The Poet and Other Poets

In the previous chapter I reconstructed the poet's conception of the Muses and what they do for him as poet. In Homer's invocations these goddesses are a complex personification of the poet's indebtedness to his tradition, but at the same time they cover over another important relationship that defines the poet, that to other poets. It may be a relief, or at least dialectically fruitful, to turn from these mythical and magical conceptions to the hard realities of poetic performance and transmission. For if we situate the invocation in the context of eighth-century performance, we find that there is a conflict between the hypostasis of Muses as bestowers of song and the ways poets actually worked and got their words. Poems, after all, come not from the gods but from other poems, and if Homer was at all like the poets we know from other traditional oral societies, his true teachers were the poets he heard and the poets they had heard. But these very poets, who developed over centuries Homer's richly varied themes and language, are overridden by the direct appeal to a single,
transcendent source of epic song. The theology, if we may call it that, of inspired poetry claims that poetry is not transmitted historically but manifests itself, when the gods will, in ever-renewed epiphanies. Satisfying and useful as the fiction of the Muses may be, nothing could be less true to the real experience of poets as they made and performed their songs in a traditional culture; in fact the Muses substitute for, and even deny, the actual processes that brought them into being and gave them voice.

We may accept the Muses as a fiction, but we should not credit too much Homer’s proud dependence on them and ignorance of any rivals. For if we do, we may begin to see him as a solitary artist, locked in struggle only with his imagination, and may mistake his project for a romantically conceived idea of creativity. If we allow the Muses to make us forget Homer’s predecessors and peers, we may distort the crucial actualities of bardic performance in a traditional oral society and miss the way it was received by its hearers. The tension between the theology of poetry as a divine donation and the actual processes of poetic transmission and performance is the concern of this chapter. We point out immediately that there is no reason that Homer should not represent transmission as he, or as the tradition, prefers to envision it. If we charge him with neglecting the existence of other poets, both the predecessors on whom he depended and the rivals whom he vanquished to gain his preeminence, he is surely entitled as artist to enter an august plea of nolo contendere. But I will show that Homer’s choice, free as it may have been, was after all a choice, and was deliberately and consistently at variance with the reality he and his audience knew.

The account of its own transmission given in the poem is worth examining not only for tentative reconstructions of literary history; it also sends a message to the audience about how to receive the poetry, how to imagine that it has come down to them through time. For the poem’s theory of transmission is also its theory of the relation of this performance to reality—in epic poetry, of this performance to the distant but real heroic age. If Homer is singing to an eighth- or seventh-century audience about events far outside

\(^2\)Pucci (1977) 29–34 has explored the same tension in the proem to the *Theogony.*
the range of certain knowledge, he was obliged, at least for his audience's sake, to connect his late telling in some way with the early events. He had to have a version of how he got this story, for he claimed to have got it and not made it. Like the storyteller's "once upon a time," the epic poet's invocation immediately settles the question of transmission: it posits for the entire performance a descent of song from deed to Muse to poet and then to audience. The ideal epic then is presented to us as the Muses' knowledge mediated only by a single singer, and this singer is removed from his historical context and influences: once the tale begins, he is not an individual standing at the end of a long line of singers or in a crowd of competitors. The most persuasive, compelling, and vivid poetry of the past has no history itself.

The schemes of transmission offered in the poems, then, are fictions, but fictions designed to secure for the poetry its special status and aesthetic power. When the poet claims that the Muses enable us to overcome our separateness from the past and release us from dependence on the slippery tongues of men, he encourages the listeners to be transported out of their particular situation and brought to a direct, unmediated experience of the heroic age. But for the poet to deny his dependence upon and rivalry with other poets is also a way to avoid the issue of being late in time, of having only the most tenuous link to the great past. In Homer this denial is sustained not only in invocations but also in his portraits of poets, who, like him, are related only to the Muses above and the audience around them. By neglecting the possibility that two mortal poets might differ in their versions of a given story, the poet encourages us to regard the story as the enunciation of earlier deeds in their timeless structure. As a way of confirming the special place of the poets I think Homer went to some lengths to deny that they had other poets around them with whom they might ever compete. And in fact, a key moment in the *Odyssey*, when an epic poet confronts an epic hero, raises these submerged concerns all the more strongly. As we will see, the discrepancy between Homer's idealized self-presentation of poets of the past and the competitive realities of his own day could be exploited for significant aesthetic ironies in epic performance.
Thamyris and Poetic Competition

Homer invokes his Muse with confidence that she will grant him the ability to bypass all other traditions and will bestow her own song on him. But the tensions this strategy covers up are well evoked by Father Ong in what he calls "the old poetic tradition associated with rhetoric":

It had kept the poet engaged, struggling, not only with an audience but with other poets as well. Rhetorically colored poetic was a poetic of virtuosity, setting poet against poet. The earlier poetic was not always explicitly conscious of its agonistic underpinnings, but the underpinnings were there nevertheless, to be seen if you looked. . . . This is a pristine rhetorical world speaking, thinking of composition, including poetry, as proceeding by "invention" (inventio), retrieval of matter from the accumulated stores of mankind, stores organized by means of the places or commonplaces or topics (loci or topoi). This topical poetic clearly calls for an agonistic stance, for if the poet deals with the common store of awareness available to all, his warrant for saying or singing again what everybody is already familiar with can only be that he can say it better than others. The invocation of the Muse can be paraphrased, "Let me win, outdo all other singers." In pre-romantic, rhetorical culture, the poet is essentially a contestant.3

Ong’s vision of the agonistic poet engaged in staking his claim on a tradition available to others, so contrary to the image presented in Homer, was expressed by the Greek poet who said, "The keenly contested gifts of the Muses are not prizes lying out in the open for the first comer to win."4 And it is likely that Ong is right to see in Homer’s invocations a disguised claim for his own excellence. Such an interpretation is consonant not only with the heroic ethic pervading the poetry—always to be best, always to be first—but also would seem to be demanded by what we can reconstruct of the

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4Bacchylides (?) fr. 55 Maehler (1982) (= adespota 959 Page). Cf. Bacchylides fr. 5 on the transmission of poetic wisdom (sophia): "One man becomes wise from another / both long ago and now; for it is not easy / to discover the gates of words that have never been spoken [arrêtôn epeôn]."
poet's professional and social milieu. Though Homer consistently maintains the fiction of a divine, ahistorical poetic transmission, Hesiod and the Homeric hymns testify that in their poems archaic poets were quite willing to lay claim to the title of "sweetest of wandering singers" and to validate such a claim in the great Greek way, through contests in poetry.\textsuperscript{5} Contests were not, of course, the only forum for making and "publishing" epic poetry in archaic Greece; Homer shows his poets at court providing after-dinner entertainment, and such a venue is readily conceivable for this kind of song in the eighth century, provided only relatively short pieces of epic (a book or two?) are given each night. In addition, comparative evidence suggests that less formal settings would have been available and performances in wayside inns or marketplaces can readily be imagined. But contests interest me particularly because they were the crucible in which traditions could be melded, refined, and worked into shape. A bard singing night after night in the same palace or tavern may give pleasure for a long time, but let another bard who treats the same themes wander in and our poet will quickly find what parts of his own repertoire his Muses had best forget the next time he invokes them, and also what of the other poet's they might remember. Eris, "competition" or "strife," is a god, Hesiod says, and she can be fruitful: wealth is increased when "potter strives against potter, beggar against beggar, and singer against singer" \textit{(Works and Days} 21–26).

Even more important, some kind of poetic competition or comparison of poems seems to me an essential prelude to the very choice of two Homeric poems to be written down at all. For we are told that oral poets do not make any fine distinctions between one version of a theme and another and tend to regard two different performances of a theme as the same song, even when they differ in length and detail. But to write down such a poem is to convert it from a form in which it was comfortably available to a wide range of people and to reduce it to a form that only a few could use. Such an astonishing step requires that people say first that one version is different from another and then that it is better. Finally, these per-

ceptions must be so clear and important to people that they are moved to do a rather absurd thing for an oral culture, to point a finger and say stop there, catch and preserve that poem, it is the best and we want to hear it and no other on this theme. It seems to me that in archaic Greece a contest between poets would have best afforded the opportunity and incentive for comparing and preferring one version of an oral poem to another (there weren’t, after all, Milman Parrys running around with tape recorders). In fact, contests are the first context in which we hear of Homeric texts, and I think, with others, that they must have provided the impetus for fixing a song in amber. In any case, the serene, celestial Muses would have taken on quite a different aspect when they were invoked by two bards in succession eying a single prize tripod between them.

The poems, however, show very little trace of competition. The invocations that open these assured, autonomous texts do not seem to be troubled by antagonism, and when Homer depicts bards in his poems the divine model of strifeless transmission sustains them. To be sure, there is a “race of poets that the Muses love,” but each one works alone and depends only on the goddesses as far as we can see. We have seen that the boast of one such poet explicitly equates inspiration with independence from other singers: “I am self-taught, and the Muse has made stories / of every kind grow in my heart” (Od. 22.347–348). For these poets, as for their author, the Muses lift the process of poetic transmission out of history. Accordingly, Homer’s singers never perform with another poet near; indeed, as far as we can tell, none of them has ever met another poet.

The image of poetic tradition we get here may be characterized as vertical transmission: great deeds acquire a fame that reaches broad heaven, and from high Olympus the Muses breathe that song down on the race of poets. There is no exchange, no strife, interference, or even acknowledged influence on the horizontal plane where the poet might meet other poets. If we wish to ask Homer what has become of this fruitful exchange, we need not expect a direct answer; certainly he was not obliged to fill his

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poetry with explicit commentary on his peers and antecedents (far less to be honest if doing so). But occasionally the poems allow their “agonistic underpinnings” to show through.

The best example is the story of Thamyris, told in an excursus on the city Dorion in the catalog of ships:

there the Muses encountered Thamyris the Thracian and stopped his singing, as he was coming from Oichalia and the house of Oichalian Eurytus; for he made a boastful vow that he would emerge victorious even if the Muses, daughters of Zeus, should come to sing in person; and they became angry and maimed him, and at once took away his divine gift of singing [aoidê] and made him forget how to play the lyre.

[Iliad 2.594–600]

The story pattern is familiar: a mortal’s self-assertion of excellence; ensuing anger on the part of the patron god in that realm; a contest between god and mortal followed by the inevitable punishment of mortal presumption. A number of such stories involve the arts—for example, Marsyas’s ill-fated challenge to Apollo in flute playing—and clearly Thamyris embodies that myth as it applies to poets like Homer himself.7 A lyre player and singer, Thamyris is something of a minstrel, on his way from the palace of Eurytus in Oichalia down into Nestor’s realm. Poets like Homer must indeed have moved from place to place, though he generally represents bards as firmly established at court.8 More important, Thamyris is boastful and competitive, and this passage shows what might happen when such a poet met potential rivals on his travels.

This is the only overt Homeric allusion to poetic competition,9

7For a survey of contest myths in the arts, see Weiler (1974) 37–128.
9It is so taken by Schadewaldt (1965) 64 and Maehler (1963) 16; so too [Plut.] On Music 1132a, which assigns to Thamyris an appropriately early and hubristic theme, the Titanomachy.
and it is muted to near inaudibility. In the first place, it is not a proper contest, because Thamyris’s antagonists are not other poets but the Muses. Second, readers have not even been able to decide from this brief passage whether the contest actually took place or whether the goddesses simply struck at him for his boast. The latter point is trivial, since the main point of the myth is to assert that there must be limits to self-assertiveness for poets as for anyone else. But the fact that Thamyris’s antagonists are the Muses may have a special significance in this version of the story.\(^\text{10}\) In this dark and peculiar tale, Homer represents the only kind of poetic contest possible under the reign of the Muses: where all horizontal relationships between poets are ignored, interpoetic strife can be played out only along the vertical axis of Muse-poet. Thamyris represents for Homer essentially an *early* singer: he serves a king of the pre–Trojan War generation of Heracles and comes from Thrace, land of the most ancient mythical singers, including Orpheus. Thamyris, the only named and identified singer in the *Iliad*, stands in that poem for preceding poets, and his contest shows that mere temporal earliness is not enough to guarantee a strong transmission of song if the Muses are not honored.

The Thamyris tale, then, may be an admission by the *Iliad* poet that rivalry attended epic from a very early time, though in the heroic form of mortal against immortal. Indeed, it seems to offer a kind of negative *aition* for the “normal” epic competitions of the eighth century. In addition, it encapsulates a repeated Homeric strategy for transposing his own art into the heroic age.\(^\text{11}\) The story transmogrifies two competing rhapsodes as they might have appeared in the eighth century into one very ancient singer competing with the Muses; if the Thamyris story is a replacement for any account of poets competing with other poets, it is a way to escape

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\(^\text{10}\)Devereux (1987) argues that the tale is an “unrecognized Oedipal myth” based on (later attested) variants in which, e.g., Thamyris is the son of a Muse/the Muses or the prize is the right to cohabit with them. Inasmuch as I will follow in this chapter Harold Bloom’s idea that the denial of poetic influence can be disguised as inter-generational anxiety, I find the suggestion that rival poets vie for exclusive access to these goddesses useful.

\(^\text{11}\)For Homer’s “archaizing” in his representation of poets, see Schadewaldt (1965) 54–86, esp. 59.
the pressure of one’s rivals by projecting an ideal image of one’s art as it was earlier, before them and closer to the origins of song. When we hear the Thamyris tale we look at the poet differently, as one whose art is not being shaped now but is very old, one whose true competitors can only be gods.

The *Odyssey* presents a slightly different version of the mortal-immortal contest story, which may suggest that Thamyris’s fault (and perhaps the fault of the *Iliad* poet as well) was not simply to deny the gods but to deny his own lateness in time. When Odysseus is challenged to compete in athletics on Phaeacia, he asserts himself and his superiority in a speech of intricate tact. He says he is willing to take on the best of the Phaeacians, his host excepted, “for a man would be a fool to offer strife [eris] to his host in that man’s country” (8.210–211). He then boasts that he is a better archer than any hero of his time (excepting, again, the paragon of Greek archers, Philoctetes), but this boast is immediately qualified: “I would not strive [erizemen] against the men of former times / not with Heracles, nor with Eurytus of Oichalia” (*Od.* 8.223–224). He goes on to recount the story of Eurytus, who challenged Apollo to a contest in archery (*eridedeskon* [8.225]) and was destroyed. We note that Odysseus declares himself to be later than Eurytus (indeed he has inherited his bow through Eurytus’s son [*Od.* 21.11–33]); hence he has put competing with an earlier hero on a par with such an early hero’s taking on the gods themselves. The mythological logic of the story as Odysseus tells it is that hubris against the gods is parallel to hubris against the precursors in one’s art. The refusal to acknowledge the natural distinction that separates god and mortal is the same as the refusal to acknowledge the differences in time, the qualitative differences between early stronger and later weaker generations.12

Perhaps we may apply the lesson of athletic Eurytus to the musical exemplar of Thamyris, for his contest with the Muses is said to have taken place near that same Oichalia, as he left the palace of

12The undeveloped reference in 8.224 to Heracles, the quintessential crosser of all these borders, is relevant too. Some myths have him attacking Hera and Hades with a bow, and even killing Eurytus (n. b.) after being cheated of a prize. See Heubeck, West, Hainsworth (1981) on 8.224 and 225 and Clay (1983) 92 n. 70.
that same Eurytus. Like Eurytus, Thamyris would not respect the limits of artistic ambition and disastrously set himself against his patrons, the sources of his power. But if presumption against the gods is analogous to the presumption of a later figure who encroaches on an earlier, stronger one, Thamyris’s attempt to take on the Muses is also a battle to claim priority and authority for the single singer against the tradition. Thamyris’s hubris in denying his dependence on the Muses is an extreme instance of the _Iliad_ poet’s own stance toward the poets before him. Each denies what must be prior, religiously and temporally. Accordingly, the Thamyris story for Homer meditates on just how far a poet can go in denying his predecessors as the poet’s battle against the consequences of being later in time, against his debts to tradition, risks becoming a battle with his Muses. What is at stake for the poet of the _Iliad_ may be a competition for vividness conceived as the gift of earliness, an unmediated closeness to the events that are the source of song. Though he strives for an absolute earliness and proximity to the heroic age—to be best is to be first—there must be a limit to poetic self-assertion if the traditional poet is to be able to continue singing. A poet who follows the example of the _Iliad_ will not admit to being at the end of a tradition but will claim to be next to the source of song; but the _Odyssey_ warns that one should not trespass further, should not strive with one’s host in the host’s country.

Thamyris’s fate is exceptional, a onetime event and a transgression of the normal piety that other Homeric singers seem to exhibit. But it shows that the epic fiction has not quite excluded the antagonism at the root of a growing poetic tradition. In what follows I study more closely Homer’s picture of how tradition is handed down through time, bearing in mind that the poet’s happy direct relationship to his Muses is shadowed by the tale of Thamyris. The text that offers most on this theme is the _Odyssey_, for

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13The three contest passages share a vocabulary of rage (khôomenos): Odysseus is “enraged” by Euryalus, Apollo by Eurytus, the Muses by Thamyris ( _Od_. 8.238, 8.227; _Il_. 2.599). The bow of contention is appropriate to the context of _Od_. 8 as a weapon unfavored by the Phaeacians ( _Od_. 6.270), but symbolically the bow was early the counterpart of the lyre.
not only is it the more self-conscious of the two epics, but it also seems to have a stronger sense than the *Iliad* of coming late in the tradition and of the need to establish its worth as a tale by setting itself against others.\(^{14}\) As we shall see, the *Odyssey* manages to say in its first book that it is the “newest songs” that men praise, and recent readings have seen in this assertion a response to the discomfitting greatness of the *Iliad.*\(^{15}\) In view of the oral nature of epic performance and exchange, however, it is perhaps unnecessary to determine to what extent the *Odyssey* poet’s “anxieties of influence” are focused on that particular poem conceived of as a text or are more generally directed at such well-known sagas as the *Argonautica* (whose wandering heroes cross many of the same waters as Odysseus) or even early legends about Heracles and Eurytus such as later nourished the *Sack of Oichalia.* For the “other” to epic poetry in the *Odyssey* is not any one of these poems seen as a text; the *Odyssey*, rather, sets itself against saga, against what men “say” about what they have seen and heard. The uninspired, toilsome, decidedly historical process of saga making is a sustained interest of this epic, which goes to some lengths to show us how mortals with their limited knowledge collect from human testimony the accounts of noble deeds in the recent past. When these tales are juxtaposed to representations of epic songs, in particular to those of the Ithacan bard Phemius and Demodocus on Phaeacia, saga takes on the role of a kind of “naturalized” epic, a wholly mortal counterpart to divinely bestowed heroic poetry. Placing the god-given songs of epic singers against a background of evolving human saga allows the *Odyssey* poet to reflect on the origins and growth of heroic traditions and the place of poetry within them. This reflection reaches its climax in book 8, when the timeless communion of poet and Muse is shattered as the last of Troy’s heroes meets one of the first of her singers. When Odysseus follows Demodocus’s epic songs with his first-person accounts of his heroic adventures, it would not be straining to say that we are

\(^{14}\) On the *Odyssey’s* concern with poetry generally, see Schadewaldt (1965) chap. 6 and, among more recent studies, Clay (1983) chap. 1; Thalmann (1984) chap. 6; Murnaghan (1987) chap. 5.

\(^{15}\) Redfield (1973); Edwards (1985); Pucci (1979); and more dialectically, Pucci (1987).
presented with the birth of the first *Odyssey*. It seems that if Thamyris could meet his match only in the Muses themselves, the *Odyssey* poet has structured a subtler meeting between a very early poet and an *Ur*-poet, the hero himself. No more than the *Iliad* does the *Odyssey* dethrone its Muses, but it explores and in a new way settles poetry’s origins in time. It reaches an accommodation between its own theory that song is a god’s gift and not a construction of poets and the knowledge that there were always earlier tellers of these tales, going back even to the autobiographical hero. Finally, I ask of each poem what is won for the poet in this steadfast denial of historical transmission if it is not a romantic voice expressing individuality and originality.

Song and Saga in Ithaca

If we consider the *Odyssey* strictly as a poem about how Odysseus made his way back to Ithaca from Troy, it must be said that the path of song begins with a detour. At the opening of the poem Athena formulates a plan to free our hero from the island of Calypso, but he will not be set into motion until book 5. In the interim we are concerned with Telemachus on Ithaca and particularly with the quest he undertakes for news of his father. Because these first four books of the *Odyssey* do not plunge us directly into its central theme, and because they seem to possess a certain coherence in themselves, they have been set apart by analytical critics as a separate poem. Yet it has been pointed out in turn that the so-called Telemachy in many ways fits in with the main story and prepares us for it. We are offered a view of the hero’s son, coming of age and winning his own *kleos*, as Orestes did. We get to know important figures on Ithaca, and we have, for contrast, vivid sketches of Nestor, Helen, and Menelaus at home and, indirectly,
HOMER: THE POETRY OF THE PAST

of other notable Greeks and their fortunes in trying to return from Troy. Finally, there are some very telling anecdotes about the great hero himself, which keep Odysseus in our minds. But the part of the Telemachy that interests me here is the story that acts as scaffolding for all this exposition, Telemachus's extensive but fruitless search for his father's whereabouts. For this framing story serves to introduce the poem in the largest way. Throughout these books the questions on everyone's lips are Where is Odysseus? and Will he come home? In this prolonged opening gambit, a game of hide-and-seek for our hero, the Odyssey opens and announces itself as the greatly desired answer to the most urgent and unsolved question. There is an agreeable irony in the poem's self-glorification in creating an appetite for itself through its own characters. But beyond this self-centering, in depicting its theme as news of the past, the Odyssey also explores the relationship between song and saga and between new songs and old.

Athena no sooner plans her favorite's release than her thoughts turn to Ithaca, which is in social upheaval: arrogant suitors harass Penelope with demands of marriage and threaten the position of young Telemachus in his house. This desperate situation prevails not simply because the rightful king is absent but because no one knows exactly where he may be. The social crisis on Ithaca is fundamentally a crisis of knowledge, as Telemachus explains when the goddess visits him:

Once upon a time this house was wealthy and excellent while yet that man was here among his people; but as it is the gods have planned otherwise, devising evil, and made that man unseen [a-istōn] beyond all others, since, even if he were dead, I would not be in such trouble, if he had fallen among his companions in the land of Troy or among friends when he had woven the war to its end. In that case the Achaeans would have joined together to make him a tomb and he would have won for his child a great kleos thereafter. But now the gusts of wind have snatched him away, without leaving kleos behind [a-kleiōs], he has perished unseen [a-istōs], without leaving any report [a-pustōs], and left me only groans.

[1.232–243]
Had Odysseus died among men that knew him, society could accommodate the change and effect an orderly transition of power: a tomb would mark for all to see the spot where he lay, and his *kleos*, his glorious and enduring reputation, would preserve his status in an account of who he was and how he ended. In that case Telemachus too would have his rightful place as the son and heir of a great king. Hence, though Telemachus might wish that his father would come home and rout the suitors, he would prefer to the present uncertainty to be the son of a man who had died among his possessions, a well-witnessed death that would secure his own position and patrimony (1.217–220). But as it is, everything is in doubt because Odysseus has vanished without a trace. For his part, Telemachus has stopped believing in the reports that are carried to Ithaca, and puts no stock in the seers his mother consults (1.413–416). He supposes his father is dead, though even in this his uncertainty is global: he doesn’t know whether Odysseus’s bones are rotting somewhere on land or washed in the waves of the sea (1.161–162).

What is needed, then, are answers to certain questions: Is Odysseus alive or dead? If alive, will he return? If not, what was his end and has he been properly buried? These concerns for Telemachus are naturally emotional and religious; moreover, definite answers, whether the news be happy or not, would at least make clear the social, political, and religious obligations of son and mother. Accordingly, Athena’s plan for Telemachus is a mission “to inquire about [peusomenon] the return of his father, if he should hear any news / so that he might win *kleos* among men” (1.94–95). The remedy to a crisis of knowledge must be a heroic quest after certainty, and the first four books of the *Odyssey* follow Telemachus as he searches after the character our poet has concealed.

In the event, the quest will not be quite successful; when Telemachus returns to Ithaca, his key questions will remain unanswered and the problems at home will only be exacerbated. The poet has been stringing us along, and the game of hide-and-seek has turned into something of a shell game: we saw the hero concealed right before our eyes, but turning to one witness after another has failed

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18Misleading reports from wanderers in search of gain are referred to in 14.122ff. and 378ff.
to disclose him. This game has a significance as it is played out because it highlights another issue, one relevant to the poet and his audience. On our way with Telemachus we see how heroic figures find out and fail to find out about events that are of great import but obscured by time or distance. These models of how stories from the past survive are quite relevant to the status of the Odyssey itself.

Indeed, a quite specific emphasis on the means by which an oral society establishes “facts” important to it runs through Telemachus’s complaint. He says that no one has seen Odysseus, no one has brought back a credible report, there is no agreed-upon version of his fate which circulates as part of his kleos. Here, as in the Iliad’s description of the Muses, there is a careful and consistent use of the vocabulary of seeing and hearing. The best knowledge would come if someone had seen Odysseus (expressed in the root (w)id/(w)oid-); failing that (expressed in the privative prefix a-), one can find out by inquiring (root p(e)uth-), which is listening (akou6) to what others have to say, without seeing the proof for oneself.

Athena is equally explicit in her instructions to Telemachus:

Go to inquire about [peusomenos] your father so long gone, if by chance some mortal might tell you, or you hear a rumor [ossan] from Zeus, which chiefly carries kleos among men.

[1.281–283]

Telemachus’s position is like that of Homer’s audience: he cannot expect to see Odysseus and thus to know surely where he is; he will have to rely on hearsay (cf., akoê [5.19]). What a mortal chances to say cannot be traced to its source; it is as unreliable as a rumor—literally the “speech of Zeus,” which is, like kleos, a tale that has currency without a definite origin among men.19 When Telemachus subsequently undertakes his journey, the focus on just how people find things out remains constant, carried through by this recurrent vocabulary to mark firsthand knowledge as opposed to the report of such knowledge. This journey extensively illustrates a

process of collating oral reports in an attempt to substitute for a clear knowledge or view of heroic reality.\textsuperscript{20}

Once the chase is afoot, the first stop is Pylos and garrulous old Nestor. Telemachus asks him for any news of his father, “whether by chance you have seen him / with your own eyes, or have heard the tale from another, / a wanderer” (3.93–95). Again, the report of an eyewitness is best; next is the account gleaned secondhand from an eyewitness, which would be perforce a slightly wandering account in the case of Odysseus. Nestor begins with his divagating recusatio but manages to bring Telemachus abreast of things as far as the time he parted with, and thus last saw, Odysseus, at Tenedos at the beginning of the way back to Greece. After that he himself made good time home,

So that, dear boy, I have found out nothing [apeuthēs] and don’t know [oida] at all about them, which Achaean survived and which died.

But as much as I have found out [peuthomai] while sitting here in my palace this, as is only right, you shall learn, I won’t hide it from you.

They say that the Myrmidons. . . .

\[3.184–188\]

Nestor doesn’t “know” about the returns he goes on to recount because he has been sitting at home far from the actual events, but he is willing to give the hearsay, what “they say” about the returning army.\textsuperscript{21} He has heard about how Achilles’ troops fared, and about other Greek contingents, but as for Odysseus’s present fate, he can only offer a pious hope that Athena still stands by him (3.230ff.). Telemachus is not comforted by Nestor’s report and continues to suppose his father dead (3.240–242).

We get further along with the story with Menelaus, who was the last to make his way back from Troy. Telemachus tells him that he has come after news (kλēêdona [4.317]) of his father, and repeats the request he had made to Nestor for anything Menelaus might have


\textsuperscript{21}It is also from what “they say” that housebound Nestor knows of the current troubles on Ithaca (3.212).
seen with his eyes or heard from some traveler (4.323–325 = 3.93–95). Menelaus turns out to have some hearsay about Odysseus, and it comes from an unusually good source, Proteus. The prophetic sea god told Menelaus a good deal about the returns of various Achaeans and said that he “saw” (4.556) Odysseus alive but trapped on Calypso’s island, with neither vessel nor crew (4.555–560). What the god has seen and deigned to say must be true, and so it will prove to be (4.557–560 = 5.14–17); but what may have happened to Odysseus since then is not known, and it hardly seems likely that he will be able to make his way home. Menelaus knows only that things look very bad for his old companion and fellow warrior: “It is likely after all / that trouble came on him, and on me an unforgettable sorrow / for him, so long gone, I don’t even know / whether he is alive or dead” (4.107–110); some angry god, he hazards, has taken away his return (4.181–182).

Telemachus then returns to Ithaca without the crucial information he was seeking but having learned much about other heroes. Most of it is reliable report, for it comes from eyewitnesses of established credentials and good will, Odysseus’s comrades in arms or someone such as Helen, who contributes her own encounters with Odysseus in Troy. He also has the report of one divine sighting of Odysseus, but it offers little insight into his present situation. If his firm knowledge of Odysseus’s prospects for returning has not essentially been advanced from the time when we first saw him, “imagining in his mind’s eye” (ossomenos . . . eni phresi [1.115]) how his father might come home and scatter the suitors, nevertheless his quest has provided an extensive illustration of how a great and complex action is converted into an accepted story.

What we are shown here is in effect the formation of an oral tradition recounting how the Greeks fared on their perilous return from Troy. The tales are passed from witness to reporter to reporter, and Telemachus in his travels can collate them to make a larger whole. The particular stages by which such a tradition grows can be resumed in a consideration of Agamemnon’s exemplary fate, which is rehearsed four times in these books. First of all, the events have occurred and, even if done by guile, have been open to the sight of the gods, to all-seeing Zeus in particular. In the scene that opens the poem, we get the Olympian view, as Zeus calls to mind
Aegisthus, how he killed Agamemnon on his return and how he was in turn slain by Orestes (1.29–35). On earth, the tale is carried to Ithaca by Athena, disguised as a traveling merchant: “Haven’t you heard,” she asks Telemachus, “what kleos Orestes got / among all men when he killed his father’s murderer?” (1.298–299). The story is evidently already widely circulating, and Nestor assumes it has reached Ithaca: “You yourself, though you live far away, have heard about Agamemnon / how he came back and how Aegisthus contrived his wretched destruction” (3.193–194). Menelaus was even more removed from Mycenae at the time of his brother’s death, being detained in Egypt, but he can give the fullest version of all, because he got it from Proteus (4.519–537). The next step for a story like this, which has moral and dynastic implications that give it universal and enduring interest, is to become kleos, the hardened and lasting form of report which passes through the wide world and through time. So Athena says Orestes has won kleos with his vengeance, and Telemachus predicts the future career of the story: “Indeed that one took a great revenge, and the Achaeans / will carry his fame afar, even to be a song for men to come” (3.204–205). Action, report, kleos, and finally song; Athena and Nestor compress the whole sequence when they counsel Telemachus to be brave at this time so that men born later may speak well of him (1.302 = 3.200).

As the poem opens, then, Agamemnon’s great fall is already achieving fame, and stories about the other heroes are circulating. From his various sources Telemachus can piece together an account of the nostoi, the perilous returns of the Greek heroes from Troy. The human tale is incomplete, but there is of course another way to find out what the Greek heroes did and suffered, one that comes not from the tongues of men but from the gods, inspired song. In fact there was a large range of epic which took these very returns for its themes. The Odyssey is the greatest and earliest extant example of such nostoi, or “return poems,” but its author by no means invented the form. Indeed, such a poem is being sung by the very first bard we see, Phemius, who sings in the palace of Ithaca “the Wretched Return of the Achaeans / from Troy which Athena brought about” (1.326–327). This return song plays in the background while Athena and Telemachus discreetly talk about Odys-
seus’s possible return. The human account of the Greek returns is thus matched with an account given in “divinely inspired song.” If Proteus will sometimes tell men what he has seen, the Muses also tell men the *klea andrôn* that they and their father have witnessed. On Ithaca both epic and human inquiry as forms of recollection aim to give an account of the same events, and both have strong psychological effects on their hearers. Athena tells Telemachus about her last meeting with Odysseus, and her conversation “put him in mind of his father more strongly than before” (*hupemnēsen* [1.321-322]). The song sung by the bard moves Penelope to an “unforgettable sorrow” because she is “always thinking of” (*memnēmenē*) her husband (1.342-343). Both Athena, who bears the name Mentes, “inspirer of thought,” and the “mindful” bard play the role of *mnēmonēs*, reminding guardians of the past.

We would like to know more about this song of Phemius, which seems to parallel human inquiry as a source of heroic history and incentive to action, and a good deal is supplied in the ensuing scene. Penelope appears and asks the bard to sing one of the many other enchanting songs that he knows but to stop this sad one (1.337-341). What exactly is the subject of “this” song? We are told only that it is the “Wretched Return of the Achaeans.” Because Phemius’s song makes Penelope long for her husband, it has been suggested that Phemius is singing a lying song about Odysseus’s death to please the suitors. Yet no bard in either epic sings an evidently false song, and Penelope elsewhere seems uncertain of his fate. His “fame spread wide throughout Greece” to which Penelope refers (1.344) must be of his heroism in the Trojan War, well known by now. But what is missing is any *kleos* of his return (1.242), and for Penelope this must remain in doubt, despite her

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22Homer creates a foreground and a background here by having Telemachus draw Athena (and us) out of earshot of the entertainment for their talk at 1.156–157. It is normally his practice to depict simultaneous events as happening consecutively, but Phemius seems to begin singing at 1.155 and to have been singing all the while (cf. 1.159) until Telemachus returns to the suitors, 1.324–325.

23Such I take to be the implication of *thespin aëidēn* in 1.328, on which, see Chapter 5.

24Svenbro (1976) 31 n. 88.

interest in divination. It is rather because she thinks of him always that the tales of other returns remind her of him who has not come home.

A striking point is made in Telemachus’s reply, which offers a significant commentary on song in the heroic age. He tells his mother that the bard is not responsible for the fates men get, but Zeus is; the bard must be free to pursue the course of song “wherever his mind moves” (1.346–349). “He is not to be blamed for singing the evil fate of the Danaans / for men praise most of all that song / which rings newest in their ears” (1.350–352). The palpable irony of this statement is not always noted, but it could not have failed to strike an audience whose greatest delight was for songs of a dim and distant past that the heroes within the Odyssey take for their entertainment the newest themes. The fundamental character of epic as poetry of the past is reversed when it appears in the looking glass of epic. What were the “fames of men” for Homer’s audience were fresh rumor and recent news for the heroes; the literate’s trope would be to say that the faded parchments we keep in museums were the daily newspapers of old. And this makes sense, for it is an appropriate glorification of these men greater than we to say that, just as their own deeds and lives are destined to become the stuff of immortal poetry, so the poetry they prefer comes closest to these deeds.

Book 1 of the Odyssey, then conscientiously juxtaposes the two forms of heroic narrative by setting up an urgent inquiry after Odysseus and then characterizing poetry as a source of the latest news about glorious action. With this irony, poetry is put alongside oral report as a parallel source of knowledge about the klea andrôn. When the story begins, however, each source of knowledge has reached the same impasse. Phemius sings the latest poetry, the sequel to the Trojan song, but the nostoi do not yet embrace Odysseus’s return. The path of god-given song has advanced only so far in the process of transmuting deed into account. And this is exactly as far as human tradition has progressed. Telemachus manages to piece together a fairly complete saga of the returns, but the great

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26 An exception is Jensen (1980) 118.
missing piece remains the return of Odysseus, as he says to Nestor:

For all the other heroes who fought at Troy
we have found out where each one met his painful end,
but this man’s death the son of Cronus has made unknown
[apeuthea],
and no one is able to tell us clearly where he died,
whether he fell on land, at the hands of foemen,
or on the high seas in the waves of Amphitrite.

[3.86–91]

No one can say where Odysseus is, and no one can sing his return. Phemius, “man of fame,” has the latest poetry, but this is no more than one might learn by going abroad.

In the Telemachy, then, we see oral traditions about the heroes’ return and the poetry of that return stopped at the same point. How will the tale go on? The answer is of course the Odyssey itself, and the poem very explicitly situates itself in its prologue as that latest song, sought by all but not yet accomplished:

At that time all the others, as many who escaped utter destruction,
were home, having escaped the war and the sea;
but him alone, eager for his homecoming and his wife,
the awesome nymph Calypso kept back, shining among goddesses.

[1.11–14]

Others have come home, or not; some have won kleos; others are in the process of winning it; reports abound. But Odysseus’s return is covered over; he is held by Calypso, the “concealer,” on her “far-off island” (5.55). The Odyssey dedicates its opening books to depicting a world in which it is itself on the verge of being realized, at the precise moment when gods and heroes are most eager to retrieve the story of far-off Odysseus.

Song and Saga in Phaeacia

The nostoi is completed by the Odyssey: the newest of new songs tells how the last of the heroes came home. Yet the poet has
not finished sketching out the relationship of saga and poetry, for what has happened to Odysseus since Troy is told to us by Odysseus himself in a long first-person narration filling books 9 through 12. Moreover, this hero’s report of his own heroic doings is also juxtaposed to the poetry of an epic bard, Demodocus, the court poet in Phaeacia. The Phaeacian episode, like the Telemachy, puts heroic reminiscence alongside epic poetry, but with a significant difference: here at last a reporter is found who can add to the tales of return. Our source for the missing account will prove to be an excellent witness, in fact he is the only Greek on earth who could tell the story as an eyewitness.

On Phaeacia, Odysseus’s oral report supplements heroic song, but the situation is in fact more complicated. Odysseus’s performance is not simply juxtaposed to that of Demodocus but so intertwined with it that the two nearly meld together as if they were the offerings of two poets. It has been noted that Homer repeatedly compares Odysseus to a poet in his tale-telling and that in these books the hero in many ways acts as his own bard.27 Alcinous explicitly compares Odysseus to a bard (11.363–369), and the poet twice says that his long heroic narrative cast a spell over his audience, which is precisely the effect Phemius’s songs have on his hearers (11.333–334 = 13.1–2; cf. 1.337–340). But the comparisons are more extensive than is usually noted; in the aggregate they suggest that Odysseus is not merely the “prose” counterpart to Demodocus but in a certain sense his poetic antagonist.

As far as the plot of the Phaeacis is concerned, Odysseus’s tale is an interruption of the song of Demodocus, indeed, only the last in a series of impulsive interruptions by Alcinous that seem to send the action in book 8 reeling from palace to public square and back again. But threading together all of Demodocus’s performances and tying them to the tale of Odysseus is a consistent and explicit focus on the forms of poetic performance. In describing the performances of Demodocus and Odysseus, Homer highlights their formal aspects, noting how they begin and end and so suggesting how they might be connected. Specifically, he uses a number of

expressions that are rare or unique in his corpus but usual in Hesiodic proems and the Homeric hymns as technical terms relating to the rhapsodic presentation of piece after piece of heroic poetry. The constellation of these quasi-technical terms here (and only here in the two epics) draws our attention to the place of Odysseus’s story in Homer’s “topical poetic,” a poetic conceiving of poetry as themes selected from a common store and connected one to another.

Demodocus is moved to sing by the Muses and selects as his theme, *oimē*, the “Quarrel of Odysseus and Achilles, son of Peleus” (8.75). This particular theme is not known to us elsewhere, but comes from sometime in the beginning of the expedition. Later Odysseus refers to this performance and then asks the poet to skip forward on the path of song: “But come, move along [on the path of song] and sing the Fashioning of the Horse” (Od. 8.492). Demodocus complies: he “took his beginning from the god *[theou arkheto]*” (8.499). The phrase *theou arkheto*, like the verb *metabainō*, is unique in Homer, but like *oimē*, both seem to belong to the quasi-technical language of early epos, and their effect here is to draw attention to the formal breaks in the performance and to the performatory procedure by which subsequent tellers pick up and carry on the previous theme. Similarly, when Demodocus takes up Odysseus’s

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28 The quarrel is “the beginning of woes” for the Greeks. Whether one locates this event at the marshaling of the fleet at Aulis, with Pagliaro (1951) 17–20, or later at Tenedos, with Nagy (1979) chaps. 1 and 3, the sequence is not affected.

29 Another possible proemic locution in this context is the Homeric hapax *humno̱* in 8.429, referring prospectively to Demodocus’s second palace performance. As mentioned in Chapter 1, *humno̱* does not at this time mean “hymn to the gods,” but if it is a general term for “song,” it is remarkable that Homer does not avail himself of it more often as a variant for *aoidē*, which occurs more than thirty times. This anomaly would make sense if *humno̱* named singing particularly in its aspect of an individual performer’s contribution in a series of performances. Hence it would have been established in the Homeric hymns, for example, in the transitional formula in which the poet “moves” from his proem “to another *humno̱*” (H. Aph. 295 etc.); Hesiod uses *humno̱* twice in the proem to the sailing section of the Works and Days, where he speaks of “winning a tripod by my hymn [humnōi nikēsanta]” (657). Whatever may be its precise sense as opposed to *aoidē*, *humno̱* seems an appropriate expression for song in its aspect as a competition piece—not “singing” as an activity but the woven, defined presentation of an individual, possibly for a prize. Such also seems to be the force of the word in the pseudo-Hesiodic hexameters describing a mythical contest between Homer and Hesiod at Delos (note the proemic first person) 357 M-W: “Then first in Delos did I and Homer / make festive music for Apollo, weaving song in new hymns, / for the one with the golden sword, whom Leto bore.”
request, Homer tells us the starting point (ēthen helôn) from which he began the episode of the wooden horse and the ensuing sack of Troy (8.492–503; cf. 514–515). These two songs, then, roughly span the Trojan War, and their sequel can only be the returns. The great capstone to the returns, the part that Phemius was unable to sing on Ithaca, is the return of Odysseus. But here Demodocus is interrupted by Alcinous, who turns to his vagabond guest and asks him only what one might ask any long-suffering supplicant:

But come now tell me this, and recount it straight
where were you buffeted and what lands did you visit
where men dwell, and what well-inhabited cities
both the ones that were cruel and savage, unjust,
and the ones that welcomed strangers and had a mind of reverence?

[8.572–576]

But this is the same topic, in some of the same words, as the Odyssey's own: the man much buffeted, who knew cities of many men, and their mind (1.1–4). Odysseus is being invited to follow Demodocus's songs with a personal version of the Odyssey.

Odysseus begins his tale with a prologue (9.2–38), in which he manages to execute the primary functions of a proem: honoring the host and the present occasion (2–14), identifying and praising the speaker (19ff.), posing the aporia about beginnings (14–16), and settling on a starting point (37–38). His topic is his "Return of many Cares / which Zeus imposed upon me from Troy," which rings like an invocation in its title, relative clause, the mention of woes and the will of Zeus. Setting apart its unique ethos, Odysseus's tale is very much a heroic story, and he begins just where Demodocus had left off: the first word of his narrative proper is liothen, "from Ilion" (9.39).

The sequence of paths, of loci or topoi, remains strikingly evident throughout. Odysseus's narrative runs on until 11.327, when he tries to conclude it with a recusatio closing his catalog of women in Hades. There is a pause; Alcinous bestows gifts and compliments and then moves the song along:

But come, tell me this, and recount it unswervingly
whether you saw any of your godlike companions, who with you
went to Troy and met their fate there.
This night is quite amazingly long, and not yet is it time to sleep.

[11.370–74]

When Odysseus complies, he converts Alcinous’s request into a conversational version of the invocation. “I would not begrudge you,” he says,

the Cares of my Companions, who died then,
the ones who escaped a groanful death from the Trojans
but on their return died, through the will of an evil woman.

[11.382–384]

Odysseus announces that he is taking up the epic theme again in the titling syntax, the paratactic relative clauses alluding to suffering, and even the parodical mention that all this happened through the will of—not a god—that evil woman Helen.30 He takes up his story from where he left off: after Persephone scattered the shades of the women “there came the shade of Agamemnon” (11.387).

From the perspective of a topical poetic, Demodocus and Odysseus manage through starts and pauses to give a long continuous tale tracing a large part of the heroic traditions. The poet has not only enjoyed the irony of bringing the living hero into the heroic poet’s audience, he has so structured and described their performances as to make them join together into one grand epic. At first Demodocus had sung “in whatever direction his heart moves” (8.45), as Phemius did in Ithaca (1.347); but with Odysseus’s intervention, he enters the song on cue. In fact, the sequence of themes here suggests nothing so much as a competition in epic poetry; at least this is exactly the procedure that we hear was practiced later in Athens with the poetry of Homer. Ancient testimony traces to some time in the sixth century the “Panathenaic rule” that rhapsodes take up their themes from one another in a prescribed succession. Diogenes Laertius attributes to Solon a measure stipulating that at the great Athenian festival for Athena “the Homeric

30“Through the will of,” iotéti, is usually used of divine will in Homer, and always in this metrical position; cf. its use in 12.190, where the Sirens sing what the Greeks and Trojans suffered “through the will of the gods.”
poems should be recited by a process of giving cues (*ex hupobolēs*), that is, at whatever point the first poet stopped, the one who came after him should start from there” (Solon 1.57). And a work attributed to Plato assigns a nearly identical law to Hipparchus: “He compelled the rhapsodes at the Panatheneia to go through them [the Homeric poems] taking up the pieces in order (*ex hupolēpsios ephexēs*), just as they do now” ([Plato] Hipparchus 228B). The performances of Demodocus and Odysseus happen to replicate very closely the art of rhapsodes as it is later attested. Their individual contributions might be stitched together into one long continuous song.

These testimonia are late and attribute the procedure to different innovators, but they agree on the procedure for competitive epic performance at festivals, and we simply cannot say when Homeric poetry first began to be performed in this way. Other details seem to add to the picture. When Demodocus takes to the *agora* we

31When Demodocus left off his Trojan narrative, the verb used was *lexciēn* (Od. 8.87), which is the technical expression used by a rhapsode to end a performance or a part of one: *H. Dion.* 17–18; Hesiod fr. 305.4 M-W and *Theog.* 48; Diogenes Laertius 1.57; see West (1981) 122. Dunkel adds ll. 9.191 and suggests that this language may go back to the vocabulary of Indo-European song contests (1979) 268–269.

32Pagliaro (1951) 30–38 argues that these non-Homeric terms belonged to the archaic terminology of the singer’s art and especially described aspects of competitive performances. He has further claimed that the *Odyssey* preserves a technical expression for the first performer in a series of rhapsodies in describing Demodocus’s beginning, *aneballeto kalon aedein* (Od. 8.266, etc.); but Od. 17.261–262 clearly indicates that the traditional explanation of the phrase as referring to an instrumental prelude, without special reference to a series of performers, cannot be excluded from Homer (contra Pagliaro, esp. 32).

33It has occasionally been suggested that festival contests, lasting several days, were the occasion for monumentally long compositions such as the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*; e.g., Murray (1934) 187–192 and Webster (1964) 267–272. The scholium to *Pindar Nemean* 2.1 (concerned to offer an etymology for the much disputed term *rhapsode*, “stitch-singer”) says that “originally each contestant gave at a competition whatever piece he wished. . . . Later, when the two [Homeric] poems were introduced, the contestants, so to speak, sewed together the parts of the poems to each other and went through the entire poem.”

34Davison (1955) 9–12 and (1962) questions the accuracy of the testimonia, but there is no reason to think that this manner of performance cannot be archaic. For a recent strong defense of the old hypothesis that Homeric texts were first formed at Athenian festivals, see Jensen (1980) chap. 9 (relevant texts reprinted on 207–226); she argues that the Homeric epics were dictated in Athens at the end of the sixth century by the poet who won the Panathenaic rhapsodic contest.
find several peculiar details that may evoke a singing contest as much as an entertainment. For the poet’s performance *aisumnêtai kritoi démioi* appear. It is hard to judge from the obscure archaic word *aisumnêtai* what these “selected public umpires” did. Ostensibly they have no contest to judge; their job is to smooth out the dancing place and broaden it (*eurunanc* [8.260]), probably by sitting the people away from the arena, which is just what Achilles does as he prepares the athletic competition in *Iliad* 23.257–258. Further, the place they broaden, which is where Demodocus will perform, is called here not simply a “dancing place,” (*khoron* [as in *Od*. 8.264; cf. 6.157]), but an *agon* (8.259, 260); this word, used generally for “assembly” in epic, bears elsewhere in this book (8.200, 238) and in the *Iliadic* description of Patroclus’s funeral games the specific sense “place of contest.”

Taken as a whole, the series of songs offered here contains many elements typical of a succession of rhapsodic performances. Demodocus offers several themes in succession and comes tantalizingly close to entering the lists; and it is suggestive that his “Affair of Ares and Aphrodite” resembles in many respects a displaced Homeric hymn, since Homeric hymns would have been an especially appropriate way to lead off a festival rhapsodic contest. The reference to poetic contests in Hesiod makes it certain that Homer must have known of poetic competition, however idyllic the world in which his bards operate. Hesiod speaks of a contest held at a king’s funeral, but more relevant to our context may be the testimony of the Homeric *Hymn to Apollo*, usually dated to the seventh century, which describes rhapsodic competitions at festivals. For the larger context of the *Phaeacids* provides a number of other suggestions of a festival setting for poetic contests.

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35Eustathius (1594.62) and the scholion on 8.258 gloss *aisumnêtēs* with *brabētauai*, which can denote the judges at a musical agon (cf. schol. on Aristophanes *Peace* 733); but *aisumnêtēs* is rare in archaic Greek, and its meanings remain obscure. See *LfgRE* s.v. and, for its later political use, Romer (1982).

36Il. 23 passim, 24.1; cf. H. Ap. 150, *Hymn* 6.20, and H. J. Mette in *LfgRE*, s.v. 2.f, g. Cowgill (1978) has proposed to connect this word (via *ageirê*) with *agorê*, “public square.”

37See Allen, Halliday, and Sikés (1936) lxxxvii–lxxxviii, who note that the only elements missing are the invocation, epilogue, and the address to a deity—i.e., the rhapsodic elements have been shorn off.

38H. Ap. 146–150. It is hypercritical to doubt that the passage refers to contests; for
In its outline, book 8 interposes athletic contests between two epic recitations by Demodocus. The mere depiction of a festivity that combined athletic competition with musical performance would have been suggestive in the archaic age of the matching poetic and athletic contests which were the core of great festivals such as the one on Delos for Apollo. But in this book things are managed in such a way as to make the resemblance the result of spontaneous impulses: Alcinous is searching for ways to entertain his guest. The action of the book is complex but fairly well articulated by the movements of characters in and out of Alcinous's palace. At its opening Alcinous and Odysseus leave the palace to join a public assembly of the Phaeacians in the agora (8.5); there, the king proposes to entertain this unknown wanderer and convey him home (28). Then a select royal party repairs to the palace to entertain the guest. Demodocus is specially invited, and he performs the Quarrel of Odysseus and Achilles after the feast (73–74). When this presentation distresses Odysseus, Alcinous tactfully suspends the entertainment and proposes that the company turn their attention to athletic contests; accordingly, they return to the agora, where they are joined by a multitude of spectators (107–109). After the games and gift giving, the royal party returns to the palace (421–422). Here there are further civilities and a feast, after which Demodocus performs another Trojan theme (499–500). The spatial movements serve to emphasize their different contexts: one is a public spectacle, the other a royal entertainment; one is competitive and the other not. Even when Alcinous collapses these distinctions by inviting Demodocus to perform at the games, it is as though singing were incorporated with the games as an afterthought. Homer marks the incursion of the singer into the public space as exceptional: Alcinous must dispatch a herald to fetch Demodocus's lyre, which had been left hanging in the palace hall (8.254–255; cf. 67).39

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39This kind of detail is not beneath Homer's notice; cf. ll. 9.188, where it is explained how Achilles happened to have a lyre at Troy. Similar is ll. 5.192ff.
It is as though Alcinous is improvising here, and his improvised entertainment of Odysseus happens to include the activities that the Greeks were wont to enjoy at festivals. Contests between poets, formal or informal, were especially suitable for such a setting. Eustathius, the learned twelfth-century bishop of Thessalonica, was troubled when he read this scene by a naïve question—Why would a blind poet go out to watch games?—but he shrewdly sensed that Homer has brought Demodocus out here as to a competition:

Demodocus is led out where the best of the Phaeacians go... to admire or watch the athletics, not only so that he may enjoy the contest by listening to it, but also, as it were, to compete himself and to display that musical art in which the Phaeacians take so much pride because of him. And if the poet had been able to fashion some rival artist [antitekhnon] for Demodocus, on the pattern of those who later competed at musical contests, he would not have hesitated to do so. (1587.49ff.)

Eustathius is wrong about the chronology of poetic contests and fails to note that Demodocus meets his match in Odysseus, but he senses from the logic of book 8 both that Demodocus is somewhat out of place at the games and that he is a rhapsode manqué.

The Competition for Truth

The unachieved contest at Phaeacia is only one of several analogous displacements of eighth-century festival life to be found on this exotic island. The first thing Odysseus sees when he is washed up on shore is Nausicaa and her maids at play. The girls are playing a ball game (paisdon) while Nausicaa leads (érkheto) them in a “song and dance” (molpê [6.99–102]). These terms were also typically used in archaic Greece to describe any virginal choragus who led a festive maidens’ chorus, and the poet strengthens the allusion when he compares the scene to that of Artemis dancing (paisdousi) with her nymphs (6.106), making her mother re-
joice. This image of Artemis leading a maiden's dance to the delight of her parents, well known to the Homeric hymns (Hymn 27.16–20; H. Ap. 197–199, 204–205), was a paradigm for maidens' choruses in which proud parents would show off their marriageable daughters at Delphi or the Panatheneia. Artemis is invoked for a second time by Odysseus himself, who adds that Nausicaa's parents must be gratified when they see her enter the chorus (Od. 6.151–157). But on Phaeacia the formal maidens' choral ceremony is no more than a seaside game of a princess and her maids.

One detail from the Phaeacian episode supports these hints and epitomizes their subtle disguising. At 6.162–167 Odysseus compares Nausicaa to a palm he once saw beside the altar of Apollo at Delos. H. T. Wade-Gery has suggested that the poet's audience would recognize such a reference from having attended the Delian festival. This sole Homeric mention of the palm certainly suggests the sacred tree at Delos, which was frequently mentioned in Apolline poetry as supporting Leto when she gave birth to the god. But again the context denies that the palm in Homer could be Leto's ancient palm, for the altar of Apollo is already there and the tree is only a shoot (ernos) and still growing, surely too frail to support a goddess in travail. A Delian palm it is though, unique, awe-inspiring, and in the sacred precinct. It is, in fact, the very same tree, but like the other aspects of a god's festival, including the competition among poets, returned in time to its heroic infancy.

The archaizing or heroizing of poetic competition in the Odyssey, book 8, is thus part of a larger reduction from the present to the past and from the ritual to the spontaneous. On this fantastic isle Homer imagines a very early kind of festival, complete with a very early kind of contest. With its spontaneous choruses and games and musical performances, the Phaeacian episode preserves hints

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40 For exarkhein (cf. Od. 4.19), see Pagliaro (1951) 19–34. On paisdein and molpē in this context, see Calame (1977) 164–166, 90–91.
41 Wade-Gery (1952) 1–6; so too thought the scholiast on the passage and perhaps whoever wrote the hexameters about Homer and Hesiod competing on Delos ([Hes.] fr. 357 M-W).
42 In a comparable piece of archaizing, Pindar imagines the early Olympic festival before olive trees were planted there (Ol. 3.21–24).
of the major entertainments of a festival honoring a deity, such as the Ionians established for Delian Apollo. If we add the sacrifices, the feasting, and the procession arranged by Alcinous, in which delegates from the Phaeacian tribes bring gifts to Odysseus, Homer seems to have staged a day of singing and contests as the scene for a competition, or at least confrontation, between heroic poet and narrating hero.

All these details suggest the most magnificent forum for epic success in Homer’s day, and yet it is not quite a contest: although Alcinous may say that Odysseus is like a poet, he is of course finally not a poet. Hence this peculiar meeting is rather like Thamyris’s encounter with the Muses: in this imaginary land, at the very end of the Trojan tale, Homer imagines an epic poet so early in time that he can meet one of the subjects of his song. In each case the poet translates the familiar antagonism of two poets beneath one Muse into a very early kind of contest between the poet and his tradition personified. For a poet who declares his independence of rivals and predecessors, this can be the only interesting contest. In leaping out of the competitive context of his own day to find his only adversary in a figure so early as to be of another order, the poet tries to make singing timeless. The contest at Phaeacia, adumbrated but not realized, effectively solves the question raised in book 1 of how a tradition manages to grow: Telemachus sought an eyewitness account of Odysseus from the ones who had seen him most recently or seen him best; in later times, when all the heroes are gone and Proteus may be silent, Homer’s own poetry is the sole satisfying account of the past. The prize at stake is the hope of giving a true account of the past, which turns out to mean the account closest to the deeds themselves.

Odysseus’s meeting with Demodocus is usually read for what it says about the hero. In book 8 he reveals his excellence according

43 For the chorus of maidens at Delos, see Calame (1977) 194–204. There are many other parallels between the Phaeacians and the Ionians, who are also noted for their ships and wealth (H. Ap. 153–155). These might be explained by assuming that the composer of the Delian hymn was influenced by the fictions of the Odyssey in describing a real island, but again these traditional texts contain patterns that are more widely dispersed, see Richardson on Od. 8 and H. Dem. (1974) 179–180, 339–343, who suggests that H. Dem. may have been modeled on Od. 8–13 but allows that many of these similarities may be part of a tradition, 180.
to the classic heroic standard of being a doer of deeds and a speaker of words: he shows his athletic prowess in the contests and shows that he knows how to speak prudently in his contretemps with Euryalus (esp. 8.166ff.). But by bringing Odysseus together with Demodocus, Homer adds a further quality to the hero “with whom no mortal could contend” in speaking (ll. 3.223): his mere reminiscences are as spellbinding as a poet’s and so he shows the special self-conscious, artful, and affecting qualities that are so exploited in the rest of the poem.  

All this seems fair enough. But the scene also says something about the nature of poetry and its relation to other oral traditions, a theme we have seen in the Telemachy. It contrives to pit the inspired bard against the eyewitness hero. The meeting between Demodocus and Odysseus is thus a meeting of song and saga, as the poet makes clear when Odysseus addresses Demodocus:

Demodocus, to you beyond all other mortals I offer praise:  
either the Muse taught you, the child of Zeus, or Apollo.  
For quite rightly [kata kosmon] do you sing the destruction of the Achaeans,  
all that they did and suffered and wrought at Troy,  
as if somehow either you yourself were present or had heard of it from someone else who was.  
But come, move along 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 the men who sacked Ilion.  
And if you narrate these things to me correctly [kata moiran],  
then I shall proclaim to all men

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44 So Murnaghan (1987) 153: the depictions of Odysseus as his own poet “are expressions of just how rare and how complete his success in the Odyssey is.” Similarly Thalmann (1984) 174 speaks of Odysseus’s verbal facility and his extraordinary mastery of deed and word. Redfield sees Odysseus as making poetry out of his experience, as mediating and settling “somehow” the relation between poetry and fact ([1973] esp. 153). Segal (1983) 27 speaks of the irony that “calls attention to the fact that the glory of heroic deeds exists only in song.”

45 Apollo’s association with “singers and kitharists” is archaic (Theog. 94–95; cf. Allen, Halliday, and Sikes (1936) on Hymn 25). But it is suggestive that Homer names him as patron of poets only here, along with other apparent references to a Delian setting already noted.
that on you the god in her favor has bestowed divinely spoken song.

[8.487–498]

Again the opposition of seeing and hearing is pregnant: the poet speaks “as if he were there,” as if he saw the events for himself, though we know he wasn’t and we see he is blind. Yet he has “heard it from someone else who was,” since the all-seeing Muses supply his eyes into the past. In addition, Odysseus has implicitly pointed out that his own forthcoming account will not come from the Muses but will be a tale told by one who was there.

Odysseus’s praise of Demodocus must be read as indirect praise for the epic poet singing the song, but it is necessary to specify in what his song excels. This passage is often read as an indirect claim for the “truth” of the poetic tale from an actual eyewitness, but we have seen that any basis for such judgments would have been inaccessible to Homer’s audience. In fact, we should note here that as a vagabond from unknown parts, Odysseus has no credentials in Phaeacia to authenticate the “factuality” of these events. He is speaking only as another member of the audience; he remains aware of his own concealed identity enough to speak disingenuously of “Odysseus” in the third person.

In context, the only kind of “truth” that the vagabond can assert is that limited kind denoted by ἀλήθεια. Such a judgment is also implied in Odysseus’s key commendatory phrase, kata kosmon (8.489). Literally, “according to order,” this phrase has yielded the antithetical interpretations “true” or “well ordered” as well as combinations of both.46 Yet the phrase should not be pressed too quickly into meaning “true.” As “order,” kosmos is an arrangement that is good, efficient, approved: in military terms it is well-deployed forces; in social terms it is the high seated above the low.47 It is how


47The best attack is “well according to order” (ll. 11.48 = 12.85). A routed army is not “orderly” (ll. 12.225). The Phaeacian nobles sit “in order” (kosmōi [Od. 13.77]), that is, according to precedence. Actions not “according to order” are those done without regard to decency or social propriety, such as the assembly called at night, to which everyone comes sodden with drink (Od. 3.138; cf. ll. 5.759, 8.12, 17.205; Od. 20.181).
one goes about preparing a sacrificial animal (ll. 24.622). The order may have an aesthetic aspect ("cosmetic" order) when the most efficient order is the neatest; so weapons stored in three neat rows are "well according to order," and more clearly, when a horse’s cheek piece is beautifully made, it is an "adornment" to be stored away in a chamber and not borne by horsemen. In relation to language, kosmos is usually used of speeches when they are "not according to order" (ou kata kosmon), and in these cases social proprieties are violated more than factuality. So I take it of Thersites’ disorderly speech (ll. 2.214), and when Odysseus says Euryalus’s abuse of him was "not according to order" (Od. 8.179), he means that it was inappropriate to their relative status rather than that it was false. The swineherd Eumaeus calls the tales of disguised Odysseus both "reckless lying" and ou kata kosmon (Od. 14.361–365); the first phrase indicates that he doesn’t believe them and the second that it was not fitting for a supplicant beggar to try to abuse his host’s credulity. In the passage I have quoted, I translate the phrase "rightly," so that it might express accordance with social propriety as well as that sense of truth as "scrupulously told" which Thomas Cole describes. This idea of the well-ordered speech, which is at once well put together and suitable to the situation, is also apparent in the phrase kata moiran in 496, literally, "in due portion," which seems to be synonymous. I note the force of the kata in both these phrases as suggesting going through something, proceeding thoroughly, without evident omissions and contradictions. What one can judge is the way a tale is told, cir-

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48 ll. 10.472; 4.145; in Od. 8.492, the “ordering of the wooden horse” can be both its “fashioning” and its “deployment.”
49 Following Adkins (1972) 13.
50 Cole (1983) 14. Webster (1939) 175 glosses the phrase: “Everything that happened must be in it, and there must be no gaps in the narrative.” He goes on to compare geometric painting, citing as its principle the notion that “intelligibility is more important than a convincing visual impression.” Putting geometric art aside, I would say that in Homer’s verbal art “intelligibility” and recreating the visual impression are one.
51 Svenbro (1976) 24-26 stresses the social aspects of speaking “in due portion,” but social and rhetorical criticism are indissoluble when Nestor uses the phrase to compliment youthful Diomedes. Nestor says Diomedes is the best speaker of the younger warriors, for he speaks “prudently and kata moiran” (ll. 9.59). “But,” he adds, “you did not get to the end of your speech”; he, who is older, “will take up your speech and go fully through the matter” (ll. 9.55, 61). Similar is ll. 19.186.
cumpectsly, with a regard for details. For Odysseus, who does not as yet acknowledge that he has seen what happened at Troy, this is the quality he must be commending to Alcinous and the court: the fullness and appropriateness of Demodocus’s song have earned him Odysseus’s praise.

The same criteria and the same limited basis for judgment come into play again when Alcinous judges Odysseus’s tales:

Odysseus, as we look on you, we do not liken you to a cozzener and cheat, the kind of man that the dark earth supports far and wide, framing lies, whose source one cannot see.

There is shapeliness on your words, and your heart is noble within.

And you recounted your story like a skillful poet, the wretched Cares of the Achaeans, and your own.

[11.363–369]

This passage too has been overread as asserting the truth of the tale, but again Alcinous is in no position to utter such a verdict. He says as much when he characterizes the tales of wanderers as those whose sources one cannot see, and he cannot claim to have any certainty about these fabulous goings on. All he has before his eyes is the hero himself (“as we look on you”) and he judges from Odysseus’s words and actions that he is not the lying wanderer he might well have been. The “shape” of his words is like the “form” of a poet’s song: a convincingly articulated and conscientiously reported account that has the appearance of truth and so must be one with that truth, since form is finally content. This aesthetically

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52The Hymn to Hermes seems to offer an illustration: in his theogony (427–429) Hermes honors Mnemosuné first and then the rest of the gods “according to who was born first” (kata presbin, [431]). The song merits Apollo’s compliment kata kosmon (433) both because it has a structure—i.e., it corresponds to (kata-) the temporal order—and because it is “appropriate” for the very young god to acknowledge precedence.

53Following Stanford (1974) on hochen ou tis idoito in 8.366: “from sources which . . . no one could see [i.e., test] for himself.” The rendering of Heubeck, West, and Hainsworth (1981), “such lies that no one is able to see through them,” seems to me a modern idiom.

54See the excellent analysis of this speech by Heath (1985) 261–262.
convincing truth is the common property of the song of Demodocus and the memoirs of the hero. For Homer and his audience, who can expect no direct confirmation of these old stories, such truth was the special and defining quality of the poetry of the past.

Vividness and Closeness to the Past

Oichalia is the scene of two fatal contests, but Phaeacia is where threatening conflicts are tactfully defused. Such a conjunction of god and man, hero and poet, could not take place anywhere else, for the true and permanent location of Phaeacia is at the convergence of the paths between gods and men, past and present, and hero and his poet. In predicting their role in the poem, Zeus introduces the Phaeacians with a riddle, saying that Odysseus will be conducted home (pompêi [5.32]) by neither gods nor men. The Phaeacians solve this riddle because they are marginal people who live far from bread-eating men and “near the gods” (ankhitheoi [Od. 5.35, 19.279]). They live at the limits of the world, like the Ethiopians, and like the Ethiopians, they have a special closeness to the gods. At the limits of space and humanity, the Phaeacians are also at the limits of time. Alcinous and his people live like prelapsarian heroes in perpetual abundance (7.114–128), without hostility from others (6.201–203); theirs is a pristine society where the gods come undisguised to the feasts (7.201–203). They live in that golden age Hesiod characterizes as “that time when the gods and men had banquets together and were seated together” (fr. 1.6 M-W). Nor will these rare encounters ever take place again. Odysseus comes to this island just as the Phaeacians are about to fall from their blessed state on account of the anger of Poseidon. After the island is ringed with stone, the concourse between the Phaeacians and gods will be sealed off from men; elsewhere festivals will be like the Delian panegyris, and poets will have to compete with other poets in telling tales of far earlier he-

56Cf. Theog. 535. The gods also feast with the Ethiopians in ll. 1.423; cf. Od. 1.25.
roes. But in this place for a last moment the poet can meet the hero face-to-face and win from him confirmation of his right to succession, on the verge of the fall into competition.

The meeting of Demodocus and Odysseus, then, is a way for the poet to lay claim indirectly to a particular kind of value for his song. The implication of their encounter for Homer must be that his song, if not exactly a historical tale, it is a tale so well and fully told that it could be rivaled only by a hero who was there. The Muses give the epic poet truth as an effect of speech, a convincing fullness of detail that could come only from one who has seen what he describes, who holds each detail vividly in his mind. Beyond any claims of factuality, such a quality is constitutive of the aesthetic experience of epic as it is performed. In blending his own telling with that of the hero, the poet transports his audience away from whatever festival they may be attending, from whatever princely hall or tavern where they may be sitting, to become the heroic audience itself. Indeed, in books 9 through 12 Odysseus’s firsthand account becomes indistinguishable from the account we the audience hear, so that for a time the voice of a very late poet melds into that of the early hero. In performance, the effect of this double ethos would have been astounding if a poet followed another epic poet by presenting a song in which Demodocus yielded to the first-person epic of Odysseus. The extended irony of having Odysseus encounter Demodocus proves to be another way of giving the poetry the striking immediacy for its hearers that I have called vividness.

Mnemosunē, mindfulness, is so closely related to lēsmosunē (forgetfulness) by Hesiod because the poetry of the past must make its audience forget its own present; for this to happen the here and now of the performance must give way to create a space for the earlier age to appear. The epic poet dismisses the living present in which he sings and his audience hears him. What is essential for vividness is to obliterate the narrative distance between action and its telling: the “they say” frame of the tale must be reduced as close to zero as possible. Hence, as Aristotle noted, the invocations in

57Compare Redfield’s fine remarks on what he terms the “epic distance” (1975) 35–39.
Homer are very brief, and he "straightaway brings on some character speaking." But in each poem what is cast out returns, each poet mentions heroic poetry within the heroic world at least once. And with the mention of poetry, the question is raised about the relation of the deeds unfolding in the heroic present to the song they will become: tradition implies transmission, and transmission raises the problem of time. How the poet manages the relation between early event and present singing will determine how vivid his narration is. The *Iliad* and *Odyssey* take different stances toward this singing, however, and their stances are expressed in the models of transmission they convey. Here I am not interested, like the rhetorical critics, in the specific tropes by which vividness is produced; I am concerned with the largest trope, the way the poem presents itself not as a story told but as a drama unfolding.

The *Iliad* for the most part dismisses any thought of itself as performance in order to present the deeds as unfolding "now." It drives us firmly back into the time of the actions themselves, which will only later become song. This is not a time before song—Thamyris has already been there—but it is decidedly a time before the *Iliad*. Achilles sings in his tent about the deeds of former men, but his own glory has yet to be achieved. "For a long time, I think the Achaeans will remember our strife," he says in reconciling with Agamemnon (*Il*. 19.64), but this remembrance will arise in the future, and it is not clear what form it will take. Perhaps he means no more than that his deeds will become an exemplary tale, like Meleager's old story, which was repeated to him. In any case, the Trojan War is very much in progress and this song is unformed as yet. Helen is more self-conscious and, when we first see her, has begun to put "the many Struggles of the Achaeans and the Trojans" into a tapestry. But again the main action of the war and the poem remains to be done, and she breaks off her weaving to go and look at the army from the city wall (*Il*. 3.139–145). In a much-noted speech she says more than Achilles about fame, that this war

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58*Poetics* 24.1460a5–11. It seems to be because the narrative element in epic can never be eliminated that Aristotle awards a greater degree of vividness to drama in 24.1462a 16–17.

for her sake will be sung about; but again, this will be in later
generations, “among men to come” (6.357–358). The only profes-
sional singers (aoidoi) who actually perform for us in the Iliad are
the leaders of threnodies for Hector at 24.720ff. Their song is a
ritual, tied to that one event and performed for the close audience
of his female kin and townsmen. Later, perhaps, their song of how
Hector died will be remembered, and his vow to die not without
kleos will be fulfilled (22.304). Perhaps we may even think that this
threnody will evolve into that more general song for all Greeks, the
Iliad; but this is very much to come as the poem closes on the
scene. 60

Though not without its ironic moments of self-reference then,
the Iliad takes a very austere stance toward its audience. It almost
completely effaces itself as performance and postpones its coming
into shape to the end. By this resolute self-repression it achieves a
vivid presence in which the focus is kept on the actors in their
acting. The Odyssey has a different stance toward song and
achieves a different kind of vividness. It sees a longer history of
singing behind it and portrays itself consciously as the last in a long
line of song. Even before Troy a song of the Argo was on the lips of
all (12.70). Its own characters, both the living and the recently
dead, are already enshrined in Trojan songs whose fame has
reached heaven; the poetry of the returns is already arising. It is in
this song-filled world that Odysseus must find a place for his own
fame. The Odyssey, then, decides to offer not the deed before the
song but the newest in a long line of songs. Its poetic is summed
up by its hero, who concludes his performance by saying “It is
hateful for me to tell once again what has already been clearly told”
(12.452–453). In this conscientious lateness it may be that the Odys-
sey is responding in some way to the Iliad, but in any case it man-

60Cf. Lynn-George’s perceptive remarks on the Iliad’s references to its future as a
poem (1988) 272: “This repeated anticipation has tended to be recovered as a self-
reflexive text’s glorification of its own achievement. . . . This is undoubtedly part of
the story. But the Iliad seems to project itself beyond the bounds upheld by the
critical belief in the autonomy of the work of art sealed in its own absolute present
and the self-sufficiency of its performance. In its tale of the past for the future—
already belated, after the event, and always ahead of itself, telling of what still is to
come—the epic compounds a sense of finitude with a sense of the indefinite.”
ages to achieve with this self-consciousness another kind of earliness. It retrojects songs to the start of its performance and even before. As the story moves forward we move to newer songs, even to the point of the first performance of Odysseus's return in books 9 through 12. And even after this tour de force is over its effects reverberate through the rest of the poem, for thereafter we are provided with a yet closer view of the action, the actual return to Ithaca in deeds and not in speech.

By retrojecting song, the Odyssey poet makes his song early, makes it come straight from the horse's mouth, as he speaks it. If the Iliad banishes itself to get a direct vision of the heroic world, the Odyssey retrojects itself into that world, so that performance is no longer a late thing, after the event, but one involved with it and in part preceding it. The differences between the stances of the two poems toward their own past may be summarized. The Iliad sees itself as song to come; it values action over representation, deeds over boasts, as Aeneas values fighting over rehearsing genealogies in book 22. The Odyssey sees itself as the newest song in the making, song extending itself. It values one who can tell his deeds as well as do them.

Homer and his audiences knew, no less than scholars today, that epic poetry is "traditional." They knew too that tradition is never a static abstraction but exists only through transmission, the constant struggle of poetry to survive in time. Distorting as a fixed and monolithic idea of tradition may be, Homer would encourage us to see all the work of poets as nothing compared to the perfect and unchanging song of the Muses. He would pretend that his song knows no other version than what they give and always will give. This pretense is established in his invocations and is supported by his representation of poets. They confront tradition not in the form of other poets, but in the Iliad's meeting of Thamyris and the Muses, or in the Odyssey's encounter of poet and hero. Hence the historical, diachronic process of transmission, with all its hazards and losses, is represented by the synchronic conflicts of poetic competition, and both are denied or disguised by the poet.

Homer's meditations on tradition are quite different from ours and so are his reasons for giving it this particular representation. For literate critics, the opposite of tradition is originality, and these
categories break down poetry into the new and the repeated, the variable and the fixed. But such appropriations are of no concern to Homer, for whom the opposite of traditional or transmitted poetry was not originality but vividness, a matter of how close hearing a song might come to being present at the events themselves. Poets strive not to coin the memorable phrase but to make their performances more striking, to intensify the sense of heroic presence. Vividness is explored by Homer not as a rhetorical effect but as a matter of being early, of singing as the first poet on the scene would sing. Representing his tradition, then, was a way of re-orienting his audience’s sense of time, for this poetry aimed primarily to affect its hearer’s sense of the present. Hence if the issue of transmission appears as the issue of competition, denying the fact of poetic competition or disguising it as a unique, primeval encounter was a way for Homer to deny his lateness in time.

The schemes of transmission offered in the poems, then, are not incidental but confer on the poetry a great power. In the Iliad action is taking place under the eyes of the gods, who will make it song, but under our eyes too. In the Odyssey we witness not only heroic deeds but early singing about those deeds, as both poem and hero wander toward their final destination. Song is very much a part of this early world, and so even as we listen to our bard, we are playing the part of heroes.