the laudator to recount, or the audience to hear, the whole story” (Bundy [1986] 12).

42On this passage, see Bundy (1986) 29 n. 71 and Richardson (1985) 388ff. for this sense of eumachania and Pindar’s process of selection generally.
Here that same verb that in Homer combined the Muses’ knowledge and vision is used of the Muses with their mother and inscrutable father. Their great scope of vision has been “ordained” for them as a law of nature (tethmos), and contrasts with Pindar’s limited powers; it is human mortality that presses on this poet, as in Nemean 4.33–34, when “the pressing hours and my tethmos prevent me from telling the story [of Heracles at Troy] at length.”

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

The Whole Poem

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

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43 On tethmos in this passage, see Norwood (1945) 167–170 and Miller (1982); cf. the brachu metron that restrains Pindar from telling “all the contests that Herodotus and his horses won” (Isthmian 1.60–63). On the many passages where Pindar cuts down the long account he might give, see Hubbard (1985) 27–32.
firmly on the path, but how will he know where to stop, when it is enough and he can be finished? The point of closure in an oral performance is not a given, and the very form of epic poetry lends itself to infinite continuation: it is composed in short, generally self-contained phrases, paratactically strung along; these often fall into end-stopped hexameters, placidly laid one after another. Epic has no strophes to draw the poet’s circle just.\textsuperscript{44} In addition, as I noted apropos of Hesiod in Chapter 1, traditional epic poems never actually conclude: they leave off; open-endedness is the law of the genre. In Homer, we find that the last book and a half of the \textit{Odyssey} have been taken to be a later addition, and even the end of the \textit{Iliad}, so much praised for its exquisite resolutions, was in one ancient version immediately followed up by a lead-in to the \textit{Aethiopis}. Even after Homer has said his all, there is more that might be said. How then can this little piece draw itself up into a unity without falling back into the unutterable totality of events to which it belongs? If there is an answer to this question, it is not an easy answer. I think that Homer adds to an awareness of the immensity of tradition an anxiety about his hopes for completeness, a fear that it is not so easy to disentangle oneself from this great tradition once it is called forth. The meetings with the Muses do not have the atmosphere of an easy feat, a perfect transmission from divine to human intelligence. The sublime Muses in Homer intervene on a moment of stoppage: they are summoned in turmoil and greeted in weakness; there is always a sense of the passing ambrosial night as the tales go on.

This overwhelming aspect of the Muses emerges in their figuration as the \textit{Odyssey’s} sweet but fatal singers, the Sirens.\textsuperscript{45} Like the Muses, the Sirens offer Odysseus the “pleasure” of “knowing more” (\textit{Od.} 12.188); like poets, they enchant with their singing (\textit{Od.} 12.40, 44). In language reminiscent of that of the \textit{Iliad’s} Muses, they claim to know and to have seen very much:

> For we know \textit{[idmen]} all the things, as many as in wide Troy
> the Greeks and the Trojans suffered under the will of the gods,

\textsuperscript{44}Epic style is what Aristotle calls the “strung-along” style, of which he observes: “Apart from the matter treated, it has no end or goal in itself” (\textit{Rhet.} 3.9.1409a 25ff.).

and we know *[idmen]* everything that happens on the nourishing earth.

*Odyssey 12.189–191*

These far-seeing goddesses can offer the entire *Iliad* and more, not only the past but all events on earth. The chthonic Muses may not necessarily offer a total poem—for example, they do not sing the generations of the Olympian gods—but the poem they present is open-ended, and because such a poem never comes to an end, it threatens any listener. The problem is, of course, that this thrilling song destroys its mortal listeners, who lose their ability to return to wife and children, finally withering away (12.39–43). In the Sirens, “infernal counterparts to the Muses,” the enchantment of poetry reveals its sinister side: their song is a binding spell for Odysseus, for the price of listening to it is to be fixed fast.

Here this eerie art shows the dangers of an unmediated contact with the heroic tradition. And these dangers become particularly clear if we compare another occasion on which the interminable adventurer directly encountered the heroes of old and again was threatened with a kind of paralysis. Odysseus’s journey to the underworld was a seeing into the past, a direct vision of a parade of heroes and heroines reaching back to the very children of the gods; this vision, as he tells his Phaeacian audience, could never be recounted in full. Yet though he was desirous to stay and see even more, curious Odysseus had to leave this marvelous place and its sights. After his mother’s shade had departed, he says, he was determined to stay and see even earlier heroes: “And now I would have seen yet earlier men, whomever I wanted, / Theseus and Perithous, illustrious children of the gods.” But then “countless crowds [*muria ethnea*] of the dead gathered around him / with an

46 Compare *Od. 4.594–598*, where Telemachus says Menelaus’s tales please him so terribly (*ainōs*) that he could endure to stay in Sparta for a year without longing for home or parents. Though these stories are not, for him, from the absolute past, Helen’s Egyptian nepenthe, “inducing forgetfulness of all evils” (4.220ff.), makes him like Hesiod’s poetic auditor.

47 *Od. 11.630–631*. It is interesting that the heroes Odysseus names had themselves made a descent into Hades. One early remnant of this tradition (Hesiod fr. 280 M-W; cf. *Minyias 1 D = 1 K*) depicts Theseus in colloquy with the early Meleager, thus hearing face-to-face the story Achilles gets in a more mediated way.
awesome din [ἐκχει thespesiei], and green fear seized him / lest Persephone might send up a Gorgon’s head from Hades” (Od. 11.632–635). The desire to look yet more and see still earlier reaches a vision stunned by multitudes raising an unearthly noise. Odysseus is flooded with a too great vision of the heroic world, an inarticulate sound and a fear of paralysis.

Homer too, I think, shies away from the perfect song with something like a superstitious terror of paralysis. His image of the more than human poet, impervious to decay, is finally chilling. Like Odysseus, the invoking poet experiences an influx of total vision which threatens to fix him fast: he imagines himself half paralyzed, as bronze and iron. The immense tradition is not easily mastered by mortals; it takes a magical spell to control such numbers, a knowledge like that which Apollo boasts of through his priestess at Delphi: “I know the number of the sands and the measures of the sea” (Herodotus 1.47.3). Pindar says that only gluttonous men “chatter” praises of the great, not knowing that saying too much is vain; a wise poet tempers his praise: “As the sand escapes numbering, who could ever tell as many benefactions as [my patron] has done for others?” The “tether” or the “short measure” with which Pindar says he reins in his songs, like Homer’s recusatio, defends him from excess. The great invocation, then, is partly an apotropaic prayer against the spellbinding spirits that control the fatal powers of complete enumeration. Only the proverbially

48The poet’s “breast of bronze in me” (khalkeon de moi ἐτορ [Il. 2.490]) is only one letter away from a phrase Hesiod uses to describe death: “his heart is of iron and his breast of bronze” (khalkeon de hoι ήτορ [Theog. 764]).

49Olympian 2.95ff. See Bundy (1986) 29 n. 71. Cf. Olympian 13.43–46: Pindar would compete with many to tell all his patron’s victories but could not tell the number of the pebbles in the sea.

50The poet who plays most with this sublime enchantment is Catullus. In poem 7 the interrogator is a lover, the question erotic, but the answer sublime: “Quaeris, quot mihi basiationes / tuae, Lesbia, sint satis superque? / quam magnus numerus Libyssae harenæ / . . . aut quam sidera multa.” (“You ask how many of your kisses, / Lesbia, are enough and more than enough for me? / The number is as great as that of Libya’s sands . . . or as many as the stars”). The answer, finally, is to invoke a flood of kisses to ward off any evil magic: “qua e nec pernumerare curiosi / possint nec mala fascinare lingua.” (“which busybodies may never count up / nor an evil tongue bind with spells”). One can compare, too, the end of poem 5: after “many thousands” of kisses, he and Lesbia will heap them together (conturbabimus) to avoid the evil eye (invidere).
foolish poet Margites (the "glutton"), "who knew many things, but all badly," would be so stupid as to try to count the waves of the sea.51

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

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

51See 2, 3, 4, [4a]b IEG.
52For Homer's epitaph, Certamen 238.337 Allen (1946) vol. 5 and cf. 237.310; on kosmos, which may mean "marshaling," "arrangement" or "decoration," see Chapter 4.
Odysseus, who wields the staff of genealogy and authority, and slinks back into the mob, not to be heard from again. The poet and the great rhetorician make him a scapegoat so that order may be imposed, and everyone rejoices. But the speech that must be silenced is quoted, and when we recall that many readers have found that the language of Thersites echoes that of Achilles, we may wonder if he can be driven out completely.

The scapegoat is necessary to the community, for the whole is defined and made orderly by excluding the disorderly, by silencing the extra voice that has no measure. In a sense this is how Homer uses his tradition: the crucial but shadowy part that Thersites plays here seems to me much like the function of the total knowledge of Homer's Muses: like the unspeakable, the ineffable is no sooner evoked than it is cut off. But with the brief appearance of the sublime Muses, Homer is able to incorporate the all that he cannot tell, to name the all as the sustaining ground and support for his stories and at the same time to banish its threatening power from his poem. The text constantly makes us aware of other stories that cannot be told, other parts of the stories that are told, so that we feel there is a great exterior in which all is supported and fits together. This outside of the poems, the whole of legendary history of which they are a part, guarantees the value of these partial accounts and makes them suffice though incomplete. But this whole must always be put outside the text, for the text cannot at once contain it and rely on it as basis and ground.

These intricate problems and their evasive solutions in attaining a complete poem appear as theme in the last passage to be compared. It is a story Hesiod tells in his epic on the adventures of seers, the Melampodia. I give the account we have from Strabo (14.462 = Hesiod fr. 278 M-W):

It is said that Calchas the seer came here from Troy on foot with Amphilochus, son of Amphiaras, and died of vexation when he chanced to meet at Clarus a seer who was greater than himself, Mopsus, the son of Manto, Teiresias's daughter. Hesiod works up the story in some such form as this: Calchas sets Mopsus the following problem:

53On Thersites as comic scapegoat, see Thalmann (1988).
"Amazement strikes my heart at how many figs this fig tree has, though it is quite small; can you tell me the number?"

And Mopsus answered:

"Ten thousand they are in number, but a bushel in measure; one is left over which you can't put into the measure."

So he spoke, and the number of the measure was discovered to be true. Then did the sleep of death close over Calchas.

We may not be surprised at this point that to give a complete enumeration of a manifold thing, even something as clearly defined and visibly present as a fig tree, is a problem worthy of seers. Nor that when the Eastern vizier gives the exact number (one of the myriads Homer cannot tell?) the result is fatal for the Trojan seer. But note too that though Mopsus might take in the number of figs at a single glance, and name it in a word, they can not be encompassed in a single measure. There is one left out, a residuum that cannot be inserted into the whole. Without this one fig the figs would not have been namable, at least not in a single word that encompasses each one individually. The Greek for 9,999 would take some time to say and might not fit the meter. So the measure leaves something out of the total account, but this extra thing gives an exact name to the whole. The single fig fills the bushel, even from the outside.

This magically inflected view of wholes and parts may have more in common with the Homeric conception of unity than our text-oriented searches for organic and mechanical perfection. A literary notion of unity as a complete, unalterable composition was perhaps not inconceivable for the oral poet but conceivable only as a divine ideal or a paralyzing total vision. The unity that interests him as poet is not that of a plant or of a text removed from a context, but the unity of the whole as an object of divine contemplation. These epic stories must be parts of this but can only be parts. Of course that does not mean that they are all merely chaotic.

54Note Poetics 1457b11: "Odysseus wrought myriad noble deeds." See Gudeman's commentary (1934) on 1451a3 for Aristotle's use of "myriad" in connection with epic traditions.
fragments and incoherent tatters. First in history and now in the mind of Zeus and his daughters, the heroic deeds stood ordered together in a line; and in their telling too there is an ordering in the paratactic line, in ringing speeches, in juxtaposed scenes and episodes. But for the singer to value a closed unity, even a moderately regulated unity of the sort envisaged in Cedric Whitman's attractive theory of a geometric structure in the *Iliad*, according to which the events of the first book are mirrored in the last, and the intervening books are woven together in the same way, would be against basic demands of his traditional art. Homer sought to sing a story true, and that meant fully and completely, and that in turn meant that his singing was part of a whole whose final unity was not happily forgone. His songs are begun late and finished early; he weaves into them other stories as his audience directs or as his heart moves. Closure arrives with a change of mood, an interruption, waning hours, the urging of sleep. And until it arrives, until the all is added up, the singing can go on; to stave off that closure and closing is to keep the singing going; resisting the summary, the resolution, keeps the verses going down the line, as varied and inconsequential as the deeply connected sequence of life.

The extra part, the unassimilable piece, is necessary to unity. The part left out, the voice suppressed, still speaks and reassures the measure of its wholeness and integrity. Despite its evasiveness, we depend on this residue, which makes poems whole even as it leaves them a little incomplete: it is to that incompleteness that we add our interpretations. In that little space between what has been said and what might be said we read and, if we will, supply the connections that make a greater whole out of the part. Negligible as it seems, that little space between the lines contains room enough so that for us reading Homer is not merely repeating what he says but interpreting it, as he read without merely reciting the poets before him.

Whitman (1958), esp. chap. 11.