Homer

Ford, Andrew

Published by Cornell University Press

Ford, Andrew.
Homer: The Poetry of the Past.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/68520

For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=2414006
POETRY

The Voice of Song

Voice

The stories about the destruction or elusiveness of mortal signs treated in the previous chapter suggest that the traditional oral art would have found it undesirable to idealize the physical fixing of fame in the way writing offered. What, then, was the poet reserving from the scribe? In practical terms, it may have been the license to sing “wherever his heart moved him,” the ability to follow the situation and not any pre-fixed plan, however well-wrought. I think what the poet would have said he was preserving from textualization was his voice, the sound of ongoing, changeable song. For the word for what the singer did, “singing,” suggests that the “voice” of song was its soul. Homer’s “singing,” aoidē, appears to be etymologically related to a particular word for the voice, audē. This ancient etymological connection, though obscure in points of detail, is still preserved in Homer and Hesiod. In addition, the traditional epithet, thespis, something like “divine,” also indicates a close and ancient connection between singing and this voicing, for the epic language has restricted thespis almost completely to the words “voice,” “singer,” and “song” (audē, aoidos, and aoidē).
The poet's claim to a special kind of singing, then, is a claim to a special kind of voice. As a way of approaching a general statement of what poetry was for Homer, I examine in this chapter Homer's word for the poet's voice, along with its distinctive epithets. But that voice must be defined in Homer's terms. "Voice" has been a common metaphor in recent criticism, very often as a figure for the individual or intimate aspect of a poet's poetry. Such a romantic trope (one thinks of phrases like "finding a voice" or a "voice of one's own") is rather vulnerable to being deconstructed and in any case is not what I think Homer had in mind in speaking of the voice of song. The poet's audē was, as we will see, specifically a human voice, but it was not an individual's recognizable voice, nor was it voice as the expression of a personality. It was a voice we can understand but also the voice as the physical medium of singing. For Homer and Hesiod use the word in such a way as to explore the special material qualities of poetry, in particular its fluidity and its lasting continuity.

In this privileging of speech over writing, the poet as intoner rather than maker, we will recognize a fundamental literary ploy that was reenacted with great acuity by Plato in his Phaedrus and deconstructed in our time by Jacques Derrida. It would be easy now to reverse this Homeric opposition and to say that "singing" or voicing is not necessarily a more "natural" or intimate form of expression than writing, and to point out that Homer's words naming this unartful, spontaneous poetry are themselves tropes, that is, already the product of revision and rhetorical strategy. Like Plato, Homer could be shown to be feigning a central value of his art in pretending that his fluid voice is closer to the truth than mere scratches on stone. But for my purposes it will be less useful to give the dialectic yet another twist than to give full credence to the poet's unapologetic phonocentrism. I want to accept the claim that poetry is a voicing and to press on to ask what kind of voice it was that the poet insisted on retaining. We have to do with a rather complex idea here, for if audē is normally the human voice, thespis audē, "divine human voice" approaches oxymoron. I want to locate audē in relation to other words for "voice" and then to examine the epithet that connects Homer's "voice" and "singing." Uncovering the full meaning of the poet's "divine voice," thespis audē, will help
us understand more deeply his special art of “divine singing,” *thespis aoidè* and lead to conclusions on the general question of what singing was for the epic poet. In essence, this voicing was the freedom not to become one thing, even a great thing, an unbreakable voice and iron heart. This freedom is figured in the poems as a liquidity of voice, against which is set the fixity and solidity of things made. However massive and well constructed a text might be, the poet as oral performer needed to keep something of his performance unwritten, to keep his beginnings attached to the Muse’s total song and to end only when it was time for sleep. We will come as close as we can to the poets’ idea of their poetry if we can name this last thing that they withheld from their texts.

*Audè: Human Voice*

Homer says of both Phemius and Demodocus that they are “like gods in their *audè*” (*Od.* 1.371, 9.4), and he says this of no one else. When the Muses teach Hesiod “singing” (*aoidè*), they “breathe” an *audè* into him.¹ Indeed the very name Hesiod may incorporate this same root, so that he names himself in his proem as “the one who sends forth the *audè.*”² But *audè* is only one among several Greek words for the voice; in selecting this word, Homer has allied singing with the human voice as we use it to communicate with each other.³ *Audè* is essentially the voice producing human speech, and so it remains even when the gods assume it to communicate with men.⁴

¹*Theog.* 22, 31–32. Because of the intimate association of *aoidè* and *audè* it is not uncommon for the manuscripts to confuse them: see West (1966) on *Theog.* 32.
³Fournier (1946) 229 defines the word: “the human voice seen as the ability to emit a sound that is harmonious, powerful, and above all endowed with meaning” (“la voix humaine, envisagée comme une faculté d’émettre un son harmonieux, puissant et surtout doué de sens”). Similarly, Chantraine (1977) and Frisk (1960–70). For a fuller treatment and references to previous discussions see Clay (1974) 131–134.
⁴Clay (1974) establishes this central point, the neglect of which vitiates the definitions of *audè* in LfrgE.
Homer's vocabulary for the sounds produced by animate beings is very rich and includes a consideration of voice in its aspect as sound as well as an instrument of expression. In addition, the voices that are heard in epic can be arranged on a scale that extends from those attributed only to the gods to those of mortals and those of animals. At the top of the scale, we must allow for the speech of the gods and demigods. For just as the gods differ from us in their food and drink, so it seems that they have a separate language of their own. How this may sound to them we do not know, but when their speech is heard on earth special words for voice may mark its provenience. Such is omphê (related to our “song”): in Homer it is a divine voice that gods use when they speak to mortals in dreams or when they appear beside them but without assuming physical human form.

Somewhat less consistently divine but still a bit beyond human speech is ossa (derived from a root whence come epos and our “voice”). Homer only uses it in the phrase “the ossa of Zeus,” which is rumor, a dynamic voice that seems to circulate among men on its own power. In Hesiod, it several times names the voice of the Muses who “send forth” (hieisai) an ossa that is “very beautiful,” “immortal,” “lovely,” or “charming” (Theog. 10, 43, 65, 67). It has been suggested that ossa has something of the divine in it. Hence, in these instances, all for the ears of other immortals, ossa would seem to name the Olympian ring of that voice (audê) that Hesiod “sends forth” on earth. So the poet of the Hymn to Hermes seems to use ossa as an Olympian equivalent to his own “divine song”: when Hermes first performs on his lyre for his brother, Apollo names this new thing twice, calling it “divine singing” (thespin aoidên) and glossing it: “for this newly spoken ossa I hear is marvelous [thaumasiên]” (442–443). But when an ossa appears on earth, it may take the form of awe-inspiring sounds, not only voice: the monster Typho utters “the ossa of a bull” (Theog. 832) and the

5LfrgE s.v. audê 1541.28–51 briefly resumes the difference of many of these words from audê through a consideration of their epithets.
7ll. 2.41 (of Dream as “Nestor” to Agamemnon), 20.129 (of a god standing beside Achilles), Od. 3.215 = 16.96. Cf. LfrgE s.v. audê 1541.44–49 and Leaf on ll. 2.41.
8Od. 1.282, 2.216; ll. 2.93–94.
great conflagration of the Titanomachy produces an amazing "sight for the eyes and *ossa* for the ears" (*Theog.* 701). Ossa, then, is a superhuman or unearthly sound that may be marvelous or beautiful in the songs of the gods but is terrible or uncontrollable on earth.

If *ossa* is the dynamic and powerful sound of voice, a quality that only divine singing can control as beautiful song, another word, known as *opa*, names the pleasing or affecting qualities of voice. When Muses "sing with a beautiful *opa*" (*Il.* 1.604; *Theog.* 68), we should think primarily of the "music" of their song, as when it names the "beautiful *opa*" the Sirens "send forth," and the singing of Calypso or Circe. For *opa* is basically a distinctive vocal sound; it may name voices that convey intelligence or thought, but these are the especially emotional or stirring voices, such as of the anguish*ed* Hecuba, Penelope, or Cassandra. It is not a particularly "signifying" voice when Odysseus speaks and "cast[s] forth from his chest a great voice [*opa*] / and words [*epea*] like winter snows," for he stuns rather than persuades the Trojan court (*Il.* 3.221–222; cf. 224). Hence it may be used of bleating lambs (in a simile describing the polyglot Trojans marshaling [*Il.* 4.435], or of cicadas "sending forth their lilylike voice" (*Il.* 3.152). In these cases it is clearly sound apart from sense, and so it must be when the Muses' "lilylike voice" disperses throughout the halls of Zeus (*Theog.* 41). Typho, who uses all voices, as we will see, "sends forth" an *opa* as well. (*Theog.* 830).

The *opa* of a singer, then, is especially the musical sound or tone of his voice. But this voice can also be heard as a *phthongos*: Almost always used of human voice, *phthongos* (or *phthongê*) names the distinctive voice of an individual. If the Sirens, like the Muses, sing "with a beautiful voice [*opa*]," the performance also has a dis-

---

10 On the basis of the latter passage it has been said that in Hesiod this word means nothing more specific than "sound": West (1966) on *Theog.* 701. Yet no human being or "normal" animal utters an *ossa* in epic.

11 *Od.* 12.192, 5.61, 10.221. Hesiod too may have spoken of the Sirens' "clear *opa*" according to West's restoration of fr. 150.33 M–W.

tinctive, identifying sound, and as Odysseus approaches them he strains to “hear their phthongos or singing [aoidê]” (Od. 12.198). The Cyclops has a “heavy phthongos,” which frightens Odysseus and his men.\textsuperscript{13} Phthongos names the voice of the charioteer which his horses recognize (II. 5.234) and the voice of an individual which a god assumes in order to impersonate him (II. 2.791).

Last, to name the voice most essentially as mere sound, as “noise,” there is phônê. Phônê is most frequently used of mortals, often when they shout, but it is also the sound of animals (Od. 10.239) and may even be extended to the sound of a trumpet (II. 18.219).\textsuperscript{14} The language of barbarian races may be called phônê, for even if they are intelligible to each other, to the Greek ear their speech is mere phonic “babbling.”\textsuperscript{15}

Within this spectrum of vocalization, audê is properly used only of humanly intelligible speech. When audê is attributed to animals in epic, it is figurative, reinterpreting their noise as intelligible sound.\textsuperscript{16} Properly, animals have phônê but not audê: when Circe changes Odysseus’s men into swine, they keep their human intelligence (noos), but because they have taken on the heads of ani-

\textsuperscript{13} Od. 9.257; cf. 9.167 of animals. Chantraine (1977) s.v. defines the verb phthen-gomai: “to emit a sound, a noise, make oneself heard”; cf. Fournier (1946) 231.

\textsuperscript{14} For phônê, see Fournier (1946) 230–231.

\textsuperscript{15} Cf. Il. 2.867; Od. 1.183, 8.924. The Greek word “barbarian” seems to be an onomatopoeic word, like “babbling,” which defines other races by their senseless language. In an interesting passage Herodotus 2.55.2–2.57.2 recounts a legendary founding of an oracle in which doves flew to a tree and first spoke in a phônê, then, transformed into priestesses, began to “utter a human speech” (exaudan). His rationalistic explanation is that the “doves” must have been barbarians.

\textsuperscript{16} Cf. Chantraine (1977) s.v. audê and LfrÊ 1541.12–16. That animals have audê only by metaphorical extension can be seen from comparing a series of epic cicadas: Homer uses opa appropriately when he compares the Trojan elders to cicadas “sitting in a tree and sending forth their lilylike voice [opa]” (Il. 3.152). But Hesiod speaks metaphorically when he describes a cicada sitting in the same tree (Homer’s line-opening formula is slightly varied) which “pours down its clear song [aoidê]” (Works and Days 583). Here, significance is bestowed on the animal’s voice because it announces summer to mortal men. Similarly, the Shield of Heracles grants audê to its cicada, “sitting on a branch, it pours forth its audê all day long” (396, cf. 283). In this light we should understand a famous simile in the Odyssey (21.404–411) in which a plucked bowstring “sings like a swallow in its audê.” The extended use of both “singing” and audê here were prepared for when Odysseus strung the bow “like a man skilled in the lyre and singing [aoidê].”
mals, they can only cry to their leader with the \( \text{phônê} \) (10.239).\(^{17}\) Hence, \( \text{audê} \), the “voice intelligible to humans,” also means “the voice characteristic of mortals”: when Odysseus is awakened by inarticulate female shouting on Phaeacia, he wonders at first if he has heard mountain Nymphs or “human beings [\( \text{anthrôn} \)] of human voice [\( \text{audêentôn} \)]’’ (\textit{Od}. 6.125).\(^{18}\)

When \( \text{audê} \) is used of the gods it is because they can share in or temporarily assume the speech of mortals. Minor goddesses such as Calypso and Circe, who live on earth and have intercourse with mortals, can speak to them; they are called \( \text{audêessa} \), “speaking with the human voice,”\(^{19}\) as is the sea goddess Ino, who had previously been a “mortal with the voice of mortals [\( \text{brotos audêessa} \)].”\(^{20}\) When the Olympians descend to earth in bodily form and communicate with men, they often take on “human form and human voice [\( \text{dema} \text{kai audên} \)].” Jenny Strauss Clay has studied these expressions and notes that when \( \text{audê} \) is used in this formula it signifies that the gods “modulate their voices in some way” in order to communicate with men.\(^{21}\)

The gods can assume the language we use and understand, and they can also bestow it where it does not naturally belong. For a brief moment Hera makes Achilles’ horse “speak with the \( \text{audê} \) used by mortals,” and he uses the gift appropriately to lament his master’s mortality (\textit{Il}. 19.407). But this is a temporary crossing of orders, and the fates soon silence him (19.418). Equally extraordinary are the robotic handmaidens Hephaestus creates for himself with “voice, strength, and intelligence” (\( \text{audê}, \text{sthenos, noos} \) [\textit{Il.}\n
\(^{17}\)Conversely, when an eagle speaks to Penelope in a dream it uses “mortal” (\( \text{broteiê} \) \( \text{phônê} \) (\textit{Od}. 19.545); the adjective would be redundant with \( \text{audê} \).

\(^{18}\)Cf. \textit{Theog}. 142b which speaks of the cyclops as “born from the gods, but mortals [\( \text{thnêtoi} \)], with human voice [\( \text{audêentes} \)]” (see West [1966] on \textit{Theog}. 142). This use as an epithet characteristic of mortals is problematic for \textit{LfrqE} s.v. \( \text{audêeis} \) B because it assumes that the gods have \( \text{audê} \) too; but they have it only when they assume it to communicate to mortals.

\(^{19}\)\textit{Od}. 10.136, 11.8, etc. Note too that both Circe and Calypso also sing (\( \text{aeidein} \) [\textit{Od}. 10.136, 12.449]).

\(^{20}\)\textit{Od}. 5.334. This locution gave trouble to Aristotle, who emended (fr. 171 Rose [1886]), but not to Schol. HPQ, Aristophanes on \textit{Od}. 5.334: these goddesses “speak \( \text{audêessa} \), that is, taking a share in human \( \text{phônê} \).”

Inasmuch as these creatures are counterfeit human beings rather than gods, the voice they are given is human. The inspired poet is obviously another case in which divinity bestows a special ability to speak intelligibly on earth. Poetry is heard as a human voice—one that we use and can understand—but at the same time divine. Poets speak what is meaningful to mortals but as no other human might speak. We probably should not try to specify in rhetorical terms how the poet’s “divine audē” differs from other forms of eloquence. The special quality of this song is not likely to be located in its form rather than content; we can simply observe that the Muses seem to raise the power of human speech to a higher order. Yet it remains to ask in the poets’ terms in what respect the poet’s song is divine. One way gods may augment the voice is simply to make it louder, but volume would seem to be an aspect of phōnē: so heralds have a voice (phōnē) like the gods (ll. 19.250; cf. ll. 5.786). Though sheer vocal power and a pleasant timbre are undoubtedly aids to an oral poet, they hardly seem to be all a poet needs, and such heralds are not said to have thespis audē. Nor is the bestowing of this voice on poets a kind of ventriloquism. When the Muses “breathe divine audē” into Hesiod to make him a poet, it is not a matter of his mouthing their words any more than it is in the case of the horse Xanthus. (Hera gives him the ability to speak, but does not put the sentiments and words in his mouth.) Clay concludes of poets and heralds that when they are said to be “like the gods in their voice” this “does not suggest that they possess divine speech, but rather that their voices are of superhuman excellence or power.” The clues to further defining this superhuman or excellent singing will be found in its epithet thespis.

22In Hesiod’s Pandora story Hephaestus gives her “a human’s voice and strength” (anthrōpou . . . audēn kai sthenos, [Works and Days 61–62]). When Hermes adds phōnē a few lines later (77–80), Hesiod is either inattentively repetitious (see West [1978] on 79) or is pairing phōnē with logos to suggest the ability to make audible her “lies and deceitful tales.” Cf. LfrgE s.v. audē 4a. Related creations by Hephaestus are animated dogs (Odyssey 7.91ff.) and the crown for Pandora, which has on it all the monsters of the land and sea (582) “like living things with voice [phōnessin]” (Theog. 584).

Thespis: Divine Speaking

The mysterious modulation of the human voice in the direction of the divine that is poetry is summed up in the epithet thespis. I have noted that Homer and Hesiod restrict thespis to describing the “singer” (aoidos), his “song” (aoidê), and his “voice” (audê). In Homer it occurs only in a formula with the word for singing, the line-ending thespin aoidên (Od. 1.328, 8.498; H. Herm. 442) and in a related form in a generic description of the singer (17.385). Hesiod uses these terms only of the “voice” (audên / thespin) that the Muses breathe into him (Theog. 32) and in a generic description of the man whom the Muses make “divinely voiced” (thespion audêenta [fr. 310.2 M-W]).

The complex idea of a “divine audê” is a special mark of the singer. Just as, in all of hexametric poetry, only professional bards are properly called “singers” (aoidoi) and only to such singers is given the gift of “singing” (aoidê), so too, singers alone are said to be “like the gods in their voice [audê]” or to have a “divine audê.”

The restrictiveness of this phrase helps us distinguish singing from other forms of eloquence, for no other figure in epic has quite the same gift. The audê of eloquent Nestor “flows sweeter than honey from his tongue” (ll. 1.249), but inasmuch as he is not inspired, it is not called “divine.” Hesiod can say that the Muses bestow a beneficent kind of speech on the good king, but it is words (epea) that “flow honeyed from his mouth” (Theog. 84); the Muse-given audê that “flows sweet from the mouth” is reserved for singers (Theog. 97; cf. Hymn 25.5.). The phrase that serves Homer for poetry, thespis aoidê, “divine song,” is a specific “divine” kind of voice, thespis audê.

It is clear that thespis is a traditional epithet for poetry and evidently expressed something abiding in the nature of poetry. Etymologically, it is apparently composed of a root that underlies the Greek for “god” (as in “theology”) and a word for speaking; its original meaning, then, seems to be something like “pronounced

24 For the exceptional phrase thespis aella, used in a Homeric hymn, see note 49 herein.
or spoken by a god.”\textsuperscript{25} But since epic uses the epithet so restrictively, the phrase \textit{thespis aoidê} is almost a cipher, and it is not clear in what respect the poet, his song, and his voice are “divine” or “divinely spoken.” Obviously, some aspect of the Muses’ sponsorship of singing is indicated here, but it is only later that forms of this word were reinterpreted in the sense of “prophetic” or “prophesy.”\textsuperscript{26} A better sense of the meaning of \textit{thespis} can be got from its fuller form, \textit{thespesios}. This word too is used of “singing” (that of Thamyris and the Sirens),\textsuperscript{27} but it is also applied more widely in epic. Indeed, it is so widely used that sometimes the etymological meaning, “spoken by a god,” seems to have been lost, and it is applied to things like a fire or a gleam of light that have nothing to do with speaking or the gods. But the the dictionaries may be too quick to say that \textit{thespesios} has lost its original sense and only means “marvelous” or extraordinary in epic.\textsuperscript{28} For it can be seen that in almost all cases the “marvelous” objects denoted by \textit{thespesios} are such as confound cognition and articulation: they are multitudes, mixtures, immensities in the literal sense. I think this word and \textit{thespis} belong in a semantic field that preserves the concept of the unutterably large or the indescribably great. The related words I will look at are \textit{thesphatos}, “pronounced by a god,” “fated”; \textit{athesphatos}, “beyond the god’s pronouncements”; and \textit{aspetos}, “unsayable,” “ineffable.”

It has been suggested that originally these words were a magical, apotropaic defense against naming “unspeakable” abominations, lest they be inadvertently summoned.\textsuperscript{29} With the passing of such beliefs, the words would have remained in the poetic language but

\textsuperscript{25}So \textit{LfrgE} s.v. \textit{thespesios} B and s.v. \textit{thespis} B.

\textsuperscript{26}For post-Homeric uses of \textit{thespis} and \textit{thespizein} as “prophetic” and “prophesy” (1950) in poetry, see Fraenkel (1950) on \textit{Agamemnon} 1154. Koller (1965) would reduce the Homeric meaning to an original “prophetic,” but this a too-narrow sense of prophecy, one aiming solely at the future.

\textsuperscript{27}Il. 2.600; \textit{Od}. 12.158. Cf. Pindar’s reference to the “god-spoken words” (\textit{thespeisíon epeón}) of Homer’s poetry (Isth. 4.39).

\textsuperscript{28}Respectively the glosses of \textit{LSJ} and Chantaine (1977) s.v. \textit{thespesios}.

\textsuperscript{29}Such seems to be the case for \textit{ouk onomastos}, “not to be named,” used of the hundred-handed monsters, and “accursed Troy” (\textit{Theog}. 148; \textit{Od}. 19.260); so too \textit{ou (ti) phateios}, “not to be mentioned,” of Cerberus and the Gorgons (\textit{Theog}. 310; \textit{Shield} 230). See West on \textit{Theog}. 148 and \textit{LfrgE} s.v. \textit{aspetos} B.
reduced to strong intensives (like English “unspeakable”). Hence we may see in the poetry that in some formulas *thespis* is apparently replaced by the more neutral *theios*, “godlike”; and *aspetos*, “unspeakably many or much,” by *asbestos*, “unquenchable.” Nevertheless, sometimes their root meanings are quite apparent, and though the etymological connections of these words with speech in many cases seems to have been effaced, the contexts in which they are used testify to a persistent idea that the “marvelous” exceeds human speech or may be spoken only by a god. In Homeric and Hesiodic poetry they congregate around experiences of the “marvelous” that are daunting or disconcerting, and the objects they modify are very numerous, manifold, or so shapeless as to defy description. Collectively, they suggest a class of objects and phenomena that are sublime in the sense that I describe in Chapter 2: they refer to great multitudes or powers that overwhelm human speech. A further look at these associated words suggests that the Muses make the poet’s voice different from that of others in its ability to transcend such limitations.

*Thespato* is made of the same root as in *thespis* for “god” and a different root for “utter” or “pronounce” (as in “phatic,” “infant,” and “fate”). Its general sense is fairly clear: *thespato* refers to things that are “uttered by a god” in the sense of being “decreed” or “fated,” since it is often used of portentous or destined events, that is, those that have been ordained or predicted in divine speech. Zeus in particular is the god who can pronounce or know what is *thespato* (e.g., Il. 8.477; Hesiod fr. 193.8 M-W), whereas mortals, of course, do not normally know what has been “decreed by god” (Il. 5.64). But other gods may “learn” the fates from the ouché of Zeus (H. Herm. 472; cf. 534), and demigods and prophets may communicate them to mortals—as does Circe to Odysseus (Od. 12.155) or Proteus to Menelaus (Od. 4.561).30

In *athespato* we have the same word with what seems to be the privative prefix a-.31 But *athespato* appears not to mean simply

---

30 On the use of *thespato* in Od. 7.143, see note 40 herein.
31 LfrgE s.v. *athespato*. Chantraine (1977) s.v. takes the a- as intensive, and sees the word as a synonym of *thespato*, but reducing the two terms to synonyms would not account for the latter word’s distinctive association with fate and destiny. Benveniste (1969) 413–415.
“what has not been decreed by the gods,” for we see it used of such unfated things as the wine that gets Elpenor drunk (Od. 11.61) or of longer winter nights (Od. 11.373, 15.392). Accordingly, some interpret *athesphatos* as “monstrous,” that is, what goes beyond the gods’ decrees or the dooms of “fate.” But it is better to follow Hermann Fränkel, who argues that *athesphatos* is a cognitive rather than a moral term, closer to “unlimited” than “unfitting.” He takes it as the negation of *thesphatos* in the sense of “defined by the gods”; hence, *athesphatos* refers to things not subject to definite limitation or which go beyond their proper bounds. But what goes beyond the gods’ cosmic articulations also has a cognitive dimension for mortals: thus, the word makes sense as applied to a “great [polus] storm of hail or snow” (Il. 10.6), a raging sea, also called “boundless” (Od. 7.273), or great amounts of corn, oxen, or wine (Od. 13.244, 20.211, 11.61). *Athesphatos*, then, though it has evolved away from meaning literally “not pronounced by a god,” is still connected to speech because it refers to things that are beyond mortal articulation or exhaustive definition.

The idea that some things might go beyond the powers of mortals to tell is at the root of *aspetos*, literally, “not to be spoken” or “ineffable.” Frequently it is used of multitudinous things—royal flocks (Il. 11.704), gifts (Od. 20.342), money (Od. 14.297), or abundant meat (Od. 9.162). If the word is applied to such phenomena as flame, air, “broad” earth, or ocean, so that its etymological meaning seems to have degenerated into a general “immense,” such objects have in common with the *athesphatos* group the fact that they are, as a scholiast puts it, “very great, numerous and not

---

32Leaf (1900–1902) on Il. 3.4.
33Fränkel (1923) 281–282. Similarly, Benveniste (1969) 414–415 defines *athesphatos* as “that to which no limit has been set by divine pronouncement”: as opposed to what is *thesphatos*, “with fixed limits” decreed or uttered by the all-knowing god.
34Further passages in LfrgE s.v. 1ab.
35Chantraine (1977) s.v.: ‘‘infinite, immense;’ though the original sense is likely ‘unsayable’’ (“‘infini, immense’ mais le sens originel doit bien être ‘indicible’”). LfrgE s.v. E reports that the a- may be intensive, but see s.v. B: “originally, probably in connection with sensations that exceed the power of speech (or representation) . . . later, generally emphatic, for what is extraordinary or of abnormal dimensions” (“urspr. wohl in bezug auf Eindrücke, die das Sprach- (u. Vorstellungs-) Vermögen übersteigen . . . dann überhaupt emphatisch von Aussergewöhnlichem, über das normale Mass Hinausgehendem”).
to be taken in at a single glance.”36 Aspetos is always used of things that are beyond precise measurement and so not to be fully comprehended in speech.37

Within this cognitive sublime I would put thespesios and thespis, “spoken by a god.” Sometimes thespesios retains its etymological connection with speech in Homer,38 but it may also describe objects that are “divine” simply by virtue of belonging to or being connected with a god: such are the threshold of Zeus (Il. 1.591), the fleece of Polyphemus’s prize ram (Od. 9.434), or the aroma of the wine of Maron, Apollo’s priest (Od. 9.211).39 Yet, when the word has no immediate connection with a particular divinity, thespesios remains attached to “marvelous” objects that are extraordinary in a particular way: they are multitudes, mixtures, immensities in the literal sense. In such contexts the word might be rendered as “unearthly,” but with the connotation that such things are what (only) a god might say because they confound human cognition and articulation: they are by nature so borderless or unarticulated that they defy expression or boggle the mind. In Homer such divine gifts are often said to be “poured down” on their recipients, as when Athena “pours down” an “unearthly” grace over a favorite to make him more beautiful or to render him invisible (Od. 2.12 = 17.63, 8.19, 7.42).40 Similarly inarticulable, streaming, and befuddling are the “unearthly” mists and clouds that gods “pour down upon” or dispel from armies (Il. 15.669, 23.342). “Divine” is not a strong enough gloss here, for thespesios suggests a special kind of copi-

36Commenting on Il. 16.300. The scholiast’s term (asunoptos) nicely opposes the Aristotelian prescription that ideal plots be not too large but “easily taken in in a single view” (eunoptos [Poetics 1451a4; cf. 1459a33]). Frisk (1960–70) s.v. glosses aspetos “unendlich, unermesslich” (“endless, immeasurable”).
37Cf. LSJ s.v. “unspeakable, unutterable; mostly in sense of unspeakably great . . .; less freq. of number, countless.” LfrgE (s.v. B) divides the uses of epic aspetos under two heads: (1) “unsayable, i.e., ‘vast, many,’ of great quantity” (“unsaagbar, [gross, viel] von grosser Quantität”), and (2) a single example of an “adverbial” use—Il. 2.367, discussed in note 43 herein.
38Cf. LSJ s.v. “unspeakable, unutterable; mostly in sense of unspeakably great . . .; less freq. of number, countless.” LfrgE (s.v. B) divides the uses of epic aspetos under two heads: (1) “unsayable, i.e., ‘vast, many,’ of great quantity” (“unsaagbar, [gross, viel] von grosser Quantität”), and (2) a single example of an “adverbial” use—Il. 2.367, discussed in note 43 herein.
39So too it is used of the “unearthly” cave of the Nymphs in Od. 13.363 (cf. 24.6 of an eerie cave in a simile).
40In this vein I would explain the use of thspatos for the mist Athena “pours” over Odysseus (Od. 7.143), a mist that is also called thespesios (7.42).
ousness, even unwieldiness, like the “unearthly wealth” that Zeus “pours down” on a king (Il. 2.670).41

Though the specific literal meaning at root of thespesios and thespis may have been eroded in some uses, they both belong to a semantic field that preserves the concept of the unutterably large. Something bestowed by the gods may originally have been called thespesios because it was such a thing as only god could tell or describe. The “divine” aspect of the poet’s voice, thespis audē, then may be its ability to encompass and master the sublime infinity of the past. In connection with speech, these words carry the suggestion that the most ambitious forms of language must face the ineffable immensities of the world. The capacious voice of the thespis aoidos again allies him with prophets like Teiresias and Melampus, who can “catalog” or “tell all” the manifold dooms of fate (thesphata [Od. 11.151,297]). I think it is significant too that when athesphatos is twice used for unusually long nights (Od. 11.373, 15.392), these are nights to be filled with stories.

Thespis aoidē, then, defines the poetry whose object, the infinite past, is such a vast thing, as may be seen in a passage that is paradoxically taken to indicate the word’s development into a general intensive meaning “great.” In Iliad 15.637 it seems as if the instrumental thespesiēi should be translated as “greatly”: “All the Achaeans / were routed ‘greatly’ by Hector and Zeus.”42 But this line describes a confused scattering of heroes, emphasized in two preceding similes of the sublime: a ship capsizing in waves and foam (15.623–628) and a lion attacking a “myriad” herd (15.630–636). In context, the word suggests that the Achaean army was scattered “in a way [so confused] that only a god could describe [it].” Note too that immediately thereafter the poet begins to name Hector’s victims in catalog style (15.638ff.), so that this single word, inserted before a catalog and after a pair of sublime similes, is the functional equivalent of the recusatio in 12.175–178 discussed in Chapter 2.43

41The scholiast rightly explains “many and in a heap”; in telling the same story of Tlepolemus (Ol. 7.50), Pindar puts it that Zeus “rained down much gold.”
42So LfrgE s.v. thespesios B.
43So I would explain the sole example LfrgE s.v. 2 gives of the presumed “weak-
Thespis audê approaches a paradox or oxymoron: it is a human voice, but one that can include all the incidents of the divinely speakable numerous to give us a full vision of the great unseen history of the world. But if it is a sublime of sense and meaning, a sublime of the intelligible voice cataloging, it is also one of sheer power. The objects and phenomena described by these words are also so great or overwhelming as to provoke wonder (thauma) in men and a sense of the dynamic sublime in readers: so when Telemachus gazes upon the splendid palace of Nestor, he speaks of “ineffably many” (aspetos) metals that make it up and compares it to the hall of Zeus (Od. 4.74–75). Similarly, when aspetos is applied to “woods,” it suggests many, many trees; but it often turns out that this wood is about to be consumed in an awesome conflagration. Hence we find it adding height to similes of the natural sublime:

Like a fire that blazes in an aspetos wood
on mountain peaks, and the gleam appears from far off,
So, as they went, from their bronze unearthly [thespiesê]
a ray, shining in all directions, went through the air to heaven.
[Iliad 2.455–458]

The association of thespesios with a terrifying, dynamic sublime is clearest when it is used of aspects of nature. Like “ineffable” (aspetos), thespesios describes awesome natural phenomena, especially as composing many particulars—a storm, snow, hail. Again, sometimes these might be thought of as “divine” in the simple sense of “god-sent,” such as the tempestuous wind Zeus raises (Od. 9.68 = 12.314), but this wind happens also to be part of a storm that hides

44Hence later developments of audê to mean oracle: Euripides Iphigenia in Tauris 976; cf. Sophocles Oedipus the King 392.
45Aspetos is used of the wood gathered for Patroclus’s “great” pyre (ll. 23.127) and for Hector’s, gathered over nine days (24.784). Cf. Hesiod Works and Days 511: nêritos hulê, an “uncountable wood.” (In Hymn 26.10 it is used of a living wood that is filled with the noise (bromos) of Dionysus reveling with his Nymphs.)
heaven and earth, and the astonishing, disorienting qualities of such objects are more often the point of emphasis. In particular *thespesios* may describe natural phenomena that are accompanied by great noise and destruction: the word is applied to the sound of the west and north winds as they rise up, driving a storm (*Il.* 23.213); to the unearthly din of the east and south winds smashing together trees in a “deep wood” (*Il.* 16.769, in a simile); to the “unearthly uproar” of a gust of winds that strike the sea while many waves roil about (*Il.* 13.797, in a simile).

This dynamic sublime I think tries to capture the sheer phonetic power of the poet’s *thespis audê*. The brute material power that a sublime voicing requires is suggested by phrases referring to the “unearthly din” of nature—its great, clashing, startling sounds (*èkhèi thespesièi*). Often indeed sent by a god, such sounds are also typically the din, hubbub, and confused uproar that comes from such crowds as routed armies or from contending natural forces. The “unearthly din” is usually disconcerting and often transcendent, “reaching through the ether to heaven.” So, for example, the “unearthly din” of battle goes up to heaven and reaches the rays of Zeus (*Il.* 13.834, 837; cf. 15.355); it is heard when Hector and his men “pour” missiles upon the Greeks (*Il.* 8.159) or when they attack, spurred on by Zeus, who stirs up a dust storm to “bewitch the mind of the Achaeans” (*Il.* 12.252, 255). Similar terrifying sounds often accompany routs, as when Patroclus scatters the Trojans with “an unearthly uproar” (*homados* [*Il.* 16.295]), or the Achaeans are oppressed by Hector and his “unearthly shouting” (*alalètos* [*Il.* 18.149]).46 These sounds are not individuated or intelligible; they typically come from a shower of weapons, a mass of men, or a single man shouting. And they can cause fear: the echo from the mourning of Thetis and the Nereids for Achilles causes an “unearthly trembling” among the Achaeans (*Od.* 24.49).47 Hence fear or personified Panic is also *thespesios* (*Il.* 17.118, 15.637), not simply because it is often “divine(ly sent),” but because such routs

46 The same words are used when Heracles and Cynicus, two divine offspring, close in single combat (*Shield of Heracles* 383).

47 Cf. Sappho 44.26–27 Voigt: the sound of a maiden’s chorus reaches heaven through the air. Similar is *Od.* 11.43.
are also typically either occasioned by a sublime epiphany or accompanied by a disordered and noisy confusion.

The poet’s epithet thespis, then, belongs to a semantic field in which great multitudes are expressed as beyond mortal articulation, as ineffable or what gods might speak, and also as of a superhuman, almost unendurable force. Though the range of objects to which these words are applied extends slightly beyond the strictly “speakable,” all are the kinds of phenomena that cannot be reduced to an exact enumeration of details and that at the same time provoke wonder, as one of the most sublime of Homeric similes illustrates. At the end of book 8 of the Iliad (554–559) the Trojan campfires on the plain are compared to stars in the aspetos ether; it is just a few lines later (ll. 9.2) that an “unearthly panic” (thespesios) seizes the Greeks. This panic is not, at least not directly, god-sent, and the scholiast seems thus to have rightly sensed that the word is used to indicate that it was a “great” (pollê) fear; for immediately there follows a simile comparing the feeling in the hearts of the Achaeans to a sea that is heaped up in masses (amudis) by two winds. This vocabulary and the sublime similes combine to dramatize the multitudes and immensities that threaten intellection and stun the beholder. In Hesiod too we can observe these words used to signal the sublime, and in a context where the content of the Homeric similes appears as narrated fact. In a climactic moment in the Theogony, Zeus takes up his thunderbolts against the Titans: throwing them in heaps (amudis [689]), he made the aspetos wood crackle loudly and “an aspetos flame reached the bright ether” (Theog. 694, 698). This blinded the Titans, “mighty though they were,” and an “unearthly” (thespesios) heat seized Chaos. This passage manages to evoke in narrated cosmogony the sublime of Homeric similes, and it uses similar diction to do so. With such language the poet creates a scene that, “to see with one’s eyes or hear with one’s ears, was as if earth and wide heaven came together” (700–703).49

48 See West (1966) for the reading of 698.

49 In this context it is possible to understand the sole epic use of thespis outside the context of poetry. In a line-ending formula (thespis aella, apparently modeled on the formula thespin aoidên) it modifies the Zeus-sent gale that snatched Ganymede up to Olympus. Perhaps it is called “divine” because it was sent by Zeus or, more simply,
We have, then, a set of words that originally had related meanings suggesting that the language of the gods excels human language both in its power to express everything in the world and in its sheer material force. And the voice that poets borrow from them shares in both these sublimes. That the heart of the poet’s song is found in the sound as well as the sense of his voice appears in two unique epithets for song in epic.

**Thespis Audê: Unwearying Voice, Unbreakable Sound**

The sublime and threatening power of song that *thespis* names can also be observed in a final set of words, a peculiar triad of predicates for “singing” or voice in Homer and Hesiod: *athesphatos humnos*, “song without limits”; *akamatos audê*, “weariless voice”; and *phônê arrêktos*, “unbreakable sound or voice.” Beyond such immediately intelligible epithets for song, such as “sweet,” “charming,” “holy,” “fair,” “clear” or “sorrowful,” these phrases suggest, like *thespis*, a transcendence in the poet’s voice and song, but one that is reducible to the bare force of voicing, a material sublime of song.

We begin with a word from the sublime semantic group, which is used once of song in Hesiod. The passage (*Works and Days* 646–662) is a transitional proem in which Hesiod promises to teach Perses about sailing the seas, even though he himself is hardly knowledgeable about such matters. But he is in a position to reveal such things because the Muses have taught him to sing the *athesphaton humnon* (662). *Athesphatos* is not a good word merely to indicate the “divine” inspiration that puts the poet in touch with matters beyond his direct experience. Fränkel would take it as meaning that the poet is “free,” to sing “wherever I will” because no limits have

---

because it is a strong wind. Yet too it is a bewildering wind for Ganymede’s father, who “did not know / in what direction the *thespis* gale had snatched his son” (*H. Aphr.* 207–208). This gale is similar in effect to a wind (*aella*) in a Homeric battle simile, which Zeus drives with his thunderbolts in an “unearthly uproar” (*Il.* 13.795, 797).

50See *LfrgE* s.v. *aoidê G* for references.
been set to his song. But I think the song is *athesphatos* because it reveals what is in the “mind of Zeus” (661); all-knowing, all-seeing Zeus is the one who truly knows the “measures of the much-murmuring sea” (648). Hesiod’s “unlimited” hymn enables the poet to speak of something so measureless as the sea, which is typically imagined as infinitely wide, without any fixed points of reference in it. Hence I think Emile Benveniste is right in taking Hesiod to say that the Muses have taught him “a song which has no limits.” Only a song from the Muses could measure the sublime enormity of the sea.

This idea of poetry as a sublime voicing is matched by a counterimage in the description of one of Hesiod’s most awesome monsters, Typho. The last of Earth’s children, Typho mounts the final and most nearly successful challenge to Zeus before he can take up his orderly reign on Olympus (Theog. 820–880). Marcel Detienne and Jean-Pierre Vernant see Typho as “a power of confusion and disorder, an agent of chaos,” and an antagonist to Zeus’s “measure.” In form this prodigious monster (*pelôrê* [821]) appears to resemble a dragon, but among the dreadful features typically found in dragons the poet emphasizes especially Typho’s din of voices: sometimes he speaks with the language of the gods, but he roars, hisses, bellows, and barks as well. In a brief but dense passage nearly all the words for voice are attributed to Typho: *phôné* (829), *opa* (830) *pthengesthai* (831), and in a moment of categorical transgression, the *ossa* of a bull (831–832). As Detienne and Vernant put it, Typho’s voices transfer to the auditory level the traditional polymorphous nature of the beast. He is a “marvel to

---

51 Fränkel (1923) 281.
52 The sea (*thalassa*) is itself called *athesphatos* (*Od*. 7.272; *Hymn* 15.4), and “uncontrollable” (*anaimaketo* [*Shield* 207]), and (as *pontos*) is especially qualified by epithets that mean “without borders”; cf. *LfrgE* s.v. *apeîrôn* B 1ab and *apeîritos* B 1a.
56 For this reading of *Theog*. 831, see Snell (1924) 43.
57 If this use of *ossa* is not deliberately confusing, it may be a case of what West says are the awkwardnesses and difficulties “one would expect of a poet like Hesiod writing on a theme like the Typhonomachy” (1966) 382.
“hear” (834) in a transfixed sense, for he is fearful, paralyzing.59 This is the voice of a creature who with his hundred snaky heads (825) reminds us of Homer’s Gorgons.60

In part, then, Hesiod’s Typho is a mind-boggling image of uncontrolled and undifferentiated voice: “In each of his dreadful heads were voice-boxes [phònai] / each sending forth a voice, of every kind and unlimited in number [pantoièn op’ hieisai athespaton]” (Theog. 829–830).61 Typho’s voices and sounds are not wholly intelligible, which distinguishes his opa athespoton from the athesphaton humnon taught by the Muses.62 The diction “sending forth” a voice that is “of every kind and unlimited in number” suggests that the opa this beast utters is a superhuman but infernal counterpart to the “immortal” (or “lovely,” etc.) ossa that the Muses “send forth.”63 It is a super- and subhuman version of the orderly, Olympian-sanctioned singing of Hesiod—“he who sends forth the audê.”

The special difference between divine voicing and this inhuman cacophony may be expressed in another striking word used of the Muses’ voice in Hesiod—“unwearying.” When they sing the past,

59In Homer, Typho occurs only parenthetically, but significantly, as the focus of the final simile magnifying the marshaled Greek host (Il. 2.780–783).

60The face of the Gorgon is terrifying in Il. 8.349 and 11.36, and there are snaky, “unapproachable, unspeakable” Gorgons in the Shield of Heracles 223–237. Hesiod says the Gorgons live with the “clear-voiced Hesperides” a trio of lovely singers, like the Sirens (Theog. 274–281); but the Hesperides are no threat to men, perhaps because they sing only to themselves in their distant paradise, see West (1966) on Theog. 275.

61This last phrase and interpretation are taken from Benveniste (1969) 414, who compares the athesphaton humnon given to Hesiod by the Muses. One might also compare the gifts of Poseidon to Periclemenus in the Catalogue, “gifts of all kinds, not to be named” (dòra pantoia, ouk ononomasta)—i.e., the ability to change into various animal shapes (Fr. 33a17–18 M-W).

62Pindar (Pythian 1.1–27) also evokes Typho as an awe-inspiring noise contrasted with the “golden lyre” of the Olympians. The lyre brings us ordered dance and quenches even Zeus’s “thunderbolt of ever-streaming fire” (5–6). But when the disordered creatures of the world (those “whom Zeus loves not”) hear the sound (boan) of the Muses, it astonishes (atuzontai) them, on land and over the “uncontrollable” sea ((13–14) amaimaketois is used by Homer of the Chimaera [Il. 6.179, 16.329; Theog. 319]). Such is Typho, whose volcanic eruptions are “a marvelous prodigy to see, a marvel even to hear of from those who have been there” (26).

63One can compare also Hymn 27.18, where the chorus of the Muses and Graces celebrate Artemis by “sending forth their immortal opa / in a hymn to Leto” (hai δ’ ambrosien op’ ieisai / humneusin Letô).
present, and future, their “audē flows unwearyingly [akamatos] from their mouths” (Theog. 39–40; cf. 44). An unwearying stream of voice appears to be the supreme eloquence, for we have seen that what an audē does at its best is flow (Theog. 84, 97; II. 1.249). But for Hesiod to say that the Muses’ voice flows “unwearyingly” may be more than a synonym for natural enough expressions such as calling their voice “immortal” (Theog. 43, 69; cf. Hymn 27.18). In Hesiod the adjective akamatos is used of the fire Zeus denies to mortals (Theog. 563, 566) and to characterize attributes of demi-gods: Atlas’s hands (Theog. 519, 747), Typho’s feet (824), and the strength that permits Argus never to sleep (fr. 188.3). In Homer it is applied only to fire, and in the Iliad it is usually an extraordinary or god-sent fire, such as the “weariless” and “unquenchable” fire that the Trojans put to the Greek ships, or the magic flares that blaze from a rampaging hero’s helmet.64 We gather from these uses that akamatos describes again a sublime force or fire, often destructive or terrifying and always unspent.65 This unwearying stream of song seems to be the Muses’ special grace: whenever they appear in epic they are singing, and the word evokes the awesomely enduring but beneficent voice of the Muse, “ever the singer,” as Alcman calls her (14a Page).

Such a gift belongs to the gods, and may be destructive in mortals, as can be seen in the case of Tithonus. In the Homeric Hymn to Aphrodite, Tithonus wins from the gods the gift of immortality but not eternal youth; as he aged unendingly and lost his physical strength, Aphrodite confined him in a chamber, where “his voice [phonē] flows ceaselessly [aspetos]” (5.237).66 This is one human

64Il. 16.122–123; 15.598, 731; 5.4; 18.225. Cf. 21.341 (a fire sent by Hephaestus to help Achilles against Xanthus) and 23.52 (on Patroclus’s pyre). Akamatos is also used of a fire in a simile in 21.13. On the use of akamatos in the Odyssey, see the next note.

65The Odyssey would seem to disrupt the pattern and to be playfully reducing the epithet (as it sometimes will), for it uses akamatos of hearth fires that are kindled by slave women or even Melanthus (Od. 20.123, 21.181). But the first is explicitly the sacred hearth fire, never to be allowed to die away, and these lowly characters only “stoke it” (anakaiō).

66“Ceaselessly” is from Allen, Halliday, and Sikes (1936). The line seems related to Il. 18.402–403: Hephaestus worked as a smith for nine years in the cave of the sea Nymphs “and around there the stream of Ocean / flowed ceaselessly [aspetos].” The poet of the hymn puts the flourishing youth of Tithonus “by the streams of Ocean at the ends of the earth” (227). Cf. LfrgE s.v. aspetos 1c for discussion and references.
voice that can, by divine intervention, flow in an unbroken stream; yet Tithonos pays a price: though the tale of his transformation into a cicada seems not to be known to the author of the hymn, his ever-diminishing voice is called a phônê, not an audê, perhaps because its articulations are becoming ever fainter. Poets by contrast are allowed a divine audê, flowing and sweet (Theog. 97). Through the Muses’ favor, the poet of the past partakes of their unwearying stream of voice and survives to give us at least a part of their unending singing.

If Homer were to speak of his “unwearying” voice we might understand it as another negation of the reduction of poetry to shapable matter, for in Homer “wearying” has to do with craft, as in the formula “he wearied himself out working,” or “wrought with toil” (kame teukhôn), used of Hephaestus and human artisans fashioning a variety of objects. But we do not find his version of this word (akamas) used of voice. Yet Hesiod’s use of this adjective helps us better understand the one time that Homer mentions his poet’s voice, at ll. 2.490, where he says that he could not sing all who came to Troy even if he had an “unbreakable phônê and a breast of bronze within.” Homer rejects as inadequate not the “unwearying voice” of Hesiod’s Muses but a voice that is more solid and yet “unbreakable” (arrêktos). Calling this voice “unbreakable,” is, as I noted in Chapter 4, suggestive of the impiety in such a wish; for the word is elsewhere, with the pointed exception of the Achaeans wall, a quality of divine attributes. The poet desires not a voice that is “unbreakable” matter but a sound that might, through all its stops and starts, at least echo the perpetual song of Muses.

The poet here forgoes a material enduringness or strength of voice, as is also suggested in his refusal of a brazen breast. Bronze is often called “unerodable” (ateirês). It may be a metaphor of

---

68West on Theog. 764 notes that in ll. 2.490 we do not expect this phrase, usually meaning “pitiless,” when “enduring” is wanted.
69LlfgE s.v. Poseidon takes on the unerodable phônê to impersonate Chalcas (13.45), Athena to imitate Phoenix (17.558) and Deiphobus (22.227).
endurance and power, but when it is used of the voice (phône) in Homer, it suggests a loud and penetrating sound, not the meaningful audê. Stentorian heralds have a voice (phône) like the gods (II. 19.250), and when Hera impersonates one with a voice of bronze (khalkeophônos), she “shouts with the voice of fifty men” (II. 5.786). When gods in the Iliad assume the “form and voice” of mortals, they may take on a “form and unerodable voice [ateirês phônê].”

These brazen voices are unusually strong, but essentially in their massy solidity; the metaphor of a bronze voice evokes the dynamic sublime of sheer power rather than the mathematical sublime of totality: Cerberus, Typho’s offspring, also has a bronze voice (Theog. 311). One final example of a brazen voice combines the dynamic sublimes of the terrific sound and the blinding gleam: before he is to get his dazzling armor, Achilles leaps to the battlements and panics the Trojans with a shout of pure sound: “His voice [phônê] was as clear as the blare of a trumpet” (18.221). This shout is but half of the awesome epiphany: Athena sends a radiant blaze of fire shining from a gold cloud round his head and stands beside him, lending the power of her voice (phthengksat’ [218]). This double sublime—the Trojans heard his “bronze voice” (opa khalkeon [II. 18.222]) and saw the “unwearying fire” around his head (akamaton pur [18.225])—“stirred up unspeakable [aspeton] confusion among the Trojans” (18.218).

We may say in structural terms that Homer and Hesiod give us an anatomy of sublime voices across the categories of monster, mortal, and god. The dynamic sublime of sheer volume is instantiated by Cerberus, Stentor, and Hera, respectively. Similarly, Typho, the poet, and the Muses represent the mathematical sublime of the infinite in these same classes. The poet’s “divine human voice” does not hubristically aspire to Tithonus’s immortality or to the unlimited power of Typho. Yet his thespis audê gives us more than the most powerful phônê can. If the mind of the Muses is capable of subsuming all the facts of the world and their order, their “weariless human voice” (akamatos audê) is capable of uttering

70All in scenes of great contention. In 13.45 Poseidon becomes like Calchas, rallying the hard-pressed Greeks; in 17.555 Athena as Phoenix addresses (prosêuda) Menelaus to rouse him to seize Patroclus’s body. In 22.227 Athena as Deiphobus stands beside Hector being pursued by Achilles.
them in a continuous stream. When this speech descends to earth, albeit in the reduced form of *thespis audê*, it retains the ability, if not to say all, at least to say each thing in its particularity, to present the detailed, circumspect account of the past without breaking down or leaving gaps. Human speech may attain this sublime, which is one of content and form at once; it may be *thespis aoidê*.

*Thespis aoidê*, then, is our access to a past in which every detail has the right, by the mere fact of having existed, to be mentioned, to be heard again on earth. The poetry of the past, to be adequate to that enormous past, must be a fluent, continuous voicing that goes beyond the speech of any other powerful speaker. The poet’s “divine human voice” is not an oxymoron or ventriloquism but an epiphany: divine knowledge appears in sound and presents to human senses a world not otherwise apparent. This sound, the body of the poet’s voice, is the substance of the heroic world in all its presence; in it the human account of the past and the divine perspective upon it, as far as they can, appear together on earth.

No material device can embody or substitute for the divine afflatus: if his heart were bronze and he had ten mouths and the voice were unbreakable within him, the poet would still need the Muse and her special voice. This is the fiction at the heart of song which the poet will not let the pen or any toiling art approach. The singer, as vehicle of this fluid, ever-renewed voice, does not want to be mistaken for an artisan, nor does he want his singing to be identified with any visible thing, any text. Such song is a voice, the sound of poetry is its soul. It is not to be wrought or sought, and it is never to be confused with the still, silent letters on a page.

Poetry for Homer, then, was singing, not as an abstraction but as a voicing. It was making the names of heroes sound again on earth. This fiction is perhaps the one most alien to our conceptions of literature, for on its most basic level, poetry thereby becomes not an art of storytelling, but an act of mentioning: merely sounding a name, recalling an exploit or repeating a story gives life to fame and on each occasion restores the shade loitering in Hades to heroic vitality.

There is something of the catalog heritage of epic poetry in this sense of a dispassionate inventory, a placid listing of who did and said what. Of course, the poet speaks not just inventories but
stories. These stories are named and defined structures of action in which the choices of heroes and their consequences ramify and reach certain resolutions. Of course, these patterns are always referred to a larger complex—the will of Zeus or fate—but to view Homer as the fashioner or shaper of his world is to invoke metaphors of the artist that are more common in a fifth-century Democritus or Pindar.

This flat *audē* is also the voice one hears as heroes speak, for speeches make up nearly half of the epics, and many follow Aristotle in making Homer the father of drama. Yet the poet becomes the speaking hero only within the world of mentioning; in the organization of epic, narration follows invocation, and reported speech follows narration. Homer’s speeches appear in the poems in the first instance as part of an exact account of what was done. Although his speeches are rightly praised for their dramatic force and their subtle characterizations, and though rhapsodes could later seize on them for intensely dramatic effects, sawing the air and moving their audience to tears, the simple fact that a speech that is repeated in the story may be reiterated word for word in the text points to their basic justification in this account: a complete rendering of what happened to the heroes ideally involves repeating word by word what they said on each occasion. Speeches, no less than the exact pronunciation of a name or a deed, are finally part of that full epiphany that the poet’s voice makes possible.

Modest as such a project may be, it suggests a great role for heroic song. In some sense epic reanimates the heroes, restoring them to action and speech, for the poet’s voicing retains some magical power, even as it retains some of its magical taboos: naming was invocatory and not naming was apotropaic. From this point of view, each utterance is of equal value, for the opposition at work here is simply saying against not saying, naming or refusing to name. The briefest mention of the death of the most marginal character evokes that fact and preserves its fame to the same degree as the fullest and most poignant account of the fall of a Hector or a Patroclus; the cordoned bedstead, the smooth tholepin are retrieved from oblivion by poetry no less than the shield of Achilles or the palace of Menelaus. The poet’s picture of song is very different from that constructed by the critic. A reader who selects
“central” themes or episodes from the whole neglects the power inherent in each thing. An inventory of every third item, or only of gold-plated items, will be a totally different kind of inventory. To transform the song into an artistic structure is a distortion of this aspect of its nature. It is not a poem to be read into, not a coded message to be deciphered, not an artifact to be appreciated in aesthetic contemplation. As a form of audē, singing was, finally, sound and not the stored-up structure of a song.