Homer
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CONCLUSION

What have I assembled here? Before characterizing the view of poetry in Homer, I want to recall the limits of this study, for every book about Homer is to some extent also about his poetics. I began by invoking Curtius’s distinction of the history of the theory of poetry from the practice of poets since I have not tried to demonstrate the unconscious theory that governed his composition. The “views” of poetry that I have found in these texts can only be fictions spoken by a poetic persona or attributed to fictitious characters; they are part of the poet’s larger fiction and binding neither on him nor on his audience. Hence we cannot expect to divine from the texts Homer’s true and final opinions about art, and far less to use such views as authoritative rules for how to read him. It is, then, a representation of poetry I have sought; but such a representation is more than a “theme” running through the epic as it reflects on itself, although such themes have been part of my evidence. Taken as a whole, the references to poetry that I have assembled do not come together to form a leitmotif or counterpoint to the narrative, for they were found in various registers of the texts: the formalities with which the poet introduces himself and his song to his audience; the terms that tradition has left him for naming poetry, kinds of poetry, and its parts; the stories he tells about poets, perhaps idealized and archaized, within his stories.
Other stories too been consulted, especially the myths and tales that bear on the nature of language, its powers, shapes, and kinds. In reading the Homeric poems for their own representation of poetry I have tried to catch the poet not as allegorist of himself or as theorist manqué, but as a singer thinking as he sings. I have hoped to extend our awareness of Homer's poetry beyond its systems, categories, and classification and to take note of poetic choice and will animating them. In concluding these deliberations, I have no wish to extract a theory of poetry from the poems, but I want to look over what has developed to ask how far Homer has satisfied us and what we expect of poetry.

I began by trying to show how such a poetry might classify and define itself. The definitions I sought were of a poetry without texts, fixed only in the sight of the Muses. Though it may have been highly regulated by social custom and religious practice, it was still an ephemeral poetry that came and went with divine condescension. Such a poetic prescribed a singer's behavior before it prescribed a song's form, and it answered few of the demands of formalist criticism. Though highly elaborated in many of its aspects, it did not separate form from content or speak of "how" a tale is told apart from what tale is told. It sustained a view of singing in which the themes, though demonstrably variable to a tape recorder, were the only stable elements, and these it figured as paths across a celestial field.

Yet some of the lines it drew in the air, such as that encompassing the klea andrón, enabled the poets to define themselves and to mark themselves off from other tellers of tales. This most important and most elusive line demarcated the realm of divine singing itself. Divinity bestowed on this special discourse about the past a near-immediate closeness to the event, approaching the closeness of seeing. The Muses not only provided knowledge of things that were gone but also superintended them, so that all the notable actions ever done remained in place under their gaze. In their eyes there is no past: to know is at once to have seen and to have in memory all the events of history in a timeless order. Homeric epic was a poetry of the invisible past, visiting an unseen realm that holds these actions as they were in life. I settled on a definition of epic as the poetry of the past in the sense that it alone claimed to
make the past appear before our minds' eye. Its "art" was to be the site of an epiphany through the voice, speaking of the past beyond the limits of mortal perception and articulating it "truly," as if seeing it in all its complexity and detail. In rhetorical terms, Homer suggests that poetry achieves this effect by its very full telling, by presenting to us the actions in all their particulars as they looked to the gods at that time. But its real status was phenomenological. Making the past present, a "god-spoken song" transports us out of our present place and time and makes the past appear to us more clearly than any other version can. It knows and has seen all: the heroes, the gods—even when the heroes themselves could not see them—and makes them vivid for us.

Epic pretends that its art is not one of selection but of mentioning. But of course, the poet cuts down his story again and again, so that epic is always a human voicing that cannot embrace "all that happened." But in its crises of selection epic manages to evoke that all, and we approach a comprehension of the immeasurable past. At such moments, this nearly insubstantial, never fully apparent tradition could take on weight, even weightiness for a poet. The human epic is driven to its exclusion, and it scapegoats what cannot belong. Because performance is a speech borrowed from the Muses' vision, it becomes necessary in beginning each performance to negotiate the distance between ephemeral occasion and the perfect, unchanging song that belongs to no individual. The desire to connect this tale to a larger lineage of tales is stronger than the desire to make an autonomous whole without such a support.

If we follow Aristotle and assign epic to the long-enduring and many-formed tradition of praise poetry (noting, in addition, that such a genre is of Indo-European antiquity), we must note that it has fundamentally changed its purpose, for it no longer makes overt obeisance to king or court. It celebrates the noble ancestors of the race, all the while refusing to speak directly to those present. Its hearers too are represented as silently enchanted, pleased and inactive. If they come to know more than they knew before hearing it, they are not morally instructed or even addressed in the way that exhortation demanded.

Yet in the dynamics of performance it must always have hap-
pened that the deliberate flatness of the poet's ethos and the consistent austerity of his self-presentation were enlivened: the context of performance could excite dormant tensions in the poetry of the past in the way a magnetic current excites a field of electrons. To tell the deeds of the great men impersonally, to present them without pointing, without moralizing, was an enormous trope when facing an audience of Ionian Greeks. To be speaking at one moment as a named and known poet and then, a few lines later, as Agamemnon or Athena, was a performative tour de force that the poetry and its poetic developed and exploited fully. Here we are, centuries removed, profoundly cut off from the heroic age, and a form of song dares to claim it can present that reality simply and let us hear what the heroes said directly. In the performative context of epic poetry a great irony necessarily arises, and the poet delights in playing the past and present together. In this way the crucial relationship the poet establishes among himself, his audience, and other poets can be reinforced and figuratively represented by the relations that the poets in his songs have with their heroes and the gods.

The poet will not distract us with claims of originality, of authorship, of his own contributions; he does not want to pose as master craftsman, cunning maker, original deployer of old materials; he forgoes for the moment his own zeal to declare himself above his peers and even to set himself up for posterity. And the refusal of settling on a text is only the last of many refusals needed to purify this voice. The poet is an undeconstructed phonocentrist or, better, "audocentrist," but I have noted less how his fiction is a fiction than the many self-effacements needed to sustain it. Looking at the "voice" inside of "song" we saw that singing had to be human to be meaningful but more than human to make the past present and apparent in speech, and that speech or voice was simultaneously the poet's intelligible, perceptible, and fluent medium. Its truth was the truth of particulars, of the accumulation of details vividly seen; its substance was its ephemeral sound, finer and more lasting than bronze.

If we reflect that behind this figure of the voice was an avid and excellent Greek poet who made a living from his art, no doubt we will judge these disclaimers to be disingenuous. And much that
the poet gives up in this theory of poetry might have been reclaimed outside the path of singing: in proem and epilogue he might well have been able to give us that portrait of the artist we look for, the artful, readable artist of the kind that a Pindar weaves inextricably into his songs. But these postures would have been asides, necessarily excluded from a song too great to bear his or any name.

There have indeed been many refusals needed to bring before us a poetry that is only a voice that, in its unalloyed form, flows constantly on Olympus. Homer's poetry was not only conceived within a world very different from our own but was also given a very different relationship to that world. For us, the most troublesome refusal may be that this oral poetry invited no reading, no interpretation. It pretended not even to need a human audience, since, whether or not it was heard on earth, song existed completely and timelessly in the Muses' performance. Of course, as readers we will interpret; but in doing so we may remember that we are listening not to that original and indifferent choir or even to its first echoes in early Ionia, but to a book, a format for storing singing that in some ways changed singing forever. As we try to sound out our text, we may remember that the early form of singing lurking behind its letters presents its own idea of what poetry may be. It was not a text, an icon, a well-shaped artifact. It was not moral exhortation or history or the pleasurable play of subtle language. Conceived in terms shared with magic, religion, and mythology, it was nothing very much like what we are accustomed to think of as poetry or literature or art—except, of course, insofar as it was a poetry of the imagination.