

**WRITING IN THE *ODYSSEY*:
EURYKLEIA, PARRY, JOUSSE, AND THE
OPENING OF A LETTER FROM HOMER***

HAUN SAUSSY

1. “A LETTER OR TWO”

Jean-Jacques Rousseau once contended that Homer and writing were antithetical. “Not only are the traces of this art rare in the *Iliad*, but I dare to suggest that the whole *Odyssey* is a mere tissue of stupidities and ineptitudes that a letter or two would reduce to smoke, whereas the poem becomes reasonable and rather well-constructed if one supposes that its heroes were ignorant of writing” (Rousseau 1968.110–11). Homer was for Rousseau the poet of face-to-face archaic society, the society against which Rousseau measures all other societies and finds them wanting. In such a state of culture, writing is either useless or the herald of a catastrophic weakening of social bonds (ibid. 117, 122, 173–75). And if it is immediacy that writing necessarily subverts, then the *Odyssey* would seem to have much to lose. For the *Odyssey* is (among other things) the story of the wanderer’s return to his home; of the restoration of the king and father to his position; of the affirmation of the hero’s identity despite the dangers he has encountered and the years that have obscured his memory; of the son’s confirmation as his father’s adequate image; of the reunion, after twenty

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years of separation, of name and reality; even of a personal solar myth.¹ By intercutting absence with tokens of presence (for example, a hypothetical letter from Odysseus to Penelope), and conversely intermingling presence with its mere representations, writing would rob the *Odyssey* of the energy to be gained from its polar antitheses. In Rousseau's demonology, nothing is more apt than "a letter or two" to reduce the triumph of Odysseus to smoke.²

I shall try to show that the threat to the *Odyssey* and to immediacy is already effectively anticipated by the "oral" poetics of the work itself, indeed that the story the *Odyssey* tells may be taken as a parable on the relations of oral poetics and writing. My argument will require some reworking, faithfully intended, of the terms "writing" and "orality." Conscious of long-standing precedent, I call Homer as my first witness.

The work of Alfred Heubeck, Jesper Svenbro, Barry Powell, and other students of the early history of the Greek alphabet makes it possible for me to identify one famous episode of the *Odyssey* as a scene of reading. Late in the epic, slightly before the story has come to its expected triumphant ending, an old serving-woman named Eurykleia is asked to wash the feet of a beggar who may, her mistress surmises, have reliable information about Odysseus (19.386–94, 467–75).

... γρη῏ς δὲ λῆβηθ' ἔλε παμφανόωντα,
τοῦ πόδας ἐξαπένιζεν, ὕδωρ δ' ἐνεχεύατο πουλὺ,
ψυχρόν, ἔπειτα δὲ θερμόν ἐπήφυσεν. αὐτὰρ Ὀδυσσεὺς
ἶξεν ἐπ' ἐσχάροφιν, ποτὶ δὲ σκότον ἐτράπετ' αἶψα·
αὐτίκα γὰρ κατὰ θυμόν οἶσατο, μὴ ἐλαβοῦσα
οὐλήν **ἀμφράσσαιτο** καὶ ἀμφαδὰ ἔργα γένοιτο.
νίζε δ' ἄρ' ἄσπον ἰοῦσα ἄναχθ' ἐόν· αὐτίκα δ' **ἔγνω**
οὐλήν, τήν ποτέ μιν σῶς ἦλασε λευκῶ ὀδόντι . . .
τήν γρη῏ς χεῖρεσσι καταπρηνέσσι λαβοῦσα

1 Studies on the theme of return in the *Odyssey* are legion. But see in particular the analyses in Pucci 1987 as well as the comparative evidence offered by Foley 1990. The suggestions of Wilamowitz 1884, 53–55, 87, 113–14, 199–226 on solar and seasonal myth in the poem have been developed in Fries 1911, Murray 1934, Wilamowitz 1927, Austin 1975, and Frame 1978.

2 On Rousseau's theory of writing, see Derrida 1967, 145–445. A pessimistic counterpart to the *Odyssey*'s circular plot is found in the progressively degenerating circles of Rousseau's model of human history, described *ibid.*, 288–89.

γῶ ῥ' ἐπιμασσαμένη, πόδα δὲ προέηκε φέρεσθαι·
 ἐν δὲ λέβητι πέσε κνήμη, κανάχησε δὲ χαλκός,
 ἄψ δ' ἐτέρωσ' ἐκλίθη· τὸ δ' ἐπὶ χθονὸς ἐξέχυθ' ὕδωρ.
 τὴν δ' ἅμα χάρμα καὶ ἄλγος ἔλε φρένα, τὼ δέ οἱ ὅσσε
 δακρυόφι πλησθεν, θαλερὴ δέ οἱ ἔσχετο φωνή.
 ἀψαμένη δὲ γενείου Ὀδυσσῆα προσέειπεν·
 “ἦ μάλ' Ὀδυσσεύς ἐσσι, φίλον τέκος· οὐδέ σ' ἐγὼ γε
 πρὶν ἔγνων, πρὶν πάντα ἄνακτ' ἐμὸν ἀμφοφάσθαι.”

. . . The old woman took up the brightly-shining basin
 to wash his feet in and poured it full of water,
 first the cold, then the hot. And then Odysseus suddenly
 pushed his seat back and turned to face the dark:
 for he had begun to worry, lest in handling him she should
attend to his scar and his whole enterprise be revealed.
 She approached and began to wash her master, when suddenly
 she *knew*

the scar that once a boar's white tusk had torn . . .
 Running her hands over this scar, the old woman
knew it from the feel, and she let his foot slip so that
 his leg fell into the basin, making the bronze clang,
 the basin totter, and water slosh onto the floor.
 Now joy and pain possessed her mind. Her eyes
 filled with tears, and the voice grew thick in her throat
 as she touched Odysseus' chin and spoke to him thus:
 “Yes, you are Odysseus, dear child! Not even I
knew you, master, before I held you in my hands.”

In the *Iliad*, “writing,” *graphein*, the word which should have been
 absent from the *Odyssey*, makes a few appearances, and always with the
 meaning “scratch, mark, incise”: having one's skin “written on” is a
 fearsome but not immediately fatal accident.

νῦν δέ μ' ἐπιγράψας ταρσὸν ποδὸς εὔχεαι αὐτῶς.

And now you boast proudly of having scratched the heel
 of my foot!

(*Iliad* 11.388)

... Τρῶες . . . οὐδὲ δύναντο
εἴσω ἐπιγράψαι τέρενα χροά νηλεῖ χαλκῷ

The Trojans were unable to scratch his tender flesh with
their merciless bronze

(*Iliad* 13.551–53)

... γράψεν δέ οἱ ὀστέον ἄχρις
αἰχμὴ Πουλυδάμαντος· ὃ γάρ ῥ' ἔβαλε σχεδὸν ἐλθὼν.

And now the spear-point of Poulydamas grazed him to
the very bone: for he had come in close to make his
throw.

(*Iliad* 17.599–600)

The battle with the Suitors at the end of the *Odyssey* emulates these Iliadic passages:

Κτήσιππος δ' Εὐμαίων ὑπὲρ σάκος ἔγχεϊ μακρῷ
ᾧ μιν ἐπέγραψεν·

Ktêsippos then grazed Eumaios' shoulder above the
shield with his long spear:

(*Odyssey* 22.279–80)³

Odysseus' scar is, to take the evidence of the *Iliad* literally, an *epigraphê*, a scratch, a mark, a letter, and Eurykleia who discovers it and recalls the occasion of its inscription is its reader. That “complete externalization of all the elements of the story and of their interconnections [so] as to leave nothing in obscurity” remarked on by Erich Auerbach (1953.4) has here the point of verifying Eurykleia's reading. Unlike an illiterate observer, someone who might notice the scar but draw no conclusions from it, she is able to recognize the letter for what it is (μὴ . . . ἀμφοράσσαιτο, ἔγνω, γνῶ, ἔγνω), and its bearer—the physical support of

3 Cited after T. W. Allen's OCT edition. Further references to the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* in the Monro and Allen edition will simply indicate title, book, and line numbers. On *graphein* as bodily “incision,” see further Svenbro 1988.106–07.

this writing—for what he is and was, thus completing the cycle of verbal correspondences between this recognition scene and scenes of reading.⁴ The reading of Eurykleia's recognition as a kind of reading receives more detailed confirmation from yet another *Iliad* passage which turns on the use of something very like writing to determine who will face Hektor in single combat (7.175–76, 183–89).

‘Ὡς ἔφαθ’, οἳ δὲ κλῆρον ἐσημήναντο ἕκαστος,
 ἐν δ’ ἔβαλον κυνέη Ἀγαμέμνονος Ἀτρεΐδαο
 . . . κῆρυξ δὲ φέρων ἄν’ ὅμιλον ἀπάντη
 δεῖξ’ ἐνδέξια πᾶσιν ἀριστήεσσιν Ἀχαιῶν.
 οἳ δ’ οὐ γινώσκοντες ἀπηνήναντο ἕκαστος.
 ἀλλ’ ὅτε δὴ τὸν ἵκανε φέρων ἄν’ ὅμιλον ἀπάντη
 ὅς μιν ἐπιγράψας κυνέη βάλε, φαίδιμος Αἴας,
 ἦτοι ὑπέσχεθε χεῖρ’, ὁ δ’ ἄρ’ ἔμβαλεν ἄγχι παραστάς,
 γνῶ δὲ κλήρου σῆμα ἰδὼν, γήθησε δὲ θυμῷ.

Thus spoke Nestor, and each of the heroes made his sign on a
 pebble,
 and they threw the lots into the helmet of Agamemnon son of
 Atreus.
 . . . Now the herald carried the winning lot up and down the
 throng,

4 The Greek words translatable as “to read” are inventoried and richly commented upon in Svenbro 1988. The prefix *ana-* (“up,” “again,” “back,” “re-”) is a striking common feature of many of these words, even when formed from distinct roots. *Gignôskô*, a word repeated several times in the *Odyssey*’s recognition-scene, combines with *ana-* to form *anagignôskô*, etymologically “to know again.” (Aristotle’s *anagnôrisis* or “recognition” is simply the verbal noun formed from *anagignôskô*; but see Murnaghan 1987.15 on the differences between tragic and Odyssean recognitions.) *Phrazô*, the verb component of *amphrassaito* (from *anaphrazô*) in line 19.391, receives a commentary centered on its relation to reading and attention-giving in Svenbro 1988.21–23. As if to gloss the double prepositional sense of *ana-*, Svenbro’s reconstruction of archaic Greek reading practices puts the reader’s voice at the service of a prior and higher writing to which it restores and submits its sound. For general discussions, see Svenbro 1988.44, 125–30, 178–79; for *anagignôskein* and derivatives, 9, 22, 30, 53, 61, 71, 182–84, 189, 200, 213, 217; for *nemein*, 8, 36, 178; for *ananemein*, 60–61, 73–74, 210, 235; for *aponemein*, 25; for *epinemein*, 125; for *legein*, 20, 50, 61–62, 66–73, 115–16, 123, 196, 206, 224; for *analegesthai*, 44, 178; for *epilegesthai*, 72–73, 183, 223. See Nagy 1990.171–72 for a complementary discussion. On “knowing” and “recognizing” in Greek epic generally, see Nagy 1989.202–22. On steles, cairns, and similar markers in epic, see Lynn-George 1988.253–71, Ford 1992.138–68, and Goldhill 1988.

displaying it from left to right to all the best of the Achaeans.
 Not *recognizing* it, each one denied it.
 But when, bearing it up and down the crowd, the herald reached
 the one who, having inscribed it, threw it into the helmet, bright
 Aias,
 Aias held out his hand and the herald, standing near, dropped
 the lot into it,
 and Aias seeing the lot's sign *knew* it, and rejoiced in his heart.

The correspondences between the two scenes are partly verbal, mostly narrative: both present a sequence of inscription, distancing, seeing, and recognizing, and both involve “writing” in a special sense that will have to be argued for. Beyond this, however, the parallel is pointedly deceptive, as Iliadic references in the *Odyssey* often are. Aias shouts out his recognition of the pebble and calls for his weapons, but for Eurykleia such reading out loud is not yet permissible—Odysseus catches at her throat before she can make her new knowledge public. Most uncharacteristically for the first few centuries of a literate Greece, he compels her to a silent, private study of the inscribed sign.⁵

Even if there is only one letter—Eurykleia's letter—in the *Odyssey*, it engages Rousseau's prophecy. *Engages*, but does not quite confirm. For this much-scrutinized mark is the proof that the shipment known as Odysseus has indeed arrived at his destination.⁶ Far from “reducing the whole *Odyssey* to smoke,” it brings the *Odyssey* to its end; it completes the circle. The scar episode is of a piece (so to speak, while the rhetoric of being-of-a-piece is one of its effects) with that other riddle answered correctly by the wanderer: the tree not to be split or moved, the figure for the connectedness of past and present and of husband and wife, namely the tree out of which Odysseus' and Penelope's bed is built.⁷ Far from

5 On this vexed question, see Knox 1968.421–35 and Svenbro 1988.181–88, 197–202.

6 On “arriving at one's destination” as a critical issue in Derridean reading, see Derrida 1980.517: “une lettre n'arrive *pas toujours* à destination et, dès lors que cela appartient à sa structure, on peut dire qu'elle n'y arrive jamais vraiment, que quand elle arrive, son pouvoir-ne-pas-arriver la tourmente d'une dérive interne.” By “letter,” then, it seems that Rousseau meant that kind of letter which *always* arrives at its destination—a purely notional kind of letter.

7 *Odyssey* 23.177–204. On this passage, see Peradotto 1990.157–60, Bergren 1995. Odysseus calls the bed's immobility a *mega sêma* (188). Compare *Iliad* 2.308, another *mega sêma* (the portent of the snake and the sparrows).

endangering identity (and the whole identitarian story of the *Odyssey* or of the career of meaning), the written scar authenticates it. The *Odyssey* does not exclude the letter; indeed it is nothing but the story of a letter. Why then did Rousseau so stubbornly misread it?

But slowly now: is it not an exaggeration to give the name of writing, with all that that implies, to Odysseus' identifying scar? When Homer's antique commentators found the word *graphein* in the *Iliad*, they did everything to steer readers away from such premature conclusions: "although [*Iliad* 6.168–69, the story of Bellerophon] seems to speak of the use of letters for speech, one should not take the passage in this sense: but rather 'writing' here is the same as carving [ξέσαι]." Similarly, when in *Iliad* 7 the heroes cast lots to see who will have the honor of a duel with Hektor, what is "marked" or "inscribed" (as the text says: ἐσημήναντο, ἐπιγράφας) is according to the same scholiasts not a word or a name but rather a "sign," *sêmeion*.⁸ Homer knew "carving" or "scratching" but not "writing." Between the two senses of *graphein* lies an important conceptual barrier. For by "writing in the proper sense" the annotators meant "recitable letters," τῆς λέξεως γράμματα (Jeffery 1967.161), letters that belong to speech. By taking a strict bond to speech to be the defining feature of writing, Homer's scholiasts position themselves and Homer on the very path traced by later historians of writing such as Ignace Gelb—a path leading from "identifying-mnemonic" marks through "primitive semasiography" to "logography" and finally to "full" writing, the writing of the sounds of words.⁹

"Not recognizing it, each denied it." From the unpromising beginnings of two negations—Rousseau's, denying that writing could have anything to do with his Homer, and the scholiasts', solicitous to maintain the difference between the *graphein* of the Homeric heroes and their own writing—we shall now try to work out the links between Homer's poetry and the art of writing. Does Homer write? In what sense of "writing"? Of course, all scholars know what writing is, and many of us accept the thesis that the composition of the Homeric poems took place without writing, in the usual sense of the word. But the scholiasts' distinction between

8 Scholia from Codex Venetus A, in Erbse 1969–83: 2.160, 260–62, discussed in Wolf 1985.97–102, Jeffery 1967.161–62. The gloss on *graphein* already appears in Dionysius Thrax *On Grammar* 1.1.9.

9 Gelb 1963.11–15, 34–36, 190–201. On evolutionary histories of writing, see Derrida 1967, esp. pp. 12–14, 109–42.

“writing” and “scratching” is uneasy for some of the very reasons that make it so appealing to our historically consolidated common sense.

The distinction between writing and the “forerunners of writing” assumes a conceptual universe of which achieved writing already forms a part. The statement that Homer’s *graphein* prefigures true writing announces itself as a piece of external criticism, one that defines our relation to Homer through the developmental history of writing. But what if we could not yet be sure of the outcome of the story? Might there not be more than one history of writing? More particularly: if we wish to avoid reading the history of writing as a history that leads *up to us*, what definitions and histories, what potential outcomes for writing are to be read *from* or *within* the present of the Homeric poems?

2. ORALITY, OR HOW TO WRITE “WITHOUT STOPPING”

If I venture to recommend an immanent reading of “writing” in the Homeric poems, it is with a great debt to the counterweight or counterpart to writing provided by Milman Parry’s suggestion that Homeric poetry was first composed and transmitted orally. But even Parry’s insights into oral composition invoke a constant contrast with writing, and a definition of writing as the notation of spoken sound: if we experiment with the distinctive features of writing, we will have to adjust our understanding of some of Parry’s theses accordingly.

Parry nowhere defines “writing” or “speech,” and the task would doubtless have seemed to him otiose. But in presenting the case for an oral tradition he alludes to certain qualities of writing that establish for him the difference between oral and literate modes of composition. Rousseau saw in orality a guarantee of spatial immediacy, a system of communication which required speaker and hearer to look each other in the eye; Parry transfers this immediacy to the dimension of time. Homer could have composed in a carefully calculated individual style, says Parry, only if “writing materials gave him time to pause” (M. Parry 1971.322), and the fact that word choice in epic style is so regular and predictable indicates the contrary (1971.317, 324).

Writing . . . alone allows the poet to leave his unfinished idea in the safe keeping of the paper which lies before him, while with whole unhurried mind he seeks along the ranges of his thought for the new group of words which

his idea calls for. Without writing, the poet can make his verses only if he has a formulaic diction which will give him his phrases all made . . . Unlike the poets who wrote, [Homer] can put into verse only those ideas which are to be found in the phrases which are on his tongue.

A contrastive definition of writing and orality is implicit in this theoretical picture of “the Singer, who without stopping must follow the stream of formulas” (318–19). The oral poet’s horizon is strictly limited to the present, it provides no facilities for “safe keeping.” One might imagine the mind of this oral poet as a point moving through space on a unidirectional line, and that of the literate poet as a point roving to and fro on a plane—a vast plane of paper, perhaps. Writing is a device for storing side by side moments that would otherwise exist only in succession.

The elements of this picture of writing are, of course, both quite traditional and rooted in experience. I will permit myself an extended commentary on this passage, because it seems to provide the common ground on which advocates and detractors of Parry’s theory of oral composition stand; and moreover it seems to me to be based on a mistake. Orality is here seen as the lack of writing, and the vocabulary used to talk about it is privative: one dimension instead of two, a narrow present rather than a cumulative one. But a closer inspection of Parry’s observations of oral composition will weaken, rather than strengthen, the distinctions made here in principle between the linear time of speech and the planar time of writing. For Parry sees orality as compensating for its temporal boundedness through the use of “formulae,” set expressions and expressions modeled on them. An adequately complex oral tradition is an archive of linguistic resources together with the skill of unpacking and combining the stored materials as they are needed. Only in appearance does all of this happen in a narrow here-and-now. What Parry calls “formulaic diction” differs from manual-visual writing only in the means it uses for the same ends. Formulaic diction is oral writing, so to speak. From now on I shall be assuming this definition of orality and linking it to Parry’s name.

Once the difference between writing and orality is reduced to one of means (or media), the temporal mode of oral “writing” comes more plainly into view. Oral poetry does its work not only in the narrow present of the traveling point or the stream of speech, but also in the synchronic time of grammar—and here again it is Parry who best makes the counter-traditional case. When we examine a word or phrase or episode of Homeric

poetry, we must see it as existing in two dimensions: both as a component of its context in the ongoing poem, and as a member of a synchronic archive, series, or “paradigm” (the memory-archive somewhat crudely represented by Parry’s tables of formulaic parallels, for example 1971.110–11). A table in which every phrase of one meaning-class has a distinct metrical value exhibits “economy”: a phrase justifies its existence by being a specialized means to certain specific compositional ends. As Parry put it, “The fixed epithet did not so much adorn a single line or even a single poem, as it did the entirety of heroic song.”¹⁰ And that “entirety” exceeds by far the scope of any momentary spoken “stream.” The recurrent formula is a token of a type—an instance, not a particular. Its mode of recurrence—the same grouping of words arising every time a similar set of metrical and semantic conditions are met—indicates that the present tense of oral composition presupposes a long training in the right cues, rules, problems, and solutions. The utterance in series (however singular and striking it may be) has to be seen as the realization of an utterance-type stocked away in mnemonic space. Parry’s great contribution to Homeric studies was to begin mapping that space.

Parry found some cartographical guidance in Ferdinand de Saussure’s depiction of the complementary realms of “*langue*” and “*parole*” (Saussure 1972.37–38) and in Marcel Jousse’s analysis of the psychology of rhythm. Parry’s debt to Jousse is considerable, although rarely discussed: before he began collecting songs in Yugoslavia, Parry derived virtually all his information about oral traditions from Jousse’s *Le style oral*. Jousse’s studies of oral instruction and memory suggested general laws of “verbo-motor” behavior, “a pedagogy deeply and universally in keeping with the laws of the human organism” (Jousse 1925.19). Among these were a reliance on repetition, for emphasis and inculcation; a tendency for repeated utterances to fall into rhythmic form, underscored by alliteration, antithesis, parallelism, and similar devices; and finally an interdependence between the oral style and the trained speaker such that the organizing forces of the style were apt to take command of any content whatsoever and “rhythm” it. Needing to internalize the huge repertoires of traditional, unwritten knowledge, speakers broke them down into cadence

10 M. Parry 1971.137; see also 268–69 and compare Meillet 1923.61. For the converse of Parry’s observation, see Martin 1989.196: “To read Achilles’ speech properly, we are obliged to reread every scene in the *Iliad* in which any phrase of that speech appears.”

and formula for the same reasons that would drive a crew of oarsmen to adopt a common rhythm.

Space does not permit a full discussion of the parallels between Parry and Saussure. Here I will merely advance that Parry's outline of orality amounts to a call for the reconstruction of a grammar for the special art-language of Homeric poetry. Where Jousse had revealed to Parry the dynamics of verbo-motor pedagogy, Saussure enabled him to postulate laws of structure that would make Homeric verse composition a dialect analogous—but not of course identical—to the prose dialects of its time. A traditional sticking-point in the study of epic had always been its seemingly thoughtless use of epithets—villains described as “blameless” and the like. The grammar of the art-language shows these seeming anomalies to be regular and rational. Ranks of redundant synonyms differentiate themselves according to metrical function, awkward epithets gain an architectural purpose. Where Homer had seemingly failed to make sense, Parry showed him as displaying unequaled order (see M. Parry 1971.118–31, Kahane 1994). As a result, the oddities of expression that had caused critics to speak of Homer's language as something unique, difficult, and irregular—in short: as a style—prove to be not whimsical but overdetermined. So, indeed, between Parry's first and second articles in English the phrase “Homeric style” is replaced by “the Homeric language” (M. Parry 1971.266, 325).

Scholars indebted to Parry have industriously set to bringing larger and more complex phenomena into the ambit of a learnable, common epic “language”: we now have preliminary “grammars” of type-scenes, narrative functions, characters, and so forth. (For summaries of this line of research, see Martin 1989; Edwards 1986, 1988, 1992.) A great deal remains to be done before the relatively firm results of work on phrases and epithets can be achieved in work on themes and episodes, but in this section I am concerned with working out the implications of the theory and will therefore occasionally speak as if these results were already to hand.

If we are to take the word “language” at face value—and I think we must—then it is an open question whether Parry's analysis can still be lodged within the category of literary criticism. Its object is not singular but generic; it takes texts not as messages but as corpora. A grammar operates with classes of similar things and constructs utterances that are comparable as realizations of the same (hypothetical) rules; the individual utterance has for it only the status of an example. The focus is not on the isolated line or episode but on “the entirety of heroic song.” That is simply the way

grammars operate: a grammar that did no more than list the sentences of its language would probably not be a grammar, nor its object a language (since “having a grammar” is the core requirement for “being a language”). What Parry called “the epic technique of oral verse-making” writes the poem, not singly but generically, by constructing it as an example of a grammatical rule. The *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* are misleading names for what is really a statistical frequency: the likelihood that a poem on a certain subject, by a competent singer with the right ambitions, will replicate the poem we know. Those for whom the *Iliad* means Allen’s Oxford Classical Text, or some better ancestor, are not in the business of constructing grammars.

Parry’s elaboration of the model of epic “language” emerges from a tension with the received model of a “style,” and the history of the oral-poetic theory since Parry suggests that the tension has endured.¹¹ Is a “style” necessarily a product of literate cultures, as the etymology of the word would suggest? Simply as a point of method, to draw attention to whatever in a text is a fact of language is to neutralize that set of markers that literary reading knows as the components of “style.” A style may be unique—certainly the use of the word coupled with an individual’s name tends to suggest as much in modern literary discussions¹²—but a language should have more than one speaker. To construct a grammar is, indeed, to say what qualifies a person as the second speaker of a language. And the extension of the grammatical model does not stop with units of text, however large and many-layered they may be. At the far end of this project one may discern a Turing-like goal of mechanical simulation. The object of research such as Parry’s is not to come to know the poet better, but to construct a grammatical robot that might duplicate him, generating all the possible sequences of correct epic speech and none but those sequences. If that could be done—if the poet could be redefined as a competence, not as an author—it would be no small irony to note that it all began from the apparent *singularities* of Homer’s language.

11 One line of argument opposed to Parry’s theories seeks out phrases that do not repeat, or that appear uniquely suited to the specific contexts in which they occur. For an extended example, see Shive 1987.

12 Cf. Littré 1873. 4. 2052: “Style. . . 4°. Par métonymie de l’instrument employé pour écrire à l’écriture elle-même, le langage considéré relativement à ce qu’il a de caractéristique ou de particulier pour la syntaxe et même pour le vocabulaire, dans ce qu’une personne dit, et surtout dans ce qu’elle écrit.” Of the examples given, however, many bespeak the older understanding of “style” as generic appropriateness. For another (and, I think, over-hasty) judgment on Parry and “style,” see Lynn-George 1988.55–81; for a combative defense of Homer’s use of words as “style,” not “language,” see Shive 1987.

3. WRITING AND MEMORY: THE INSCRIPTION OF THE POET

The theory of orality that emerges from a systematic consideration of Parry's work is one founded on the temporal category of repetition, not (as Parry's express theory would have it) of spontaneity. Without repetitions, no rules can be formed; and the rules, once formed, ensure the possibility of repetition—that is, the transmission of bardic technique from speaker to speaker. (Grammatical “synchrony” is just a way of describing the persistence of the possibility of repetition.) All the devices of oral poetics are designed to raise the odds that two performances of a certain story will strike hearers in the tradition as repetitions of the same poem. But the sameness at which oral writing aims is a functional equivalence, not identity. In fact one of the distinguishing features of manual writing may well be its ability to suggest new criteria for the identity of linguistic artifacts.

Or so one is led to believe by the turn of argument in which two of Parry's best-known inheritors, Albert Lord and Adam Parry, revert to the necessity of writing. Homer may well have composed the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* with all the techniques of a long-traditional formulaic language; Lord and Adam Parry did much to make this account of Homer's art convincing. But while oral tradition is a workable explanation for the genesis of the poems, it only causes Lord to worry about its effect on their transmission. As Lord knew from his own experience of song collecting, songs change shape from performance to performance and from singer to singer. So “fluid” and “multiform” an entity can perhaps be said to recur only as “the general idea of the story . . . which actually includes all singings of it” (Lord 1960.100). A “general idea” is convenient for classification, but a poor guarantee of strict resemblance among its successive “singings.” This fact led Lord to suggest an ideal bargain between the strengths of oral and literate tradition: Homer, the last and best oral poet, would have dictated his songs to a literate disciple (Lord 1953, 1960.128–32). Adam Parry, writing under the title “Have We Homer's *Iliad*?,” expressed a similar fear that oral transmission would “imply changes that would destroy the exact texture *and therewith the essence* of our poem” (emphasis mine). The best solution for a problem phrased thus was to have the *Iliad* “put into writing at the time of its composition” (A. Parry 1966.201, 216). The identity of the song, and thus that of Homer, depends on the unreliable oral text being caught and preserved in all its individuality, through writing, as early as possible.

Does the oral-traditional theory then apply to the tradition, but not to Homer? Lord and Adam Parry are not alone in making this suggestion. Recently Keith Stanley has proposed that we see in the *Iliad* two authorial hands, that of “the founder,” who perfects an oral tradition, and that of “the expositor,” who subjects oral materials to “recreative, inventive, and ironic use” (Stanley 1993.279, 293). But our reading of Parry’s method suggests that such distinctions derive primarily from a choice of object. The theory of orality treats the individual epic performance as incidental, a priority which Lord and Adam Parry, like most readers of the two great epics, find hard to accept.¹³ Milman Parry’s Homer is a *réalisateur*, not a creator: he stands at the boundary of our epic texts and all the other possible epic texts, some fraction of which were actually composed. But writing redefines the poem and consequently the poet: no longer the *delimiteur* of a corpus of poetry within the universe of possible poems, the poet is the fashioner of this particular rendition of a theme, singularized by script in all its functional and non-functional detail. Writing isolates *parole* from *langue*, what is individual from what is social, the original from the derivative, the poet from the rhapsode, this *Iliad* from all the more or less likely *Iliads*. And from the point of view that writing makes possible, it is when writing is not available to Homer that his epics find themselves in the position Socrates attributes to writing *per se* in Plato’s dialogue on writing and memory, the *Phaedrus*—namely the sad condition of “drifting all over the place, getting into the hands not only of those who understand them, but equally of those who have no business with them; . . . and when they are ill-treated and unfairly abused they always need their parent to come to their aid, being unable to defend or help themselves.”¹⁴ When the writing down and preservation, word for word, of a particular performance by a particular person replaces oral “writing” and its criteria of functional sameness, one may begin to formulate the theories of authorship and style that alone can

13 There are indications that performers put the ability to sing above the songs that are sung. The Albanian singer Mirash Ndou, invited to dictate a series of narratives for preservation by folklorists, “was, of course, proud of his honorable visit to Tirana, but there is nothing to indicate that he felt that on this occasion he had made specially important versions of his songs, much less that he would try to repeat these special versions afterwards” (Skafte Jensen 1980.85).

14 Plato *Phaedrus* 275e 1–5 (Hackforth’s translation, somewhat adapted). For a discussion of social changes in the reception of poetry brought about by the use of writing, including changes in the status of authors, see Nagy 1990.433–37.

support the reading of the epic texts *as Homer's*. And when that is the issue, then of course nothing but manual writing can do the job.

One might see a historical inevitability in this transfer of authority, given that Homer served so long as proving ground for the theory of alphabetic authorship. "Who will believe that the *Iliad* of Homer, that perfect poem, was never composed by an effort of the great poet's genius, but that, the characters of the alphabet having been confusedly scattered, a stroke of pure chance, like a throw of the dice, brought them together in the necessary order so that they might describe in verses full of harmony and variety so many great events?"¹⁵ Without Homer, no order. On the other hand, if reading uncovers faults and contradictions in "infinite number" (d'Aubignac 1925.144), this stands as "irrefutable proof of multiple authorship" (Page 1959.300). The grammatical style of reading, while determinedly unliterary, cuts across these lines of implication. Not only do some of the contradictions bespeak a more inclusive form of order, but the order that such reading uncovers is not of the kind that would be attributable to an individual author (M. Parry 1971.314). A grammatical vision of order challenges the literate theory of authorship more vigorously than any Analytic splitting of the poem among conflicting personalities could. The Analytics attacked Homer the individual. When a linguistics of epic utterance treats Homer as functionally identical to the latest model of the robot named Homer, it makes as if to dissolve the category of individuality underlying Homer and every other author.

Long before Parry speculated on the traces of oral composition, it was commonly admitted that "the poems of Homer" had undergone several generations of mnemonic transmission before being put down in writing. But the scholars who investigated the question, reasoning from analogy to a manuscript tradition, saw in memory only a dangerously unstable medium for the repeated transcription of a complex verbal artifact. One finds memory designated as culprit in Wolf, for example: if "works which are so large [as the two surviving epics] and drawn out in an unbroken sequence could neither have been conceived mentally nor worked out by any poet without an artificial aid for the memory," namely writing, then it is not surprising that the mnemonic transmission of Homeric poetry that

15 Fénelon 1713.9 (chapter title: "Belles comparaisons qui prouvent que la nature montre l'existence de son auteur"). The argument had some success: Rousseau uses it in the *Profession de foi du Vicaire savoyard*, and Bérard 1917 reprints it as the opening salvo in his attack on Wolf.

undoubtedly took place would garble long texts or create incoherencies when shorter memorized texts were artificially fused together (Wolf 1985.114, 137–58). Bowra, while accepting some of Parry's hypotheses about oral composition, found it "most unlikely" and "difficult to imagine" that "before the poems were committed to writing, they were learned by heart and passed from bard to bard by memory" (1962.45). To resolve this difficulty, Bowra proposed that "it is not actual poems which are transmitted, but their substance and their technique," "substance" being roughly equivalent to theme and "technique" to such devices as formulaic systems and type-scenes.¹⁶ This certainly frees Homer to do what he will, but it frees the rhapsodes and the pseudo-Homers too, and once again leads us to see memory as an irresponsible means of transmission. Oral memory seems no more capable of fixing the *ipsissima verba* than were, despite their deceptive likeness to writing, the "scratches" Homer's heroes made on pebbles. But is the only criterion of successful transmission that of "recitable letters," τῆς λέξεως γράμματα? What, failing a precedent-setting written copy, makes it possible to recognize two distinct performances as being variants of the same poem? Are all poems about the homecoming of Odysseus, couched in the expected epic language, equally the *Odyssey*? Or is only one poem—the *Odyssey*-poem we know—an adequate exemplar? These are questions we have raised already, but answered only by pointing to different kinds of models; now it is time to instantiate a model or two. Before discussing the oral transmission of ancient epics, it might be good to know what we mean by "transmission" and under what conditions a long poem might be deemed transmissible, if the term is to mean something more than the circulation of loosely connected "substances" and "techniques."

With formulaic phrases, the grounds of identity in repetition were more easily established. Everyone can see what stays the same between two "Thus spoke . . . to . . ." half-verses, and can understand why the rest of the line must be filled in differently from situation to situation. Arming scenes, assemblies, greetings, and combat scenes, just to name a few, have been analyzed into their constant and free elements (Arend 1933, Fenik 1968, Reece 1993). The fact that these can be tabulated, and exceptional cases

16 Bowra 1952.368. Compare M. Parry 1971.461. Lord's account of the poem in transmission as a range of "elaborations" around a constant "plan of themes" is similar: see Lord 1960.92, 99–103, 119–20, 138.

described as “the prototype, minus this and plus that,” suggests that performers in the tradition learned such scenes algorithmically, one model covering a number of uses. “The finished singer will boast that he knows ‘how to saddle a horse,’ or ‘dress a hero,’ or ‘plan a battle’ . . . Questioned further, he will explain that bad singers leave this out and leave that out, but a good singer knows how to put it back in, even though he has never heard that particular song” (M. Parry 1971.406, emphasis mine). What recurs so many times in our corpus must have appeared just as frequently in the tradition as a whole. The roster of typically occurring elements of a typical scene, once one has isolated these, must resemble the “how” or the art of that sort of scene, transmitted from singer to singer by example. The programmed “writing” of oral epic amounts to a typology or typography of recurrent events, the last and best of which is the whole song. Stretches of text may be memorized, but their retention is a point of method, part of the singer’s resources. “Dressing a hero” is a skill, something one learns how to do. And so, perhaps, is the *Iliad*.

But the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* only occur once apiece in our documents, and in reconstructing their transmissible core or necessary markers of identity we cannot avoid speculating. Bowra’s division of the poems into separately masterable realms of “substance” and “technique” does not answer the question posed by oral transmission, because it does not try for a tighter fit between its two elements. Contrast the typical battle-scene or greeting-speech, where substance is overwhelmingly a function of technique, and you have the reason why the more typical scenes are so consistent from poem to poem (and presumably from poet to poet). A formula retains its place in the repertoire because epic cannot be sung well without it. Technique is not gratuitous in a traditional art: that is the point of Parry’s supposed law of “economy” among formulae. Substance and technique should imply one another. Their relation is not that of a form and a decorative surface, but the rather more intimate one between a task and its solution.¹⁷ The better the solution, the more likely it is that it will stick tightly to the task and be invoked whenever a similar problem arises.

17 The idea that the techniques of traditional poetry are bound to the performing of tasks receives a nice confirmation *a contrario* in the first version of the “White Bagre” song collected by Jack Goody. The Bagre is normally chanted in the course of a series of rites extending over several days. Each part of the ancient story as chanted corresponds to a stage of the ritual being accomplished in the present. But as he recited alone into a tape recorder Benima Dagarti, Goody’s informant, lost track of the order of episodes. He

What tasks do our present texts of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* fill? It may seem an inversion of priorities to say so, but one task they certainly would have to address is that of their own retention and transmission. In order to be recalled and repeated, they must be made memorable. And with this, certain of the poems' aesthetic qualities may be shown to be pragmatic ones.

Aristotle has been seen to waver on the question of whether the vast scale of epic poetry is a virtue or a drawback (Halliwell 1987.169–70, 183). “Beauty is a matter of size and arrangement” (*Poetics* 1450b 36), so presumably the bigger poem, if proportionately well-arranged, is better. Variety, too, should give epic the advantage of “magnificence” (μεγαλοπρέπεια). But no: “tragedy is superior in that it accomplishes the end of mimesis [just as well] at not so great a length” (1461a 18). After summarizing the *Odyssey*'s return-plot in forty-five words, the critic adds: “This much is what truly belongs [ἴδιον] [to the poem]; the rest is episodes” (1455b 17–23). Aristotle's preference for tragedy recalls his reasons for considering metaphor superior to simile: the meaning may be identical, but the simile is slower at delivering it and thus affords a diluted pleasure.¹⁸ Aristotle even suggests an improved form of epic which would be complete in the time it took to perform the typical tragic trilogy (1459b 22: εἰς μίαν ἀκρόασιν). Why would anyone want to shorten an epic? Because “one must be able to see the beginning and the end of the composition together,” and an epic recital spread out over several days frustrates this wish. “Seeing . . . together” (συνορᾶσθαι) in *Poetics* 1459b 19 abbreviates and literalizes—as does a metaphor—the simile first proposed in *Poetics* 1450b 36:

For beauty is a matter of size and arrangement, which is why no extremely small animal is beautiful (for the observation of it, approaching an imperceptible instant of time, would become confused), nor is an extremely large one beautiful—let us say an animal several thousand

cleverly transferred his own confusion to the hero of the tale, who is asked by the internal audience: “How is it / that you first / carried on / without finding out / and now you turn back again / to get to this point?” (Goody 1972.130). The whole poem is the song *and* what it does. Do something different with it, and the poem is no longer the same.

18 *Rhetoric* 1410b 16. The watchword is “vividness,” ἐνάργεια, prominent in those chapters of the *Poetics* which advance tragedy's superiority over epic.

miles long (for in that case observation will not happen all at once [ᾅμα], but rather the animal's oneness and wholeness will elude the sight of the observers). And so, just as [beautiful] bodies and animals must have the sort of size that is easily taken in at a glance [εὐσύνοπτον], so [beautiful] plots must have the sort of length that is easily remembered [εὐμνημόνευτον].¹⁹

Wolf, oddly, thought that the use of εὐσύνοπτον indicated that Aristotle read, instead of hearing, his Homer (1985.115); but that is to confuse vehicle and tenor. One uses the sense of sight to perceive animals; to perceive plots one uses the appropriate sense, which is memory. Thus the hearer of an epic poem is to some small extent a collaborator in the epic singer's work. Whatever properties of the poem enable the hearer to perceive it in memory as a beautiful creature will also enable the apprentice singer to retain and repeat it. (The usual idea of a "story" is perhaps confusing, since stories can be told in so many different ways; a better analogy for the process might be found in the learning of pieces of music, where the identification of structure is central.) The very features of the Homeric poems that Aristotle found most praiseworthy (their organization, their unity, their narrative selectivity)²⁰ are precisely those which strengthen the chances of an oral poem's integral transmissibility.

Memory depends on understanding, and understanding is algorithmic. Or rather, whatever in a text to be learned resists comprehension is apt to be reshaped or replaced by something that does not, as an early experiment recounted in F. C. Bartlett's *Remembering* suggests. Bartlett gave his Cambridge volunteers an American Indian tale, the understanding of which required a great deal of contextual, mythical, and natural knowledge (not supplied). After reading it a few times, they were to write down the story as they recalled it a few days, weeks, or months later. The

19 On the strategic role played by ᾅμα ("together," "all at once") in Aristotle's *Physics* 4, see Derrida 1972.64–66.

20 Homer is Aristotle's example of the poet who chooses to imitate a single action rather than to fasten on to some delusive marker of identity such as a name (Herakles and Theseus were individuals, but their careers make untidy plots). And again, as Homer's example teaches us, "the parts of the action [of a tragedy] should be combined in such a way that, if any part is shifted from its place or taken away, the whole is changed and moved about: for anything that makes no obvious difference by its being there or not is no particle of the whole" (*Poetics* 1451a 19–24, 30–35; 1459a 30–37).

rewritten versions, Bartlett found, showed “a strong tendency to rationalize” anything “odd or incomprehensible” in the original by “omitting or explaining” it, or else by “linking [parts of the story] together and so rendering them apparently coherent, or linking given detail with other detail not actually present in the original.” Although often thorough-going and sometimes highly ingenious, this editing was carried out “apparently unwillingly, the subject transforming his original without knowing what he was doing.” In a second series of experiments Bartlett had one subject read a similar story and rewrite it from memory; this version was given to a second subject who did the same, and so on until the text had been through ten or twenty successive rewritings. The chain of transmission seemed to Bartlett to creep by stages towards a “general simplification” of the story, due to “omission of material that appears irrelevant,” “construction . . . of a more coherent whole,” and attempts at “changing . . . the unfamiliar into some more familiar counterpart.” Bartlett also remarked a “tendency for certain incidents to become dominant, so that all the others are grouped around them.”²¹

If the skill of composing *Iliads* and *Odysseys* relies on similar devices of memory, it is a harder censor of uneconomical plots than even the Abbé d’Aubignac could dream of being. Singer B interprets and recomposes the *Odyssey* as sung by singer A; singer C does the same for singer B; and whatever remains of A’s version in the *Odyssey* sung by N or Z is a credit to A’s ability to give the material a memorable form, as well as to the skills employed by B, C, and so on, who recognized it. The oral epic must be well enough organized to make its mark on the hearer’s memory, and if it is not already, the hearer will make it so. A hearer’s true loyalty, after all, is not to the prior text (which has already disappeared) but to the next one already in the making. If the skill of singing a particular epic does not determine every word of the version one actually sings every time, but sets out a rule, then it seems that the best rules and the best skills, which are

21 Bartlett 1932.64, 138 (a similar point, perhaps inspired by Plato’s *Meno*, is made in Aristotle *On Memory* 452a 1–3, again using the word εὐμνημόνευτα). For the story texts used by Bartlett (originally two retellings by the same informant!) see Boas 1901.182–86. Conclusions comparable to Bartlett’s were reached in the realm of language learning by Saussure’s student Henri Frei, who showed that grammatical errors are almost always more regular and predictable than the correct forms they replace (Frei 1929). The parallel case in semantics is folk etymology, briefly discussed by Saussure (1972.238–41). Kintsch 1974 updates Bartlett’s discoveries. An encouraging effort at charting the cognitive landscape of Homeric narrative is Minchin 1992.

also the most memorable ones, will come closest to being self-perpetuating. And those are what is “transmitted,” if the word still applies.

When he reduced the *Odyssey* to its essentials, Aristotle showed what a gap separated his and the last bard’s ideas of what was memorable: “all the rest is episodes.” Whoever wants to make a mental model of the *Odyssey* will have to work harder. The summary found in the *Poetics* leaves out all the episodes, of course—the tales told at Alkinoos’ court figure there as ἔτη πολλά, “many years,” which is hardly the most vivid way of putting things—and gives the otherwise uninformed reader no idea of the shape of the poem, despite the fact that it seems that the solution to the technical difficulties of remembering lies in finding the appropriate shape. Aristotle’s nearly exclusive interest in narrative causality shows him to be more interested in learning *from* works of art than in *learning* works of art: his criterion of “necessary or probable” organization is one that can be borrowed directly from daily experience, and does not need to be learned specially by the tragic spectator.²² If you have told of the offense done to Chryses, then Chryses’ prayer to Apollo follows as a matter of course, and the prayer is answered with the coming of plague to the Greek camp. Describe Achilles’ quarrel with Agamemnon, and you will have to tell of Achilles’ retreat into his tent, which brings on the desperation of the Greek army, to which the Embassy is an attempted remedy, and so on. To recite an epic is to obey a chain of imperatives. But art goes beyond nature, and Homeric epic is full of artificially regular occurrences. Type-scenes should once again be the prime exhibit, but other characteristics of Homeric narrative show even more clearly the unusual forms of causality used by epic art to imprint necessity on an otherwise underdetermined story-matter: doublets, “anticipatory echoes,” parallels, the framing style of ring composition.²³ Odysseus’ night-long telling of his adventures at sea in *Odyssey*

22 See *Poetics* 1448b 17, where the place of the artwork in relation to the natural world is fixed by the learning that takes place through *mimêsis*: “Therefore those who look at pictures are pleased, because they can learn and make deductions about everything as they observe, [saying] for example that this is so-and-so.” In *On Memory* 450b 15 – 451a 3, the portrait analogy is again pressed into service to distinguish memories (which represent something, and are entertained in relation to that something) from fantasies (which are contemplated in their own right). In this perspective, it is no wonder that the memory of an artwork should be such an attenuated thing.

23 On doublets and echoes, see Edwards 1988.50–53; on parallel “motif sequences,” Nagler 1974.112–30; on the various styles of ring composition, Stanley 1993.6–9. All these techniques can be seen as “means for organizing sequence into coexistent patterns of emphasis, parallel, and contrast” (Stanley 1993.9); the present analysis adds to these functions one more, that of making sequences memorable.

books 9–12 must have struck Homer’s listeners as an astonishing feat of memory, precisely because these “episodes,” each one marvelously improbable and most of them only tenuously linked to the ones that have gone before, would not be so easily recalled in order as the events of, say, *Iliad* 1.²⁴ And yet they too reduce to a manageable set of elements, shepherded along by a few leading events too important to forget or transpose.²⁵ The Aristotle of *On Memory* puts the matter well: where there are many alternative tracks for memory to follow, “it will run on the more habitual path: for habit is now as nature . . . Repetition makes [habit into] nature” (*On Memory* 452a 26). Repetition has its own forms of “necessity and probability.” The features of an episodic plot depend, for their survival, on their “band of associated forms,” as Saussure put it, those with which they share some repeated feature.²⁶ Every event in epic is situated, that is to say more or less deeply inscribed, at the crossing of a series of related events and a set of similar events. The whole group of determinants bearing with greater or lesser force on each element is the support on which a remembered epic is “written.”

The medium of oral epic is not indifferent: because of the extraordinary tasks it is called to perform, it will not take just any message. Even the wrong messages it does accept shed light on the structure of the well-formed message. The flaws of construction so often ascribed to Homer’s incompetent imitators may be explained as evidence that the singer’s memory must have been pulled in more than one direction by

24 Of all the possible plot-types, “the worst is the episodic. I call ‘episodic’ a story in which the order of events is neither necessary nor probable” (Aristotle *Poetics* 1451b 33). But: “A catalogue with its compact mass of fact is the most admired piece of a singer’s repertoire, the part that is most demanding of memory and control of the material. It is a *tour de force*, and the audience react to it as such” (Skafte Jensen 1980.73–74; under discussion are the catalogues in *Odyssey* 11 and *Iliad* 2).

25 A “geometric structure” is proposed for these books in Whitman 1958.288; causal and thematic ones in Frame 1978.35–51, Heubeck and Hoekstra 1989.8–11, and Most 1989. On Athena’s role, see the full treatment in Clay 1983.

26 The phrase derives from Saussure’s all too little consulted chapter on the history of languages. How does a word maintain its identity throughout centuries of linguistic change? By counting on its relations: “*Agunt* est encadré dans un système; il est solidaire de formes telles que *dicunt*, *legunt*, etc., et d’autres telles que *agimus*, *agitis*, etc. Sans cet entourage il avait beaucoup de chances d’être remplacé par une forme composée de nouveaux éléments. Ce qui a été transmis, ce n’est pas *agunt*, mais *ag-unt*; la forme ne change pas, parce que *ag-* et *-unt* étaient régulièrement vérifiés dans d’autres séries, et c’est ce cortège de formes associées qui a préservé *agunt* le long de la route” (1972.236).

incompatible parallel passages in the same poems, or in other poems: proof that the epics suffer, not from too little logic, but from too much of it in too many competing kinds.²⁷ There is thus room, not only for a narrative grammar of epic poetry, but for a grammar of epic mistakes too. But an obvious mistake is unstable. Every recitation of the *Odyssey* is also an interpretation of the last *Odyssey*, and just as interpretations strive for coherence, so too will the recitations based on remembered interpretations. At some future recital, either the mistakes will have been corrected, or they will have rearranged the rest of the text so that they no longer look like mistakes.²⁸

The line of thought set in motion by Milman Parry transfers responsibility for the Homeric epics from the single poet to his traditional language. It has done so bit by bit, starting with the formula's easily demonstrated functionality and (at this writing) tapering off somewhere between the type-scene and the theme. Although the phrase "composition in performance" first appears in Lord's *Singer of Tales*, it is implicit in all of Parry's writings on orality. To take up again a line of thought examined earlier: "Since [the oral poet] is composing by word of mouth, he must go on without stopping from one phrase to the next. Since his poetry has being only in the course of his singing, and is not fixed on paper where it can show itself to him verse by verse, he never thinks of it critically phrase by phrase, but only faces the problem of its style when he is actually under the stress of singing" (M. Parry 1971.331). Memory, in this account, merely supplies a store of prefabricated units that can be linked together to form the song—a division of labor in keeping with a poetic Principle of Least Effort. For the purposes of explaining why early Greek epic is conspicuous, rather, for its massive expenditure of artistic resources, the composer must be brought in again as the master of works; and since the preservation of monumental epics seems an unlikely task for the kind of memory envisioned

27 Inconsistencies and parallel passages were used by the older Analysts, and principally Kirchhoff, as proofs that the order of the original *Nostos of Odysseus* had been violated by an incompetent imitator. For the theory of competing "pulls," see Lord 1960.94, 159–85. Lord sees the mutual influence of story patterns as a cause of "fluidity" and not an effect of a drive to order (see especially the pointed comments on 168).

28 Thus one can accept, without necessarily sharing in its primitivist bent, Robert Wood's description of an "unlettered state of society" as one in which "the memory is loaded with nothing that is either useless or unintelligible" (1775.260). My reconstruction of the transmission process assumes a relatively consistent set of contextual pressures on the oral epic—such as the Panathenaia or another recurrent cosmopolitan festival might provide.

by oral theory, that task must, by the same logic, be entrusted to writing. But on this point Aristotle can correct Parry. Memory is not just a storehouse. Since it is linked with understanding, it exerts a critical and analytical power over the texts and models singers learn. The structure of the poem is a function of its transmissibility. One should then also learn to speak of composition in transmission, rather than composition *and* transmission or compositions *surviving* transmission. This is not to say that Homer is superfluous—no link in the chain is that—but only to suggest that his intervention may not have been needed in quite the way Homerists tend to suppose, and to invite the consideration that what is most canonically seen as beautiful in the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* may be the result of an ongoing, intersubjective, hermeneutic project.

4. THE INSCRIPTION OF ODYSSEUS

An oral epic is, as we said earlier, “written” in an unusually emphatic sense of the word, simply because it is made to be remembered and repeated. Not being able to find a means of transcription outside itself, it must perform all the tasks of writing on its own. It encounters writing not only on its surface but in all its dimensions, including that of its interpretation.

As evidence of the utter permeation of the *Odyssey* by the means of its transmission, consider the first council of the gods. There the homecoming of Odysseus—the content or, if one will, the “substance” of the *Odyssey*—is set in motion by an act of memory. Πῶς ἄν ἔπειτ’ Ὀδυσῆος ἐγὼ θείοιο λαθοίμην, says Zeus to his daughter: “How then could I ever forget godlike Odysseus?” (*Odyssey* 1.65). It is through Zeus’ remembering him that Odysseus is able to set out again for home, returning, for all anyone on Ithaka knows, from the dead, and becoming an object of that special form of remembering called recognition. The whole poem is not only begun but contained by anticipation in this one mental act.

Zeus’ thoughts are, however, not of random and unrelated details. Rather, the hero he names is a singular and memorable “Odysseus, who surpasses all mortals in intelligence and by his giving of sacrifices to the immortals who possess wide heaven.” When Zeus remembers, he remembers why he remembers; that is, he thinks back to a past act which is the reason for his present memory of Odysseus. His acknowledgment of those thousands of slaughtered cattle may sound undignified or mercenary (particularly when ἔπειτα is taken as having a restricting force: “how

indeed, considering that . . .”), but it shows the god’s mind as one uncluttered by “anything that is useless or unintelligible.”

Yet memory does more than join causes and effects. It also fashions parallels. When Athena reminds Zeus of Odysseus, she does so by “pulling” his train of thought from the story of Orestes’ return and revenge, which Zeus has just remembered (29) and retold, to Odysseus’ current predicament. “Mortals blame all their troubles on us gods,” says Zeus, “when they should recognize how much they bring on themselves by their own folly: take for example that Aegisthus whom we warned, via Hermes, not to woo Clytemnestra or kill Agamemnon. Now he has paid for his hard-headedness in full” (32–43). Athena quickly expresses the sentiment as a law—“That man lies now in fitting ruin, and may just such an end await whoever does such things!”—and moves to a different story, one which might fall under the same category if only the assimilating powers of memory were allowed to “pull” it a little farther. “But my thoughts are always revolving around brilliant Odysseus, the ill-fated, who has suffered so long the pains of separation from his friends . . .” (45–62). The connectives and pronouns of her first statement (ὥς, ὅτις, τοιαῦτά γε) expand the offices of memory, to make it more than the depository of information. The beneficiary of a generous deed (in this case, Zeus) may be expected to remember it, and the person robbed of his birthright (Orestes) will certainly do everything possible to reclaim it: that hardly needs explaining. But Athena’s purpose is to prompt her father into a memory of the future, to make him concede that the relations of gods and men should take the form of settled laws. A narrative agenda inspires this move toward generality: she wants to inspire Zeus to construct the rule by which to perform the Homecoming of Odysseus.

But it is as if there are two conflicting versions of this heroic plot. “How then could I ever forget godlike Odysseus?” says Zeus, and then accounts for his seeming forgetfulness: “But Poseidon the earth-shaker is still incessantly furious about the Cyclops Polyphemus, his son, whose eye Odysseus put out: for that reason and from that day [ἐκ τοῦ] Poseidon will not kill him, but merely causes him to wander far from his home” (68–75). Zeus’ memory collides with Poseidon’s, who cannot forget godlike Odysseus either. And Poseidon’s memory is just as sound as that of Zeus, an anger “firm” and “permanent” (ἀσκελὲς, αἰὲν). Like the revenge of Orestes on Aegisthus, Poseidon’s revenge is proportional to the offense. The economic metaphor of “paying,” τίσις (40; ἀπέτισε, 43) requires a fair exchange between wrong and wrong. Odysseus only having blinded the Cyclops,

Poseidon “is not killing him in the least” (οὐ τι κατακτείνει), but only preventing him from seeing his homeland. Since the blinding is permanent, so too apparently will be Odysseus’ exile.

What will become of a man who is remembered in such incompatible ways? Zeus’ solution to the conflict gains most of its force from its being expressed in the third person: “Let Poseidon put aside [μεθήσει] his rage” (77). Poseidon has already, in fact, put it away, by having gone away himself to a feast of the Ethiopians. Poseidon in the poem is a simple sort, rather like the oral poet as Herder and Wood imagined him: when he departs, his memory goes with him, and he does not leave anything behind him to go on remembering in his stead. So the decision in Odysseus’ favor, and the memory of Zeus which inspires it, can triumph in the absence of opposition.

That obstacle removed, Athena proposes practical steps to be taken and supplies the information on which the first four and last twelve books of the poem will run: as Odysseus weeps his life away on Kalypso’s island, his house is occupied by a band of Suitors who are consuming all his possessions under the pretext of wooing his wife (88–92). Thus Odysseus is located at the intersection of two revenge-plots, in one of which he is the wrongdoer and in the other the wronged. Athena has clearly had the Suitors in mind from her general statement in line 47 on, but she knows that the gods will not mount an expedition just to punish the Suitors; that Odysseus will have to do for himself, given the chance.

So far Athena’s command of the traditional art and materials is without flaw. There is a regularity to the doings of gods and men mentioned in the first hundred lines of the *Odyssey*, a pattern which both explains and categorizes. The stockpile of case studies can easily be led toward a rule, with a blank at its end which Athena is eager to fill in the right way:

- I.1 *a* Narrator: “Odysseus’ crewmen ate Helios’ oxen, out of *folly* [ἄτασθαλίησιν];
 b Helios destroyed them” (7–9)
- 2 *a* Zeus: “Mortals commit acts of *folly* [ἄτασθαλίησιν]
 b and so they suffer *unduly* [ὑπὲρ μέρον]; just as
- 3 *a* Aegisthus killed Agamemnon, *unduly* [ὑπὲρ μέρον],
 took his wife,
 b and was killed by Agamemnon’s son” (32–43)
- 4 *a* Athena: “May anyone who does such things
 b perish” (47)

- 5 *a* Zeus: “Odysseus often remembered the immortals;
 b how could I forget Odysseus?”
- 6 *a* But Odysseus blinded Polyphemus;
 b Poseidon, without killing him, delays his return”
 (64–75)
- 7 *a* Athena: “Suitors now woo Odysseus’ wife and eat his
 cattle” (88–92)
 b ?

Action *a*, in each of the examples, is followed by action *b*, which repeats *a* but reverses *a*’s relation of agent and recipient. (As you have done to me, so I will do to you.) Thus when Zeus remembers Odysseus’ rich sacrifices, he too is filling out a pattern: many heroes have given the gods cattle, but by calling to mind Odysseus’ past actions Zeus is able to motivate his memory, to insert it in the moral series that is being formed. Zeus’ remembering Odysseus is in some way a return for prior services, a form of justice.

Justice does not simply happen to take the form of remembering: at some level they are practically identical. Like memory, justice explains events by recording them. Of course, no justice, in the each-man-his-own-avenger framework of Homeric *dikê*, could happen or be recognized as justice if memory were not involved: in providing the link between Odysseus’ acts of piety and Zeus’ protection, or between any act and its recompense, memory makes sense of an otherwise unstructured (and thus unmemorable) welter of events. But beyond this, memory is the crucial ingredient distinguishing justified violence—revenge—from unjustified violence, or offense. The *b* actions in our table repeat the *a* actions, but with a difference, that of being *answers* to the earlier actions. Revenge is violence with a value, the mimesis of a prior (but unjustified) action, made to the measure (μῶρος) of the earlier wrong which it repeats and cancels. Thus memory inscribes a purpose on violence, regulating its form and its direction.

The series of actions thus set up is intrinsically mnemonic—requiring, as it does, the participation of memory in order to happen—and exhibits the very traits of “oral style” that give epic its memorable form: repetition of “formulae,” parallelism within and among sequences (similarity of the punishment to the crime; the analogy among all members of the crime-and-punishment series), and automatism (or, as the narrative law would have it, the inevitability of punishment once the moral world has

been knocked out of balance by an offense).²⁹ Being wronged forms the memory of the sufferer, who then finds himself, as it were, the performer of an epic narrative laid out in advance in its main “*clichés*” and “*engrenages*” (Jousse 1925.113, 197). And that is how all performances in the “oral style” take place, according to Jousse. Through repetition and rhythm, the teacher (bard, rabbi, prophet, or tribal historian) “plants, by persuasion or by force, his propositional Balancings into all the young muscles [of the pupil] . . . The first rhythmic Schema was a rhythmic-didactic Schema.” The pupil, properly taught, is like a wound-up clock whose movements can be precipitated (*déclenchés*) by the slightest invocation of the learned schemata. The schemata are memorable because they are rhythmic, that is, they incorporate the very “automatism” of the movements that they transfer to the learner. That automatism takes various forms: parallelism, synonymy, antinomy, rhyme, alliteration; or to use the most general term offered by Jousse, it is a series of “calls” (*appels*). The “law of automatic concatenation” thus provides a “memory-rule . . . used, like a systematic pagination, by the Composers and Improvisators of the oral style to keep in order and cohesion the numberless pages of the living books psycho-physiologically installed in their ‘human composites’ and most particularly in their wonderful laryngo-buccal motor mechanisms” (Jousse 1925.107, 114, 119, 218, 226).³⁰

The plot of the *Odyssey*—expressed, so far, as the rule toward which Athena wishes to lead the other gods—is then best described as a rhythm: a pattern of recurrences and expectations.³¹ Unlike a story, a rhythm does not contain its own ending, but rather demands the endless repetition of whatever periodic ends and wholes it constructs. (The question marks of our tables represent the *appels*, the calls, of the ongoing pattern.)

29 “Repetition,” “parallelism,” and “automatism” are the three great principles underlying the verbo-motor style according to Jousse: see Jousse 1925.20–22, 95–107, 107–18, 221. For an overview, see Sienaert 1990.

30 Jousse 1925.201–04. Russo 1966.229 makes intriguing suggestions about the acoustic and syntactic “influence” of epic verses on their contextual neighbors. Parry kept rhyme out of his thinking about oral epic, partly because his research was led by the example of Homer and partly because he thought rhyme made free improvisation difficult or impossible (1971.442). Kahane 1992 suggests many correspondences between the verbal rhythms (including syntactic “calls” such as anaphora) and plot rhythms of epic poetry.

31 On expectation as a necessary constitutive part of rhythm, see Abraham 1985.79, 85. Largely thanks to Jousse and his teacher Rousselot, “rhythm” has been a leading term in French aesthetics of this century. See Meschonnic 1982.

So thoroughly automatic is the mnemonic law of revenge that Athena will have to intervene personally to stop it, in book 24. (There she proposes, as antidote, communal oaths [ὄρκια, 24.546] that will function only so long as they are remembered.) Within this rhythm are discernible sub-rhythms: first a focalizing rhythm that sets up a nearly automatic mutual implication between “being away” and “being wronged”:

- II.1 *a* While Agamemnon was at Troy,
 b Aegisthus seduced his wife and planned to kill him;
 2 *a* Poseidon is now in Ethiopia;
 b the gods decide to help his enemy;
 3 *a* Odysseus is away from home;
 b the Suitors plan to marry his wife and kill his son.

But:

- 4 *a* When Orestes returned from exile,
 b he killed Aegisthus
 5 *a* Odysseus will surely return to Ithaka (how and when?)
 b ?

Departure and return, offense and revenge are pairs of linked antitheses. To be away means that one is a probable target of offense; to obtain revenge, then, one must be present. Departure is to offense as return is to revenge—the first term a precondition, very nearly an equivalent, of the second. But not all victims of wrongdoing are able to return, as witness Agamemnon. The plot of revenge permits individuals to act for others, granting the righter of wrongs a rhythmic identity with the original victim: so Orestes returns, and so too Telemachus, before beginning to undo the harm done to the departed person.³² (As an *exchange*, rhythm cannot demand the repetition of the same thing, only of a substitutable thing.) Here too are symmetries and implied conclusions:

32 The *Telemachy* has long been a target of Analytic attack as unnecessary and too obviously epigonal to the more prestigious Orestes and Odysseus stories (see for example Kirchhoff 1879.167–68, 238–74). Even Odysseus questions its necessity at 13.417–19.

- III.1 *a* Aegisthus killed a father,
 b was killed by the son
- 2 *a* Odysseus has harmed a son,
 b is harmed by the father
- 3 *a* Suitors plan to depose a father and a son
 b ?

But the clash of memories noted by Zeus remains, and must be dealt with. It is “written,” so to speak, that Odysseus, as the person wronged by the Suitors, should return home and exact his revenge; but it is also written that Poseidon must keep him from returning home as the price of that necessary blunder, Polyphemus’ blinding.³³ To accomplish either of these automatic story-patterns is to frustrate the other. Thus Odysseus’ relation to memory (and to its writing of stories) must be expressed as a problem. It is not enough for him to be remembered: he must be remembered by the right people (Zeus, Athena) and forgotten by the right people (Poseidon). Insofar as his prior deeds wrote him into Poseidon’s memory, he must now get himself unwritten, that is, pass unnoticed. If the logic of the story-patterns set up in the *Odyssey*’s first hundred lines is one of clear and interlinked antitheses (presence, absence; doing, suffering), the story of Odysseus is one long series of exceptions, deriving first of all from his anomalous double position as offender and offended. His career will be set against the antithetical rhythms of the return and revenge plot, forming a recognizable counter-rhythm of its own: the disguise plot, which allows an actor to be both near at hand and far away, visible to his friends and invisible to his enemies.³⁴

Book 11 neatly joins the *Odyssey*’s two plots, combining the solution of one story and the problem of the next. Almost immediately after Tiresias prescribes to him the only suitable means of appeasing Poseidon’s anger (11.126–37)—an adequate “payment” for his crime which does not require his perpetual exile—Agamemnon appears to lend Odysseus a bit of

33 Odysseus’ double character as wronger and wronged is a central motif of Nagy 1979 and Clay 1983.

34 On disguise, see Murnaghan 1987, especially pp. 11–19. Odysseus’ stratagems are presaged by Demodokos’ song of Ares and Aphrodite (8.266–366) in which the jealous husband Hephaistos, by rigging up a net over his bed, is able to leave (thus seeming to invite an offense) but remain functionally present, through the device which represents him.

his own story, linking, through a mention of Poseidon, the plots of Odysseus as scapegoat and of Odysseus as avenger (11.405–09, 441–43).

Διογενὲς Λαερτιάδη, πολυμήχαν' Ὀδυσσεῦ,
οὔτ' ἐμέ γ' ἐν νήεσσι Ποσειδάων ἐδάμασσεν
ὄρσας ἀργαλέων ἀνέμων ἀμέγαρτον αὐτμήν,
οὔτε μ' ἀνάρσιοι ἄνδρες ἐδηλήσαντ' ἐπὶ χέρσου,
ἀλλὰ μοι Αἴγισθος τεύξας θάνατόν τε μόρον τε . . .
τῷ νῦν μή ποτε καὶ σὺ γυναικί περ ἥπιος εἶναι
μηδ' οἱ μῦθον ἅπαντα πιφραυσκέμεν, ὅν κ' ἐὺ εἰδῆς,
ἀλλὰ τὸ μὲν φάσθαι, τὸ δὲ καὶ κεκρυμμένον εἶναι.

Divinely-born son of Laertes, much-devising Odysseus,
it was not Poseidon who subdued me among the islands
when he roused a furious blast of cruel winds,
nor did hostile men do me mischief on dry land,
but Aegisthus who planned my death and fate . . .
So now I say to you: do not be over-gentle to your wife,
do not tell her the whole story that you know,
but say part, and keep the other part hidden.

It is by withholding his own recognition that Odysseus manages to put some slight distance between himself and the place inscribed for him in the memories of his friends and foes. Where the logic of the *Odyssey*'s avowed theodicy is public, obvious, and self-explanatory, the means whereby Odysseus will accomplish *one* of the plot outlines established for him and suppress the other involves the kind of private calculation of which writing, according to Plato, is fundamentally incapable: “knowing how to address the right people, and not address the wrong ones” (*Phaedrus* 275e 2–3).

So when Eurykleia runs her hands over the scar on Odysseus' thigh, reading it and recognizing him, Odysseus' first concern is to silence her, “lest she become aware of his scar and his plans be made public,” μή ἐ λαβοῦσα οὐλήν ἀμφράσσαιτο καὶ ἀμφαδὰ ἔργα γένοιτο (19.390–91).³⁵ To be read is to be recognized and remembered, and to be remembered is to

35 For the sense of ἀμφαδής as “public,” “done in broad daylight,” “openly,” or even “done as if to sue for social recognition,” and its links to the topic of marriage, see *Odyssey* 1.296, 5.120, 6.288, 11.120.

become the object of a plot—the Suitors’ plot, for example, tending towards Offense, or Poseidon’s, sternly maintaining Revenge. Eurykleia’s reading must be controlled for Odysseus to remain master of his own plot, just as the Phaeacians’ curiosity about the stranger in their midst cannot be gratified until Odysseus is sure of their friendship. The bath scene echoes another moment of Odysseus’ travels in which his survival depends on the withholding of information about himself, the scene in which the blinded Cyclops, patting his sheep one after another, fails to recognize the Achaeans clinging to their bellies (9.437–60). And no reader can forget Odysseus’ own use, in 20.18–21, of the Cyclops episode as a parallel to his current need to endure indignities without revealing himself.

The name for the kind of visibility that Odysseus must avoid is *sêma*. A “sign” addresses everybody indifferently, just like writing. A sign is a record for the future (Elpenor asks Odysseus to “build a sign . . . to inform those who will come later,” σῆμά . . . χεῖται . . . καὶ ἐσσομένοισι πυθέσθαι, 11.75–76). And *sêmata* bring definite knowledge, as the description of pieces of clothing confirms the grain of truth in the stories told by a vagrant who claims to have seen Odysseus (19.252), for example, or as a servant girl’s complaining monologue brings the reassurance that some of Odysseus’ household are still loyal to him (20.113). Teiresias advises Odysseus to wait for a “sure and certain sign” (the absurd question asked about his oar by a passerby) that he has come among people ignorant of the sea before making his expiatory offerings to Poseidon (σῆμα δέ τοι ἐρέω μάλ’ ἀριφραδές, οὐδέ σε λήσει, 11.126). The sign most inimical to Odysseus, the funeral cairn that Telemachus speaks of dedicating to his father, memorializes the certainty that Odysseus is dead (1.293, 2.224). Most of all, of course, the *sêma* is the sign proving that this man is Odysseus (the scar, 21.219, 23.75, 24.329, 346; the immovable bed, 23.112, 190, 204, 208, 227). Such signs make up a truly fantastic writing—singular, permanent, and self-evident. Nothing could be more unlike that potential for functional repetition that assures the ongoing inscription of an oral epic.³⁶

36 Does the uncovering of a theme of writing in the *Odyssey* prove that Homer must have been a writer? Not necessarily: the marvelous properties of this writing are just those that would have struck a person whose culture was oral. The *Odyssey* is far from the skepticism of Plato’s supposed Seventh Letter: “Hence no man of mind [νοῦς] will ever be so bold as to put into [treatises] the things he has thought [νενοημένα], or above all to give them an unchangeable form—which must be the case with what is expressed in written symbols” (343a 1, tr. L. A. Post, altered; compare *Cratylus* 440c 3–5).

Odysseus' fate is linked to the sign—antagonistically at first. From the nadir indicated by his proposed funeral monument in books 1 and 2 to the sign that he “fashions” as the vehicle of his orders to his subordinates just before locking the Suitors in his hall (σῆμα τετύχθω, 21.231), an arc is drawn in the course of which Odysseus gradually becomes the master of *sēmata*—the very signs whose disclosure he most fears in Eurykleia's footbath.³⁷ There, it will be recalled, Odysseus is exposed as a singular and irreplaceable body through the scratch, the “inscription,” on his thigh. As he gradually organizes his forces and sizes up the situation, Odysseus has every reason to steer clear of a recognizing, that is, a reading, eye. A public declaration of his identity, if it came too early, would only destroy him. Safety lies in postponing or covering up the sign. And to do this, he takes the disguise of orality.

Odysseus in beggar's guise has been recognized as a type of the oral poet.³⁸ Not only do his storytelling talents earn Eumaios' praise (14.387, 508; 17.385), but his yarns bear among themselves the kinds of family resemblance that one would expect from composition in a formulaic tradition, influenced by context and audience. ἵσκε ψεύδεα πολλὰ λέγων ἐτύμοισιν ὁμοῖα (“skillfully he told many lies that were just like the truth”), says the narrator of Odysseus' tales to Penelope, no doubt citing a motto of the whole bardic clan.³⁹ The oral story is a φήμη or φῆμις (cognate with the personal name of the singer attached to Odysseus' house, Phēmios), a rumor, nothing more, and so put by Eumaios in the same category as lies and bewitching words. If Phēmios can say he is both *autodidaktos* and divinely inspired (22.347–48), he means to disavow two distinct properties for his songs, properties which no one would attribute to a mere *phêêmê*: factual accuracy (the domain of *sēmata*) and personal intention. If a *sêma* records a certainty, a *phêêmê* only induces skepticism. It is because the *phêêmê*, a tale told without proof and in light of immediate interests, does not count for much that it gives Odysseus the best possible cover, the perfect cloak of rags in which to envelop his *sêma*. On Ithaka,

37 On *sêma* and command in books 21–23, see Nagler 1974.108–09, Peradotto 1990.157–60.

38 Fenik 1974.167–71, Skafte Jensen 1980.51–53, Murnaghan 1987.148–75, Nagy 1990. 56–57. See especially Pucci's discussion of the thematics and generic implications of beggarly poetry as a poetry of the *gastêr* or belly, liable to veer unpredictably between praise and blame (1987.157–95, 228–35).

39 *Odyssey* 19. 203, paralleled by Hesiod *Theogony* 27: ἵδμεν ψεύδεα πολλὰ λέγειν ἐτύμοισιν ὁμοῖα.

though perhaps not on Olympus, the point of oral tale-telling is to delay the recognition of an already accomplished writing.

The multiplication of loosely convergent stories is only a means to an end, however: Odysseus' increasing mastery of the situation prepares for the moment of the sure and certain sign, the moment at which the generative writing of the Similar will give way to the finite writing of the Same. The model for this process is found in book 8, another context in which Odysseus, as the guest of the intermittently hospitable and contentious Phaeacians, has carefully withheld his name. Challenged to compete in stone-throwing, Odysseus reluctantly agrees (8.190–92).

βόμβησεν δὲ λίθος· κατὰ δ' ἔπτηξαν ποτὶ γαίῃ
Φαίηκες δολιχήρετμοι, ναυσίκλυτοι ἄνδρες,
λαὸς ὑπὸ ῥιπῆς· ὁ δ' ὑπέρπτατο σήματα πάντων

Off went the stone with a hum, and flat on the ground
crouched the long-oared Phaeacians, ship-famed men,
under the soaring of that stone, as it flew far beyond all
the other markers (*sēmata*).

Athena, acting as umpire, marks the point and shouts to Odysseus (8.195–97):

καί κ' ἀλαός τοι, ξεῖνε, διακρίνειε τὸ σῆμα
ἀμφοφόων, ἐπεὶ οὐ τι μεμιγμένον ἐστὶν ὁμίλῳ,
ἀλλὰ πολὺ πρῶτον.

Even the blind, stranger, could *judge of this sign in its difference
from the rest*
by feeling alone, since it is not at all mixed with the crowd,
but by far the leading shot.

The episode rehearses, in compact form, the main events of Odysseus' triumphant homecoming: the victory in shooting, the "marking" of the nameless stranger by an exceptional deed, and the blind recognition of a *sēma* by touch (ἀμφοφόων; cf. 19.475). Reading in the style of the *sēma* is the goal of the *Odyssey*: the temporary suppression of writing, of the permanent marks whereby Odysseus is set "far from the crowd," οὐ τι μεμιγμένον . . . ὁμίλῳ, is only a defensive strategy.

When Odysseus finally declares himself to the Suitors—just before slaughtering them all—he throws off his rags (γυμνώθη ῥακέων, 22.1), casting off the disguise of the beggar and the techniques of oral *phêma* at the same time. It is time for truth-telling now (cf. Murnaghan 1987.11, 169). Does his scar show? If it does, it accuses the Suitors of being poor readers and worse rememberers. (“Rememberer” is a functional name for a proper suitor, a man who “takes thought for” a bride or “is mindful of” her father.)⁴⁰ They are inadequate oral poets, in sum, whether we judge them by their sense of recurrent justice or their ability to recognize *sêmata*. Now they are obsolete, and the sign on Odysseus’ thigh may be read and recognized publicly. So farewell to oral composition: thanks to writing, that singular and conclusive scratch, Odysseus can win once and for all. Writing completes the circle of what Aristotle called, in one place, memory, and in another, pleasure.⁴¹

And it is just such reasons that make Homer’s readers wish to make him a master of the written object. If the epics are indeed *sêmata* and not *phêmai* of the master-composer’s activity, every reading of the *Odyssey* can repeat the triumphant return it narrates: the double *nostos* of Homer and Odysseus. But the repetition of that return requires writing, and the demand for writing implies the rejection of oral writing as imperfect, inauthentic repetition. An adequate grammatology of the epic tradition would have to comprehend that dynamic of repetition and identity-formation, not just perform it.

In a recent book, Pietro Pucci frames the *Odyssey* as a meta-logical struggle between the sure recognition of identity and “the disguising, drifting power of the sign,” “the drifting movement of writing” (1987.123, 149). To such analyses one would only want to add a marker of their heteroglossic standing, for they take as conclusive what Homer admits as a temporary indignity and they associate writing with that “drifting” which, in the *Odyssey*’s plot, writing comes to supersede. The history of writing has been recounted from within writing; even the rebels against

40 On the etymology of *mnêstêr* (“suitor”), see Svenbro 1988.107. The *Odyssey* records another connection between a bad suitor and a professional “rememberer.” Agamemnon left his wife under the supervision of his trusted bard. When Aegisthus first approached Clytemnestra, it was to “enchant her with [poetic?] words,” θέλγεσκεν ἔπεσσιν. After having the bard transported to a barren island, he then took the place of the man assigned to keep queen and city mindful of the absent king (3.254–75).

41 Aristotle *Rhetoric* 1.11 (1369b 33 – 1371a 30).

writing rebel against writing's definition of writing. Why else would Rousseau read the *Odyssey* as the very symbol of the exclusion of writing? The deeper irony is that in arguing against writing and for orality Rousseau thought he was arguing for spontaneous, subjective expression; but orality proves to be anything but mere spontaneity, and the subjectivity Rousseau had in mind may well be conceivable only as an outgrowth of the models of personality and authorship made possible by literacy.

University of California, Los Angeles

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