

REVIEW ARTICLE/DISCUSSION

"THE STEM OF THE FULL-BLOWN FLOWER": HOMERIC STUDIES AND LITERARY THEORY

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As for flowers, I've given them up. They wither away so quickly.

Cézanne, in conversation with Joachim Gasquet

IT WAS SOME TWO HUNDRED YEARS AGO NOW that the "hermit of Königsberg" had the temerity to declare:

Our age is, in especial degree, the age of criticism, and to criticism everything must submit. Religion . . . and law-giving . . . may seek to exempt themselves from it. But they then awaken just suspicion, and cannot claim the sincere respect which reason accords only to that which has been able to sustain the test of free and open examination.¹

Our "age of criticism" is not a recent, nor an entirely newly conceived, phenomenon. The *Iliad* itself opens with the reverberations of such a necessary challenge to socially instituted authority—and clearly highlights the risk and the cost. Not even Calchas will speak what he knows until he is guaranteed the assurance of Achilles' protection in the public arena. But what of "literary criticism," its attendant risks, and our new age of "intrusive" theorists? Again, it might be noted that the *Iliad* begins with the entry of an outsider and his abrupt dismissal. Ironically, Plato analysed this very scene in preparation for his later exclusion of Homeric poetry itself. That exclusion invoked the argument (most unjustly) that the epics provide us with no "Homeric way of life." And yet the Homeric ethic was always one of generous reception for the outsider.

The *Iliad* begins with the outsider already within; and so it is with that activity we call "literary criticism." In introducing his commentary on the last books of the *Iliad* (Cambridge 1993), N. J. Richardson endorses Griffin's choice of the poet of the *Odyssey* as "the first of literary critics": "the *Odyssey* forms the first commentary on—and criticism of—the *Iliad*"

The works under consideration are Andrew Ford, *Homer: The Poetry of the Past* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press. 1992. Pp. xii, 225); John Peradotto, *Man in the Middle Voice: Name and Narration in the Odyssey* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, Martin Classical Lectures. 1990. Pp. xv, 193); and Scott Richardson, *The Homeric Narrator* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press. 1990. Pp. x, 279).

¹I. Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, tr. N. K. Smith (London 1963) 9.

(25). In such comments, both overlook a major work, the *Iliad* itself. The opening page of Pfeiffer's *History of Classical Scholarship* (Oxford 1968) at least reminds us that the poet of the *Iliad* "not only created but again and again 'interpreted' his own powerful language in the course of his poem" (3). We are, in "our age of criticism"—all of us—, very late arrivals upon the scene. In our contested claims for legitimacy, we seek to trace a long and complicated heritage. As philologists, commentators—even "literary critics"—, we look back. And while the retrospectively oriented Homeric epics closed by casting a receptive gaze into the distant future, there is one thing that many in our discipline are sure of: the "theorists" are those who came later, *after the event*. In seeking to say something new (but at the same time, I might add, very old), they are, by reason of that very attempt, to be excluded from what has been emphatically labelled in one of the titles under review here, "the poetry of the past." Bearing with them their *foreign* imports, they are seen to mark the unwelcome advent of "the age of criticism."

At a time when adherents of the Parry-Lord school are repudiating the very suggestion of a theoretical component in their construct of Homeric poetry, we would do well to heed the gentle reminder of another great spokesman from the age of criticism: "The highest wisdom would be to understand that every fact is already theory"; Goethe, poet and natural scientist, concludes, "hence we can say that in every attentive glance at the world we are already theorizing." Homeric poetry is above all attentive, and in ways that we have barely begun to appreciate; but of course we still have a long way to go before we have successfully wrested it from the "pre-reflective" stage of thought in which many have until now attempted to limit and confine it.

Man in the Middle Voice is an ambitious book and the product of many years of research. Here semiology is the dominant approach to some of our oldest questions. Peradotto's endeavour forms part of that vast tradition of classical scholarship which has, throughout its history, persistently pursued the possible significance of names and the question of naming. Many aspects of this fundamental social and linguistic act were imaginatively explored in ancient Greek poetry itself. Some of the most searing moments of that literature produce an intense reflection upon one of the major dilemmas of existence: the intelligibility of a world where one cannot construe with certainty what is to be assigned to necessity or design, and what is but the random play of the fleetingly arbitrary—stunning as this may be in its overwhelmingly disruptive effect upon individual lives. In reading the riddle of inevitability, Greek literature knows a world in which the mere rustle of leaves may suggest as yet undisclosed significance; a world in which one's identity and destiny may be unexpectedly released in the sudden realisation that something which is most familiar, one's name, has from a moment in

the past harboured an unknown, predetermined meaning. A name breaks into a fragmented cry of woe as the sense of life and the sum of its meaning are scattered irretrievably into the flight of birds across the sky. Names may signify, but that linguistic possibility in itself guarantees no purchase on the limits of sense. And therein resides much of the problematic with which Peradotto's book is riven, despite all his attempts to master it.

It is nothing less than a new history of our discipline and a commentary on its current state that Peradotto proposes to consider in an opening chapter entitled "*Polysemantor*: Texts, Philology, Ideology." In many respects the scene Peradotto depicts is not especially comforting. In a book concerned with naming, the author cautiously avoids names as he reminds his audience of some of the realities of power, strategies demonstrably operating within the structure of our collective activities: annually renewed institutional "excommunication," a sustained "conspiracy of silence," a determined effort at effacement on the part of what he terms a dominant "ideology," which simply denies the existence of any resistance to its own entrenched positions. Peradotto aims above all to make such things explicit, and in so far as this is designed to contribute to "open dialogue"—the possibility of shared rational discussion of, and "informed reflection" upon, our methodological (and professional) "presuppositions and assumptions"—his gesture is commendable. For the discipline, one could say that there is always the possibility of the fortunate dialectical outcome delineated by Hegel:

One party proves itself to be victorious by the fact that it breaks up into two parties . . . and consequently shows it has abolished the one-sidedness with which it formerly made its appearance At the same time, however, the opposition has been lifted into the higher . . . element So that the schism that arises in one party, and seems a misfortune, demonstrates rather its good fortune.

If this passage from *The Phenomenology of Mind* concludes without the usual acerbity with which Hegel frequently punctuates the sections of that work, it is nevertheless difficult to relate the promised outcome to the discipline without some residual suspension of belief: "Both worlds are reconciled and heaven is transplanted to the earth below."

In the very awkwardness of its title, *Man in the Middle Voice* would like to suggest, among other things, the possibility of mediation. It begins, however, by dividing its audience, and in doing so, perpetuates a deeply entrenched assumption within the discipline. Peradotto addresses a group that divides instantly and sharply into two opposed camps: we must, it seems, be either philologists or theorists. This initial demarcation tends to ignore the work of an increasing number who have sought to combine traditional philological rigour with the intellectual challenge of sophisticated theory. Moreover, as Peradotto himself argues, a decision to engage with

literary theory is no longer to be regarded as a casual option: we are already, with different degrees of awareness, involved in the exercising of certain shaping assumptions, expectations, and presuppositions in approaching literature. But as "middleman," Peradotto's position here appears somewhat defensive. In his awareness that his own theoretical position is not as developed as it might be, he apologises to literary analysts who, it is assumed, belong "outside the field." They must appreciate the deep suspicion and hostility to theory that dominates the discipline of Classics. Hence what might appear as theoretical inadequacies in his own work are to be understood as the product of an overriding need for tact and the "utmost diplomacy" when approaching traditional philologists. At the same time, this collusive sophisticated audience is distanced as Peradotto the philologist firmly reminds them of their lack of credentials when it comes to subtle and detailed examination of the Greek language.

One of Peradotto's major criticisms of classical studies is what he sees as its consistent tendency to convert everything it treats to history. As a structuralist he favours the synchronic: "the synchronic approach is logically prior to a diachronic approach because systems are more intelligible than changes" (13). As often throughout this book, broad assertions invite questions. Must a system be static, and haven't we passed beyond a simple opposition of the synchronic and diachronic? More generally, should we always privilege what we conventionally find "more intelligible"; or doesn't that claim itself map something of the circuitous route often taken in our determinations of what is to count as "logically prior"? With respect to an ordering of the world which locates change as something which (both temporally and logically) only comes after an original "closed" system, it might be asked, where and how did the forces of change enter the originally and absolutely immutable? All the might of an (admittedly longstanding) metaphysical tradition is needed to uphold this fragile, if intelligible, world.

One has only to turn the page to find Peradotto suddenly supporting an entirely different, more fluctuating reading of the world. At the same time as he deplores the consistently *historical* approach to all questions, Peradotto proceeds to argue for the need for "a radical rewriting of the history of classical philology" (24). Such a history of classical studies, "written along Foucault's line," is outlined in pages 17–25. Here Peradotto draws substantially from Sheridan's brief guide to Foucault's thought,² with predictable results. When Peradotto inserts a reference of his own—from Pfeiffer's admirable *History of Classical Scholarship* (a work from which he has explicitly distinguished his radical new history)—the chronology goes seriously astray. Where Foucault is tracing the sixteenth century (and this is more than a matter of mere dates; the distinction forms a significant

²A. Sheridan, *Michel Foucault: The Will to Truth* (London 1980).

contrast within the structure of the argument), Peradotto takes what is in Pfeiffer a summary of the *seventeenth* century and comments (ironically given the nature of the error), "We should note in passing that classical scholarship during this period largely takes the form of the collection and reproduction of past notes" (20). Peradotto reproduces from Sheridan (77) the claim that "it was Nietzsche, a classical philologist, who first explicitly associated the task of philosophy with a radical reflection on language" (Peradotto 24). Camus was in certain respects right when he observed, with regard to Nietzsche, that "we shall never finish making reparation for the injustice done to him." But reparation should not consist in assigning to him the position of being first to explore one of philosophy's oldest, and in that sense most "radical," tasks.³ One of the most recent studies of Nietzsche's early work on language simply dismisses any need for a knowledge of Greek, ancient philosophy, or classical philology, with the comment, "[Nietzsche's] theory of language originates in his modern influences and may at most have been confirmed or prefigured, here or there, in the ancients."⁴ But as classicists sensitive to both the history and material of our discipline, we should surely be able to do far better. Moreover, in a book where semiology almost subsumes philosophy as its tributary, Peradotto's version of the history of ideas does not do full justice to that quiet and enigmatic figure who also studied at Leipzig not long after Nietzsche, the philologist and linguist who introduced the term "sémiologie," and was to have such a profound effect upon the study of the language in this century: Ferdinand de Saussure.

Peradotto's book is subtitled "Name and Narration in the *Odyssey*." The possibilities of such a subject are enormously broad and diverse, but it would appear that, in effect, the relation between name and narration here functions quite simply. As with a number of critical approaches, the ultimate aim is to read the immense epic narrative—its history, tradition, complex literary and linguistic structures, the processes of its making (and so much more besides)—within the delimited frame of a single self-contained linguistic form: the name. More precisely, the proper name. There is, to be sure, a measure of disagreement among critics who pursue this objective as to what, specifically, is to function as that "proper" name. Peradotto's achievement will be to locate in the vast epic text "*the only truly 'singular proper name'*" (154; the reservation signalled by quotation marks will be abandoned in the course of the quest). The philosophical implications of

³Nor does Foucault, the original source for this statement, go quite so far; within his context it is a question of a "return" in which "first" heralds the approach of the twentieth century. (The emphasis in all the quotations which follow is mine unless otherwise stated).

⁴C. Crawford, *The Beginnings of Nietzsche's Theory of Language* (Berlin and New York 1988) 13.

this exercise are profound and daunting. Peradotto moves with swift and alarming ease through these philosophical complexities and subtleties to construct what is finally—even more than a “proper” name—something of a “super name.” This singular name is not simply “the only truly singular proper name.” It is, among other things, a strictly individual name, unique and univocal; at the same time it is a truly universal name for every narrative character, the generic name for narrative character *per se*—the only proper name for every truly singular individual. It is semantically the most “univocal” linguistic term available, a proper name that is the only *proper* name, but at the same time a *metaphor* for the whole of narrative and its fundamental generative processes. It also happens to be “no name.” It is *Outis*, “the only *proper* name for the emptiness that in reality all narrative persons share” (154). No name is all of these things. To assert as much is to deny it at the same time; upon reflection it amounts to a self-refuting proposition, and, ironically, the writer on the middle voice ignores the negative echo and self-inflicted violence of many of his assertions on the negative. In naming no one, he would contain narrative and all its many voices within his own theoretically constructed, resonant, but enclosed, cave.

Regrettably, it is not possible here to work back through and unravel systematically the fascinating philosophical labyrinth that Peradotto has managed to create for us. But perhaps one can make just a few pertinent observations. Peradotto (with a certain amount of skill, but also quite irresponsibly) exploits difficult and delicate theoretical work for the very purposes that he elsewhere disdains. To achieve with originality a most traditional critical objective—the single key to a long and complex text (in this instance epic narrative reduced to a single name)—Peradotto’s work is both unconventional and at the same time very conventional. In attempting to exploit paradox, he is, on and by virtue of his own terms, caught in innumerable contradictions. The name/no name is truly unique “for it is not, nor is it ever likely to be, shared by another”—a claim followed by the parenthetical observation, “In this respect, it is *not unlike* the names of the gods” (154). But it is, as Peradotto must realise (on the basis of the anthropological evidence cited in support of his claims), not quite so unusual.⁵ As he also unwittingly concedes in the parenthesis (and this is a crux at the base of the status of any proper name), *Outis* belongs to a *class* of such “unique” names (even as it denies its status as a name, and, as “an individual proper name,” seems to deny membership of any general class).

Throughout Peradotto’s work, *nothing* is too often *everything*. As the passing reference to the names of the gods might suggest, his work seems to offer us ultimately a form of negative theology. His originality will be

⁵On related aspects of this question, see M. Lynn-George’s review of M. I. Spariou, *God of Many Names* in *Canadian Review of Comparative Literature* 19 (1992) 435–440.

to locate the only proper name where "no one else" would think to look for it (although, it needs to be added, *Outis* has received a fair amount of attention). The negative will become the definitive, all-encompassing reading. This process necessarily and silently transforms, at the same time as it repeatedly affirms, the nature of the "negative." As Peradotto must be aware, humans have often named their god(s) precisely as "the nameless one." As indeed they also frequently name *themselves*, even if only out of shyness or suspicion before the stranger. Peradotto's argument for "No one" as the only truly unique name on the grounds that "it is not, nor is it ever likely to be, shared by another" overlooks an important feature of language and literature. His assumptions can be questioned at once simply by citing any number of examples from a literary tradition which includes Joyce's *Ulysses*, Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking-Glass*—or indeed the passage from Isak Dinesen's *Out of Africa* quoted as an epigraph to Peradotto's own book: "'Outis,' he said. 'The boys on the plain are afraid of Outis'."

One might also consider briefly the large claim that "within the poem, Odysseus-Outis-polytropos becomes a metaphor for the fundamental operations out of which narrative is generated" (155). (In that compound of possible substitutions, Odysseus-Outis-polytropos, Peradotto has already divided and dislocated the proper name.) In the possibility of substitution itself there is quite a lot to be said for "a metaphor of narrative." But such metaphors will, upon examination, multiply in much the same way as names do in the epics. While making much play upon that much turned term *polytropos*, Peradotto seeks to recuperate everything for one man. (In this process, as throughout, Peradotto elides a distinction between *many* and *any* meaning "all.") How do we arrive at a single metaphor in which we can see narrative's generative process? "This will manifest itself in a variety of concrete ways, as for example even on a purely verbal and formulaic level, by endowing Odysseus, among all male figures, with a virtual monopoly of epithets in πολυ-" (155). In this comment it is a little surprising to find that "a variety of concrete ways" in the linguistic text includes "even" the "purely verbal." But why "a virtual monopoly"? And why indeed a *monopoly* in a study which espouses and pursues *polytropy*? And why only "among all male figures" ("all" and yet only "male")? Once more there is a considerable reduction of all the epic work in language, particularly that specifically epic exploration of the resonances and significance of πολυ-, even where the epic knows and yet so often refrains from παν-. And "all" because for this mode of criticism, "polytropy" must ultimately be the monopoly, the exclusive property, of the unique individual. "Among all male figures," since *Man in the Middle Voice* chooses as its centre a viewpoint that ignores an epic universe of places, animals, objects, relations, women, language, the visual, and, resoundingly, the sea—to name at random only some aspects of the epic's far-reaching composite of compounds

in *poly-*. One is left with the question, aren't the restrictions by which this critic strives to establish singularity essentially another version of a familiar work of criticism, and its claims for "potentiality" another version of "adaptability," such as we find, e.g., in W. B. Stanford's *The Ulysses Theme: A Study in the Adaptability of a Traditional Hero*² (New York 1963), a book never referred to throughout? In that work Stanford (247) attempts to establish epithets "confined to Odysseus *alone and not shared* with any other hero": "A remarkable feature is his virtual monopoly of epithets in *poly-* among male Homeric figures." To be fair, Peradotto refers, as does Stanford, to the latter's study of 1950, which should be read, if only to see how the *poly-* epithets are restricted to "named persons" (which excludes, e.g., anyone who has no name), unknown persons ("singly or collectively"), places, and abstractions; Stanford concludes: "Odysseus shares this versatility *almost exclusively* with divinities, foreigners, women, and members of his own household, so far as *named persons* are concerned" (108)—with all that that includes and excludes. In short, it seems that there are almost no limits to which the critic will not go in order to set limits on what he would like to belong "properly" to one person alone.

The problems presented by Peradotto's book magnify many of these questions raised by the name. These problems concern the most general issues of current literary theory, and on these issues Peradotto has some major pronouncements to make. In this relation I should say how much I regret that I was unable to attend the paper on "Methodological Rigor" to which he refers in his book, since it would appear, from its title, that it addressed some of these significant concerns. In a recent address that is publicly available, however, Peradotto repeats what he sees as the value of his approach as it operates within the book. Semiotics is said to make ideology explicit, specifically by unmasking the process of language in which what is merely arbitrary and accidental is made to seem natural and necessary.

Entitled "Disauthorizing Prophecy,"⁶ the paper highlights some of the disturbing aspects of *Man in the Middle Voice*. One might note the terms in which Peradotto objects to the form of drama:

The superficial deletion of the author's voice in drama actually gives him greater dominion over the discourse . . . and disables his audience's power to produce meaning. This sort of linguistic activity is tyrannical, for it turns the arbitrary into a constraint. (1)

This is the objection to a great and humbling work, Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannus*; but the argument is maintained for all linguistic activity in literature which, as "arbitrary," is also, it would seem, always the masked ideology of tyranny. We shall soon allow the poet's audience (through Per-

⁶ J. Peradotto, "Disauthorizing Prophecy," *TAPA* 122 (1992) 1-15.

adotto) its "power to produce meaning" in the epic; but even before that activity is undertaken it has already unwittingly committed itself to a difficult association with "the arbitrary." Is liberation from constraint a leap into the production of arbitrary meaning? "Submitted to the true lottery of chance . . . the *Tyrannus* took second place. Like it or not, that's just the kind of thing that *does* happen by chance" (14). Again, a difficult decision, both to accept and to interpret. But in his certainty as to what constitutes the "true lottery of chance," the arbitrary, and tyranny, Peradotto sees "poetic justice": "Sophocles undone for writing a play discounting chance. Not the kind of thing that happens by chance!" It is difficult to reckon with all the possible forms of contingency, but it is noteworthy how, after attributing all to chance, Peradotto must, if only to preserve some sense for chance, return finally back within the realm of necessity, intelligibility, and "poetic justice." In this sort of game Nietzsche did well to remind us of "those iron hands of necessity which shake the dice-box of chance."⁷ When the stakes are gathered from the table, how many will notice that Peradotto has had it both ways: "Like it or not, that's just the kind of thing that *does* happen by chance"/"Not the kind of thing that happens by chance!" There is a major difficulty here, and in his means of achieving "methodological rigour," Peradotto as critic cannot so easily escape one of the profound dilemmas of our condition.

When it comes to producing meaning for the literary text, Peradotto espouses a tolerant, "freewheeling" approach that "rejoices in its freedom." The terms are, notably, cited out of context from Eagleton's rigidly Marxist crib on theory, and prove difficult to reconcile with the procedures whereby Peradotto advances arguments for his own interpretation against those of others.⁸ For example, he would like the term *Outis* in Book 9 to be significantly linked to the verb οὐτάω in the account of Odysseus' scar in Book 19. In preparation for what others may find a rather remote possibility, he insists, "Enforced sensitivity to the play of linguistic ambiguity is more intense *nowhere* in the poem" (149); he concludes: "To say 'Yes, it fits, but it's only a coincidence' is to invoke the notion of an authoritative reading, to dogmatize about which likenesses are 'acceptable' and which are not, to police the free play of metaphor, in a text less likely than we modern readers

⁷He concludes, "To get out of this . . . one would have to have been already a guest in the underworld, sat at Persephone's table and played dice with the goddess herself."

⁸One should read T. Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (Minneapolis 1993) 198, in context. It is surprising to find a number of senior classicists citing this theoretical primer. Some will perhaps find reassurance in "an introduction" that ultimately turns out to be an "obituary": "The problem with literary theory is that it can neither beat nor join the dominant ideologies of late industrial capitalism." But the "loss" of literary theory is accompanied by some other rejections which should give us cause for hesitation: the classic works of literature that will be removed from all relevance will extend beyond Shakespeare.

are to tolerate, if even to comprehend, the very notion of 'mere coincidence' or the accidental" (150). The final step recalls a great number of crude divisions between "primitive" and more sophisticated "mentalities," which have long ruled our approaches to the Homeric texts. For Peradotto an extremely complex problem is resolved by dividing the world indisputably into two *historical* realms, the arbitrary and the necessary. He entirely eliminates all possibility of chance from a text which "probably" does not "even comprehend" the concept. If it comprehends everything Peradotto would have it intend across a wide range of relative significance, in that case Peradotto is the judge of the necessary. But it is also claimed that the text masks the arbitrary as the necessary, whence the need for semiology.⁹ We ourselves as readers of Peradotto and readers of Homer are left with little choice here; if we do not belong to the traditional group of unmentionables ("not to speak of those who espouse a more dogmatic philology" [146]) we nevertheless risk being branded as "dogmatic police" if we are not persuaded. Even our right to consent seems to be taken from us as Peradotto presses his particular interpretation upon us with a rhetoric that is notably coercive. (In this free state of interpretation one is handcuffed by being forcibly dressed in a police uniform, which is a sad abuse of an often very legitimate language of dissent). In its own way, an authoritarian, self-endorsing interpretative process remoulds a text which is supposedly at play limitlessly—while limited in its comprehension. It is almost as though an intolerant text ("less likely than we modern readers are to tolerate . . .") forces us to accept Peradotto's interpretation, and specifically at its weakest point, where it is straining for originality.

At the outset of his book, Peradotto provocatively suggests that "a pair of critical terms dear to traditional humanistic literary criticism," "originality and creativity" (11), must, in a radically new context of theory, surrender their claims to continuing relevance. But the very language in which that threat of extinction is articulated points only to the persistence within Peradotto's own work of a dichotomy supposedly being dismissed. It is noteworthy that the pair of critical terms is defined as "originality and creativity," while Peradotto distinguishes himself from "*traditional*" critics. Through all its versions of ideology, semiology, "narratology," philosophical "efficacy," etc., *Man in the Middle Voice* returns comfortably to the very familiar dichotomy which its vocabulary has almost disguised but which has organised it throughout: tradition and originality. The final page of the book (170) contrasts "a discourse of representation" (which "repeats a

⁹But much of Peradotto's work, particularly his concentration upon and use of etymology, may be seen by a number of readers as a repeated implementation of what he objects to in "ideology" which, by his own definition (adapted from Barthes), is the "transmutation of what is arbitrary and historical into something thought to be necessary and natural" (29).

fixed tradition") with "a discourse of production" ("embodied in Odysseus himself, who freely designs fictions"). True, the unacknowledged borrowing of Barthes's terms works to eclipse the old terms; but for Peradotto this is part of the process of "translation" precipitated by new theoretical work. The book thus builds upon what is, for a classical philologist, a curiously uncritical and unproblematic view of *translation*. Perhaps this may be explained by the fact that in this matter the outlook is borrowed from Jameson, and as so often throughout the book, critical work is cited out of context or possibly misunderstood. Where Jameson (as a Marxist critic) is attempting to deflate structuralism specifically, Peradotto accommodates the assessment to the advent of "any new theoretical position": "The overwhelming bulk of work done is simply a tireless process of translating all the old into the new terms" (26). There is no sense in this concept of "translation" that the new terms articulate new conceptions, or that new theory makes any essential differences at all.

At the outset Peradotto quite legitimately reminds sophisticated literary analysts of "a philologist's heed of subtle and crucial discriminations of lexical and grammatical texture" (xiii). Although Peradotto ignores the Platonic dialogues (and the whole field of literature relating to them concerned with the same questions of language that he is considering), one might recall how in the *Cratylus* and the *Phaedrus* Plato ironically allows, e.g., *μαντική* = *μανική* (dismissing the *τ* as an "insensitive" addition). Sometimes the pursuit of etymologies can in itself appear to confound the sense of the two terms cited. But treatment of these delicate relations does require scrupulous attention to the detail of the Greek text. And too often Peradotto's Greek is insensitively inaccurate. Critical errors are made in citing even the central term under examination.¹⁰ This cumulative pattern of inaccuracy results in an example such as that which concludes the whole consideration of the epithets of Odysseus. The long examination of these epithets reaches a rhetorical climax in the statement: "At no point in the career of Odysseus is his name more fully realized than in the closing lines of the poem" (166); "He [Odysseus] is called *polymetis* (24.542), suggesting control of the world by infinite cunning" (169). But, as scansion would indicate, not even von der Mühll's text reads *polymetis* in this "final naming" of Odysseus. A mere slip, perhaps, but it is symptomatic that this study fails, in support of its sweeping claims, to cite correctly the final epithet for Odysseus in the *Odyssey*—*πολυμήχαν' Ὀδυσσεῦ* (24.542).

Although Peradotto thus exposes himself to serious criticism from both the camps which he aims to stand between, ultimately it is not his alternating condescension towards either the traditional philologists or the lit-

¹⁰It might well be said that the very choice of von der Mühll's not easily available edition of the *Odyssey* to serve as text is a little eccentric (and not always consistent, cf., e.g., 128). Significant errors occur on, e.g., pp. 112, 117, 136, 137, 139, and 145 ff.

erary theorists which troubles so much as does the easily adopted attitude of condescension towards a great work such as the *Iliad* itself. A certain sense of complacent cultural superiority of "we moderns" might be registered in the remark, "The Homeric poems represent a heroic culture . . . that fails to recognize, as so many cultures do, that individuation escapes predication" (152-153). There is an ambiguity in the sentence structure and Peradotto's thesis will flounder on contradictions which equivocation barely masks. Later it will appear that the *Iliad* shares this cultural "failure" with all narrative "and perhaps also 'real life'." But the abstract, and at first sight seemingly self-evident, philosophical generalisation, "individuation escapes predication," does call for thought. It brings to mind a most famous example: "Socrates is mortal"; and there is much that all of us as individuals might ponder upon in that. It is notable that Peradotto chooses the verb *escape* in his assertion, since this seems to be ultimately one of the deep underlying desires of the work as a whole. But as in the case of the proper name, there is much that is common; and Rilke articulated a profoundly significant aspect of this question when he composed the following lines to be inscribed on his own gravestone: "Rose, O pure contradiction, delight / Of being no one's sleep under so many / Lids." Death is, for mortals, universal and, as Heidegger would have it, our "ownmost" individual possibility. But inextricably so; and what is most our own also, as Rilke perceived, belongs to no one. The heroic ethos was founded on a recognition of the attempt to make something distinctive of a common mortality. Its "failure" seems to have been its recognition of the linguistic possibility, "I am Odysseus." For Peradotto, individuality is a pure entity that simply remains outside of and untouched by naming, predication, language, society, culture, and death.

If there is something of a "residue" effect in this attempt to slice an ineffable individuality off from all that might possibly be shared, Peradotto also maintains that such individuality *can* be articulated and is articulated neatly in the name "No one." At times his viewpoint is distinctly reminiscent of Schopenhauer's definition of the subject as "that which knows all things and is known by none." And in relation to this godlike position for the subject, it is interesting to observe that Joyce also claimed, from his own etymology for the name Odysseus (the improbable combination of Zeus and Outis), the possibility of the conception of the literary hero as precisely a "divine nobody." For Peradotto, "The *true* individual is nameless; he is *Outis*" (152).

In this study, the two epics are organised, hierarchised, in a manner which is homologous with the division between tradition and originality. There is an advance, but one that is not convincingly defined: the *Odyssey* develops "a broadened concept of the self," "a sense of self with depth," which is seen as "capable, dynamic, free, rather than fixed, fated, defined" (169). In comparison with the *Iliad*, the *Odyssey* is "considerably less

deterministic"; it rejects "the narrow quest for an abiding *kleos*," the crude struggle of "competitive excellence." The *Iliad* is "less articulate"; if it glimpsed something of these possibilities, the "realization" remains "dim" and any "clear expression" "muddle[d]" (158). In line with the critics he reproaches for so doing, Peradotto seeks, finally, a simple clarity—while being considerably less than clear as to the exact implications of what he means by "a subtler ideology of the self" and its relation to semiology. All this at the expense of the *Iliad*'s great achievement.

From Peradotto's viewpoint, society is essentially hostile, a negation of the individual and his or her autonomy. This powerful act of suppression is "masked in all naming" (117; cf. 161–162). Our inextricable alienation is seen as the product of a form of life and society within which it is others who create us, and not we ourselves. At the same time, *Man in the Middle Voice* is a celebration of power and the ability to escape the confines of a controlling society. Its vision is "utopian," in the etymological sense of that word: emphatically negative, a negative determination of the definitions produced by society, it locates escape in "an infinite negativity" (163). As with a large number of recent critics, Peradotto values highly the concept of *metis*, "that hidden power of cunning intelligence," as delineated by Vernant and Detienne. *Metis* is construed as mastery of metamorphosis, the ability to assume every kind of form without being imprisoned within any; elusive, encircling but never encircled, the master of *metis* achieves mastery through metamorphosis. It is *the art of seeing without being seen*. Closed in on itself, the subject defined by *metis* nevertheless prefers to see itself as a limitless, circular form: it no longer has a beginning or an end, it can seize anything and yet can be seized by nothing. Turning through rings "without limit," *metis* would embrace the unlimited. *Metis* has not only become a form of the ideal, untouchable critic; it contains the promise of infinite knowledge.

But the circle soon comes to assume the shape of a closed cave, a vast cavernous space of emptiness; and *Man in the Middle Voice* seems ultimately to occupy, if not an island, at least a "no man's land," which it conceives as its utopia. Peradotto defines "theft" as "an hermetic activity." But theft is also always open to the *possibility* of detection.¹¹ In the desire to escape all social restriction, the circle of *metis* at times reveals unexpected relations to the ring of Gyges. In its preoccupation with polysemy and the possibilities of "No one," *Man in the Middle Voice* ignores another notable name, "Poly-phemos," in that cave where some particularly disturbing aspects of language are unleashed in Odysseus' stratagem for survival. Their implications haunt us even as we probe their unfathomed

¹¹Even if the hermetic excludes the very possibility of the property of another, and is thus constricted to dispossession of the self.

depth. But Peradotto also ignores alternative versions of the story where it is the verbal "shifter"—"I, myself"—which speaks to conceal the cause of injury, in the word for "myself" which belongs to everyone and no one. In the midst of seeking self-reflexive echoes, Peradotto overlooks the social possibilities valued by the Homeric epic itself; his view of society is very much shaped by the anti-social scene enacted in the cave of the Cyclops. Charles Taylor has recently remarked, "The close connection between identity and interlocution also emerges in the place of *names* in human life. My name is what I am 'called.' A human being *has* to have a name, because he or she has to be called, i.e., addressed."¹² Alternatively, one might say that even the unknown stranger is often called upon; it might indeed be I who am doing the calling. And it is one's final hope that the one called will respond, in spite of all arguments that the call marks (or masks) a sense of obligation and hence culture's constraints.

Peradotto's book concludes with the figure zero. *Polytropos* is read as "the attribute to assume *any* attribute" (161), "to become anything that is." This infinite possibility is defined as "the zero-point where every story begins, the zero-point where every story ends": a complete circle which now includes *every story* (thereby denying much of its own argument against, e.g., the *Iliad*) and which refutes, at the same time as it confirms, its earlier view of a narrative teleology ("The real beginning of all narrative . . . is its end" [43]). The end is nothing other than the beginning; indistinguishable and difficult to locate in this eternal ring which includes all the world's stories in a single point, zero: infinite, a point, everything and nothing. Abandoning the specificity of any particular tale, Peradotto finds ultimate unlimited power in indefinite possibility, the eternally non-existent: "that which remains potential [*en puissance*]. Nonexistent from remaining infinitely potential. From being condemned to power and remaining there."¹³ One might perhaps have expected some word on or from Joyce in such a study; particularly since one brief sentence from *Ulysses* sums it all up and, in the same step, carries it that much further: "No one is anything."

II

I had resolved to work in silence until the day when I should feel myself able to defend in theory the results of my attempts.

Cézanne, November 1889

Why theory? Even if, for the purposes of answering such a blunt enquiry, we reluctantly and provisionally accept the monolithic term "theory," I think a few very good reasons can be found from among a wide range of possible responses. Along with a great deal that many literary scholars might quite

¹²C. Taylor, *Sources of the Self* (Cambridge, Mass. 1989) 525, n. 13.

¹³J. Derrida, *Glas*, tr. J. P. Leavey and R. Rand (Lincoln, Nebraska 1986) 199.

justifiably wish to reject, there can sometimes be found a certain simple honesty on the part of the practitioner who begins, not with a hidden hoard of unexamined assumptions, but with the basic question, "What is it I am doing?" and "how?" I find no reason to doubt the sincerity and conscientiousness of a number of writers, artists, and critics of different persuasions who have sought to articulate and scrupulously examine their founding presuppositions. To that extent we are now far removed from Wilamowitz's self-refuting proposition, which "naturally always presupposes that you have no presuppositions." The attempt at self-cancellation remains one mighty presupposition and one which is contradicted by everything we have learnt about the construction of knowledge since Kant at least. In some shape or form, whether articulated or not, reflected upon or not, there has always been some "theory" at work in every practice. But this recognition does not render "theory" unequivocal or suddenly produce one that is immediately implementable. If there were to be a distinguishing general feature of *theoria* one might hope that it would be an ongoing thoughtfulness.

Scott Richardson's work, *The Homeric Narrator*, is presented by its publisher as "a narratological analysis of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*," which, "in using tools provided by narrative theorists . . . is a departure in Homeric studies." Todorov's neologism "narratology" is a rather rebarbative hybrid that not unexpectedly offends the linguistic sensibilities of the classicist. As such the term has served two quite different ends. It often promises critical innovation where there is none, and remains a conveniently derogatory term of dismissal for those inclined to fear that there might be. Richardson (who in fact favours the term "narrative theory") seeks to implement the "tools" provided by one of the leading theorists on narrative, Gérard Genette. Throughout he cites and uses only one of Genette's many works, an English translation and selection, which was packaged with an English title, *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method* (tr. Jane E. Lewin, Ithaca, N.Y. 1980). It is regrettable then that he has not considered more of his model, particularly in view of Genette's calls for "a moment of reflection and assessment to determine where we are in relation to all the theorizing that has passed for narratology."¹⁴ It has long been recognised that Genette has been scrupulously troubled by difficulties in literary theory which are often blithely ignored in the facility of those who use him as a model. Those difficulties are numerous and complex and cannot be reduced to summary form here. But we can at least pinpoint some major issues.

¹⁴See W. Godzich's incisive summary in his foreword to D. Coste, *Narrative as Communication* (Minneapolis 1989); cf., *inter alia*, G. Genette, *Introduction à l'architexte* (Paris 1979).

There is a significant continuity between orality and "narratology." From the moment that Meillet and Parry observed that the Homeric diction lent itself to schematization, from the early work of Arend, *Die typischen Szenen bei Homer* (Berlin 1933), Homeric studies have prolifically pursued the formalisation of "the formula," typology, taxonomy, and various modes of classification at different lexical and narrative levels. These studies offered what Meillet distantly and indistinctly understood of his friend Saussure's concept of a "system." Systems multiplied, just as terminology and taxonomy have proliferated in narrative studies generally. This approach to literature as a "system" which could be "scientifically" schematised understandably supplied a great need in a discipline which sought to escape serious charges of mere empiricism, sheer indulgence in emotion and sentiment foreign to the realm of reason, and so on. In the wake of (and very much on the model of) the science of language (linguistics), a science of literature at last seemed possible. And besides (reassuringly for the classicist), the fundamental taxonomic nature of this activity was not so far removed from later ancient treatments of rhetoric, genre, etc. It seems certain that the twentieth century in Homeric studies will be remembered and characterised generally as an age of formalisation, bearing not only the fruits of such an activity, but also, ineluctably, its increasingly evident limits.

In retrospect it seems strange, although not at all inexplicable, that once the approach to literature embraced what it greeted as a more rational mode of procedure, it then at once refused to heed the voice of reason and its urgings to reconsider the very principles of classification, the conditions for the possibility of taxonomy, the presuppositions at the base of all those grids, schemas, and codes, and the essential (not fortuitous) limits to any ideal formalisation. Perhaps it will in time. And when it does (if it does) it would seriously question, among many other things, some of the fundamental aspects of an undertaking such as that proposed by Richardson.¹⁵

"I categorize the ways in which the narrator can betray his presence as the mediator between us and the story and provide a comprehensive list of instances within each category" (7). One would focus on the nature of the qualification provided in the accompanying note and ponder its implications, instead of merely taking it for granted as we so easily do in such an undertaking: "Completeness is an unattainable goal in dealing with two large texts and *many categories that elude rigid definition*" (210, n. 10). The analysis is "comprehensive," but always necessarily and significantly incomplete, in spite of its numerous categories and "sub-categories." This

¹⁵In addition to its brief "Introduction" and "Conclusion," *The Homeric Narrator* consists of seven chapters: "Summary," "Pause," "Speech," "Order," "Special Abilities," "Commentary," "Self-Consciousness."

is not an insignificant, inevitable failure in what is a less than ideal world: it is a constitutive aspect of what is an idealising process, a major gap in an ambitious empire of systematisation achieved through simplification. One would pause before accepting as even feasible the claim, "the value of my system of classification will be the same as most—to provide the groundwork for further studies of Homeric narrative" (7). The modesty in the acknowledgment of multiplicity and diversity itself denies the possibility of a single "groundwork" or "foundation" from which we would in future start. Above all, in approaching the "delimited" realm of "the Homeric narrator," one would want to begin by reconsidering at length and carefully that great line of demarcation, so fraught with philosophical implications and highly important evaluations, that Plato once drew between *diegesis* and *mimesis* in analysing the scene that was enacted along the shoreline between land and sea. If one were to attempt to follow Genette, one would also need to bear in mind that he never lost sight of the great work of art in all the terminology and taxonomy, but was always one of the most sensitive readers of the literary text he analysed scrupulously as narrative. One would also give serious attention to his anxieties. And one would ponder finally all there is in literature that always escapes the circularity of an activity which claims mechanically to take it apart and put it all back together again:

Narrative theory breaks narrative down into its components, and with the categorization, dichotomies, and distinctions that emerge from an analysis, a theorist can describe and explain the way any particular narrative is put together. (2)

The loss of the incalculable in this version of the procedure of narrative theory is incalculable.

III

As with *Man in the Middle Voice*, reworking the negative plays a major part in another recent book on the epic, Andrew Ford's *Homer*. Here the fundamental approach is derived from Harold Bloom's programme of "Revisionism." At one time a prominent proponent of what was known as "Yale deconstruction," Bloom has more recently aligned himself with Lord, Havelock, and Ong as the latest upholder of "the authority of oral tradition." There is a predominantly reactionary element in this "Revisionism." In a series of books, Bloom has persistently returned to what he sees as the creative writer's intense Oedipal struggle with precursors, a largely concealed battle that manifests itself in the latecomer's "anxiety of influence." Provocative, tough-minded, and often knowingly offensive, a vociferous advocate of "Daemonization" (and more recently a source for what many may have found a particularly unpalatable chauvinism), Bloom strives to achieve a "de-idealising" exposure to the "darker truths" of poetic creativity. This relation helps to explain some of the apparently odd turns

that Ford's approach to Homer takes. Bloom's sustained insistence upon "the Negative" perhaps explains why Ford has no hesitation in defining his approach (and its immediate compatibility with an oral poetics) as an essentially "negative poetics" (17). This has always been a pervasive problem in the many attempts to construct an oral poetics; conceived and largely determined as a negative form of the literary, the oral is in every respect simply and fundamentally what literature is *not*.

In its chapter titles, *Homer* offers a certain austerity while suggesting a sense of the definitive: "The Genre," "The Poem," "The Poet," "The Text," "Poetry." The book opens with the comment, "After reading the Homeric poems, and indeed after reading interpretations of them, I cannot help asking about Homer and wondering what he thought he was doing" (1). This, then, is the project: *Homer* will tell us what Homer thought. A difficult undertaking, which Ford would pursue rigorously. He will limit himself strictly to Homer's "own terms." There must be no anachronism: nothing derived from "academic criticism since the nineteenth century"; nothing influenced by eighteenth-century aesthetics; no "misreading" of Homer "as a literary text"; no imposing upon these texts "our ideas of literary art" (2, 5, 16). It is as if the Homeric epic had had no formative and lasting impact on this Western literary tradition, but had simply been severed at some indeterminate but absolute point in the past. The perspective denies any possibility of dialogue within a tradition or indeed any significantly new or different readings. By analogy, one must not approach the past with the science of palaeontology, since such science was unknown in the Palaeolithic Age. One is left only with the impossibility of having been there—or rather, a bemused, but forceful, reminder to all other latecomers that they have not: a reaffirmed negative.

His subject and approach delimited in this way, Ford must then explain how his focus upon a section of technical terms for poetry differs from the many excellent treatments of this particular vocabulary which we already have; or indeed, in specific instances to what extent his definitions of terms such as *aoide*, *aude*, etc., expand upon the *Lexikon des frühgriechischen Epos*, which he frequently cites. One procedure that does operate here involves a manipulation and overriding of his own rigidly defined boundary between what is articulated in the poems (exclusively "Homer's own terms") and a large realm of silence. Ford will tell us exactly what it was Homer suppressed. After an opening which has stringently reinforced the imperative, "no anachronism" in any shape and form, Ford immediately shakes the newly-won fervour of those persuaded to his approach by introducing the twentieth-century critic Edward Said, and his book *Beginnings*, as the model for what the ancient poet would have been thinking at the moment in the distant past when he too "began" (18). What holds for the beginning holds throughout. The recurring term in Ford's critical vocabulary,

"the Sublime," is derived from that other twentieth-century critic, Bloom. Not that Bloom coined the term, or that Homer ever used it. Its rise to prominence as an aesthetic concept that dominated the eighteenth century is well documented. It was Boileau who chose to translate ps.-Longinus' *Peri Hypsous* in this way—although Johnson notably objected that "The 'sublime' is a Gallicism." (*Plus ça change . . .*) A systematic examination of Ford's critical vocabulary would only compound these hesitations regarding the purity of its historicity. The effect is heightened when Ford seeks to match Bloom's "no nonsense," plain-speaking approach to poetry by regularly describing the Homeric epic as, for example, "flat" (196; cf., e.g., 171, 201). Repeatedly throughout this book one meets with such jarring formulations as, for example, "I have repeated Homer's own definition, which is a vicious circle with a god in the middle" (57). One might reply that much of this is mere cleverness with a hole in the centre. It is all part of the programme of "de-idealising" poetry, and specifically Homeric epic, but reference to characteristics such as the "flatness" of the poetry and its ethos falls well short of what are, after all, great works of literature.¹⁶ This claim for the literature is more than sentiment and mere assertion: close and detailed critical analysis has argued for its validity. Eventually Ford recapitulates this "negative poetics" by citing the comment which much of it recalls: "Take my word for it, poor Homer, in those circumstances and early times, had never such aspiring thoughts" (Bentley, cited on page 135).

Ford's account includes in "such aspiring thoughts" the moral dimensions of the epic. Stripped of the aesthetic, the poetry is also unconvincingly denied the possibility of ethical significance. This is in line with Bloom's approach to literature ("moralizing, which is to say, pernicious").¹⁷ But what is interesting in terms of Ford's overall approach is the use he makes here of an argument from silence: "to interpret the tale for its moral lesson would break the spell, and there is *no mention of anyone's doing so*" (52). In itself that claim is surely contestable. But by pressing it, Ford exposes the greater part of his own reconstruction of the poetry of the past to precisely his own objection. For this is a treatment which not only speculates freely from silence (the dominant mode throughout is the "would have"), but also abandons its restriction to Homer's own terms alone to argue from silence, to reveal to us what Homer would not say or what he (supposedly) consciously *suppressed*. It is fascinating to watch how in this process silence repeatedly becomes a matter of "hard evidence." Let us take, for instance, the question of the Bloomian thesis of poetic competitiveness. It has some

¹⁶Ford's evaluation here recalls G. S. Kirk, *The Songs of Homer* (Cambridge 1962), which defines the "flat," the "tired style" in Homeric epic (e.g., 166 f.; 361 f.). But Kirk's insensitivity to the literary (and there is no need to exclude the "oral" in this) has been widely observed by reviewers.

¹⁷H. Bloom, *Agon* (New York 1982) 23.

plausibility, derived from the work of, for example, Burkhardt and Nietzsche. There is, nevertheless, a problem: "The poems . . . show very little trace of competition" (95). Even while we might be prepared to suspend judgment on the basis of this consideration alone (a case can be and has been made a number of times elsewhere for the *Odyssey's* "competitive" relation to the *Iliad*), in the chapter "The Poet" we are abruptly rushed into the "hard realities of poetic performance" (90). The *Iliad's* detachment and reticence are interpreted as a "cover-up" (see 93). "Since we know that poets lie" (7), we can not only assume, but forthrightly assert, that the epic's fiction "falsified the way poets actually learned and taught" (9). Setting aside the specific terms in which the poet articulates his art, Ford can supply "the actual" in support of the thesis that poetry springs from a great denial. The "theology . . . of inspired poetry" is a concerted and sustained denial of "the actual processes that brought the [poems] into being and gave them voice" (91). If the *Iliad*, for example, seems to ignore all or any rivals ("a crowd of competitors"), this is a well-known strategy by which the latecomer seeks "to escape the pressure of one's rivals" (97-98): one doesn't cite or even mention them. Homer "must have known" (116) of the existence of "competition." And so the critic has no choice but to reveal what he knows Homer knew, even if we do not have Homer's "word" for it: "But I will show that Homer's choice, free as it may have been, was after all a choice, and was deliberately and consistently at variance with the reality he and his audience knew" (91). Ford endorses Ong's view that "The invocation of the Muses can be paraphrased, 'Let me win, outdo all other singers'" (93), which is one way of transforming, if not demeaning, Homer's own terms. The same thesis will be reworked when the "hard realities of poetic performance and transmission" (90) include the possibility of writing—the competitor from the viewpoint of oral theory.

With late acknowledgment of earlier work and, it must be said, considerable obfuscation in citations (e.g., 157), Ford examines in chapter 4 the *sema* and "The Text." Once more, Homer is portrayed as an anxious, fearful artist who reacts violently to a newcomer, a deadly rival that threatens to usurp the poet, who had, according to the schema, already "usurped" the position of all former poets. The difference now is that this physical form of usurpation will be final, fixed for ever: writing menaces living poetry with death, according to a well-known version of this complex relation. Where the oral was "fluid," writing arrests language, making it "a fixed and visible object" (134). To the singer this "makes the songs rather stiff" (136). If writing allows the text to be controlled, "hidden away," "revised," it also means that the text is "no longer subject to [the poet's] personal control" (134-136). Driven out of every city, excluded from all vigilant, jealously oral societies, writing is a wanderer, a form that can, and will, traverse great distances. Writing is proclaimed a killer to be feared, able to immobilise

the very life of early poetry; the text is not only fixed but "has become fixated and lost its motion and ability to change" (137).¹⁸ A great wanderer, writing is strangely less mobile than an "able-bodied poet": "Circulation becomes far more limited than it had been for an able-bodied poet: very few of the crowd in the agora *would have wanted* to read such a thing" (136). And where Ford speaks generally of Homer "scapegoating" what he does not want within his epic, one can only reflect once more on what must be at stake in this recurrent and virulent scapegoating of writing within scholarship. This mode of criticism rejects as undesirable a text which is denied its very possibility of a reading by such assured assertions of what another society "would have wanted."

Once again, regrettably, it is also the critic's confidence in his ability to present us with a less than noble view of the desires and intentions of Homer himself which prevails. Homer "must" have felt great antipathy to this rival found in writing, and Ford assembles aspects of "Homer's hostility to the presumptive monument" (154). In Ford's view the *Iliad* is unrestrainedly, ruthlessly competitive: "Homer seems to go beyond self-assertion here to undertake an aggressive war on the visible." Homer thereby ultimately confirms Ford's interpretation of any text, including the *Iliad* itself: "No tangible, visible thing can be trusted" (146). The limits of the critic's potential for interpretation determine what is to assume the status of inevitable truth: "I can situate such a motif only in the doubts of an oral poet confronting his own making of a text. The [Achaean] wall seems to provoke a jealousy in Homer" (156). Evidence for this feeling is provided by the perspective adopted in the episode of the Achaian wall, a perspective which is said to be quite "peculiar," unlike anything else in the epic: "It is significant that here alone he reaches outside the range of his story to narrate the event," here Homer "shifts his perspective to the here-and-now of his unheroic audience" (148). This produces an "unepic ethos," the poet "here alone" in the poem "speaking . . . from a distance, contemplating the heroic age retrospectively as something apart, utterly remote in time" (149). If anything, this comment only highlights the extent to which Ford is committed throughout to what is essentially a restatement of Auerbach's conception of the epic present. To sustain this position he must, in this chapter on "The Text," overlook a great part of the epic text itself. The point can be made simply by considering the very elements that make up a monumental *sema*, or are strewn across the heroic landscape—the great stones which only heroes of a former age can lift. Ford maintains, "It is difficult to see a poet in this mood entrusting his song to marks that can be destroyed, removed or misread" (146). In its "fixity," writing can also be "removed,"

¹⁸ An argument which would in the same gesture render the long scholarly tradition of textual criticism somewhat superfluous.

like the stones which form a *sema*; within the epic these huge boulders are lifted and cast by heroes who have a strength, which, as the audience of the *Iliad* is repeatedly reminded, is "far greater than that of men now."¹⁹ This perspective, which accentuates distance in time, is by no means peculiar to the episode on the Achaian wall.

Maintaining the metaphor, Ford states, "Wherever it [sc., the huge stone flung by Athena at *Iliad* 21.403–405, representing the written text] lands it will have lost its original significance" (145). Writing is thus a preserver which destroys: it is from this that the oral poem must save what is construed as its "soul." And to save this threatened invisible essence, the poem itself aggressively destroys: "The destruction of the wall is the denial of any physical form of the *Iliad*" (156). Where earlier in this account of universal rivalry, the oral poem "disparaged" oral reports (62–66), it now denigrates writing. We are offered once more a form of "that long, hidden contest," "a long and largely hidden civil war" which in Bloom's view accounts for the genesis of poetry.²⁰ In this fierce process, epic competes with epic, so that in a section dealing with monuments (beginning "Strange objects on the ground"), Ford observes that the *Odyssey* "may make the *Iliad* seem slow and awkward as it almost trips over the objects in the ground" (168). "Strange objects in/on the ground" are, one might add, great material signs, inherently fragile traces, the mighty but vulnerable monuments of, or to, an heroic age. Is it not conceivable that the great poem reflects profoundly upon the possibility of destruction and loss for all things, including its own great efforts at retrieval and memory? Ford's response to such a question seems somewhat glib: "Like the *Iliad*, then, the *Odyssey* has no particular love for rolling up its hero under a monumental tomb" (164).

To deny Ford's "denials" would be to stand accused of flinching before the hard, repressed, but unavoidable realities of history, life, and common sense. Ford writes of the "divine condescension" of the Muses; but once again in this reassertion of the negative poetics of orality, it is difficult not to sense a certain disguised condescension on the part of the twentieth-century "oral" critic. We might consider, for example, Ford's observation on the drawing of lots in Book 7 of the *Iliad* (175 ff.), which has many significant implications for the concept of "making a mark," a constitutive feature of "writing." The hero identifies himself in a *sema*, a marked sign of his identity, different from the other warriors', a mark which comes back to him to recognise. In so doing he also, in a sense, contemplates in that moment a *sema* (not only "a mark, sign," but also "a grave-mound") before going into battle with its attendant risk of death; battle here is a duel proposed with careful,

¹⁹ οἱ τοὶ νῦν ἄνθρωποι εἰσι. On these expressions see, e.g., R. von Scheliha, *Patroklos* (Basel 1943) 345, n. 53.

²⁰ H. Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence* (New York 1973) 12.

explicit provisions for burial and prolonged reflection upon the conditions and possibility of *kleos*. The episode is charged with dramatic tension as "the lot" is taken around to each warrior in turn, a tension carefully built up through the significant procedure of making and identifying marks within a powerfully heroic atmosphere. But for the all-too-literate critic this is seen as "a little comedy of illiteracy"; "the procedure is a cumbersome affair"; "this is a primitive kind of marking one's name" (138-139). Not, therefore, "writing."

"The voice" is preserved until the end. "This sound, the body of the poet's voice, is the substance of the heroic world in all its presence" (195). Beyond the body, it is defined as the "soul" of song (172). Yet again, the theory of orality unfolds its familiar metaphysics. After the epic's "denial of any physical form of the *Iliad*" (156), the voice is specifically defined as the "*physical medium of singing*." The epics explore "the special material qualities of poetry" (173). While "ephemeral," the voice's material quality ultimately assumes the form of "its lasting continuity" (178), an eternal flow which places it above the deceptive form of permanence seemingly offered by writing. Self-sufficient, it has never had a need for something like writing, while writing, in its inherent inferiority, always has need of speech. "Such song is a voice, the sound of poetry is its soul. It is not to be wrought or sought" (195). "But," once more, "that voice" "must be defined in Homer's terms" (173). From an epic world which comprises a vast multitude of very different sounds, and indeed a wide range of poetic terms, Ford devotes most of his final chapter, "Poetry," to a single, simplified, idealised *aude*.²¹ For in the end the study which has set itself the task of "de-idealising" involves a misplaced idealisation. From the phrase *thespis aoide*, which (Ford claims) "serves Homer for poetry" (180; a generalisation which is difficult to uphold for the *Iliad* at least), Ford singles out to be the centre of his attention the phrase *thespis aude* (e.g., 179, 185, 186, 187, section title on 189, 194). In view of all the insistence upon the rigour of defining poetry only in Homer's own terms, it needs to be pointed out that the definition ultimately chosen, the phrase *thespis aude*, is quite simply not one ever found in Homer.

Ford's approach is emphatically, repeatedly, defined in relation to what is "not Homeric." It is constructed from exclusions, denials, refusals—a litany of negations. The Homeric epic is "not a well-wrought urn" (58, 86, etc.), "not a seamless garment" (58), "not a well-shaped artifact" (202); it is not visible, tangible, in no way physical, neither material nor in any respect "shapable matter" (193). It is in no way *artificial* (which requires that we overlook, for example, the *Kunstsprache*). Was it written? If so,

²¹In this relation Ford might have considered, e.g., E. I. Granero, "El elemento auditivo en la poesía de Homero," *Revista de Estudios Clásicos* 12 (1968) 55-90, and H. J. Krapp, *Die akustischen Phänomene in der Ilias* (Munich 1964).

"the poet as oral performer *needed* to keep something of his performance unwritten" (174; necessarily, to remain, by Ford's definition, an oral performer). Removed from any possibility of an interval, articulation, differentiation, silence, death, or destruction, orality ends gently "only when it was time for sleep" (174) at peace far from the spectre of "still, silent letters" (195). There is a dream in this account: "In essence, this voicing was the freedom not to become one thing, even a great thing" (174).²² But isn't it precisely the greatness of the Homeric epic—and the achievement of text as heroic narrative—that eludes us in this "negative poetic"? In its totality, the presence of all and all its presence, something was, according to Ford, nevertheless withheld. He sparingly opens "a *small space*" which was left over throughout and at the end. "We will come as close as we can to the poets' idea of their poetry if we can name this last thing that they withheld from their texts" (174). The treatment will conclude with the name; naming what seems to be the ultimate unnameable. "Poetry for Homer, then, . . . was making the names of heroes sound again on earth. This fiction is perhaps the one most alien to our conceptions of literature, for on its most basic level, poetry thereby becomes not an art of storytelling, but an act of mentioning" (195). Not an art and not a narrative, the epic begins and ends with the naming of the name, specifically an "exact pronunciation of a name" (196). Ford easily aligns "merely sounding a name" with "repeating a story," but the seemingly inadvertent mention of the term "story" at this point immediately reminds Ford of the narrative aspect of epic and thus the need to reconcile "story," or narrative, with the notion of a "listing of who did and said what": "Of course, the poet speaks not just inventories but stories." Moreover, "These stories are named" (195–196).

One might ask why, here again, this ultimate reduction of the vast epic to a name? To answer this question we might observe how consistently throughout every chapter Ford has been wrestling with the possibility of our reading the epic as a great narrative. Chapter 2 concluded with a section entitled "The whole poem" (89):

Despite its evasiveness, we depend on this residue, which makes poems whole even as it leaves them a little incomplete: it is to that incompleteness that we add our interpretations. In *that little space* between what has been said and what might be said we read and, if we will, supply the connections that make a greater whole out of the part. Negligible as it seems, *that little space* between the lines contains room enough so that for us reading Homer is not merely repeating

²²The epic is not any one thing, almost "nothing," as each thing is singly and systematically discounted as an account of the whole. The strategy of denial can be applied inexhaustibly to all possibilities singly, but may the epic not include, e.g., an "aesthetic" element, the ethical, greatness, and a great number of other qualities also, without constituting a "single" "thing"? On the other hand, Ford has no hesitation in concluding (200), "But its real status was phenomenological"—an observation which calls for some elucidation, given phenomenology's summons "to the things themselves!" and Ford's insistence upon a world view in which "no tangible, visible thing can be trusted."

what he says but interpreting it, as he read without merely reciting the poets before him.

We read and interpret just as Homer "read" and did not simply recite. The conclusion to chapter 4 suggests that "Nietzsche's apophthegm may well be profoundly right: 'How Classicists torment themselves with the question whether Homer could write without grasping the much more important principle that Greek art exhibited a long inward hostility to writing and *did not want to be read*'" (171).²³ At the conclusion to a book which has spent all its time constructing the poet's view of poetry, Ford concludes with a comment that would efface his own work in that construction: "The poet's picture of song is very different from that constructed by the critic" (196). This being the case, the critic's work is a curious but familiar form of a necessary superfluity. It supplements that which would appear to call for no supplement: "For us, the most troublesome refusal may be that this oral poetry invited no reading, no interpretation" (202).

In this version the epic is an inventory, not a story. "To transform the song into an artistic structure is a distortion." Thus "a reader who selects 'central' themes or episodes" interferes in an analogous way: "An inventory of every third item, or only of gold-plated items, will be a totally different kind of inventory" (197). Irrefutably, then, the text is the text; no more, no less; whole and unchangeable. That "small space" between the lines has been slowly and tightly closed. "It is not a poem to be read into, not a coded message to be deciphered, not an artifact to be appreciated in aesthetic contemplation," nor indeed an "artistic structure" (197). In presenting it to us, *Homer: The Poetry of the Past* takes the epic from us, distances it as irrecoverably remote, out of reach and out of sight. The negative poetic does not so much define as deny, making it new in the extremes by which it attempts to make the epic irretrievably alien and old. And much of this conception of a "poetry of the past" is at least no older than the eighteenth century—and as recent as the critic Harold Bloom. "There have indeed been many refusals needed to bring before us a poetry that is only a voice" (202). But such refusals amount to a repeated negation: "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 . . . it was nothing very much like what we are accustomed to think of as poetry or literature or art" (202). Almost inconceivable, it is always fully present—and yet for ever beyond the reach of nearly every modern critic.

The field of Homeric scholarship is to be sure already (as Ford would point out) "a very crowded" domain. At the same time, one senses the

²³Nietzsche also, however, had some particularly fine things to say about the relation between philology and the delicate process of reading; see, e.g., M. Lynn-George, *Epos: Word, Narrative and the Iliad* (London 1988) 80–81.

possibility that it is entering a new and significant stage. And for all the points where one might debate theoretical positions and challenge conclusions, all the works discussed here are earnest attempts to respond to this new climate of scholarship. But one would hope that in the process of change one fundamental aspect in the study of Homer might be preserved, however we define or shape the "new." While the critic Harold Bloom characteristically cited the words "you shall not discern the footprints of any other . . . ; the way . . . shall be wholly strange and new," Thomas Mann once spoke of *Bildung* as "a treading in footprints already made," in the acknowledgment of a "powerful influence of admiration and love." One sometimes feels that we have lost sight of what an undertaking it is to propose to write significantly on Homer. A single short question of Socrates might not only focus our efforts but should also profoundly engage us: "Are you not an admirer of Homer?"

IV

Cézanne worked very slowly and needed a week of daily sessions just to sketch on the canvas the contours of the model, a few shadows, and some indications of color. For his still lifes he was obliged to use paper flowers and artificial fruit, for real flowers wilted . . . before the work was far advanced.

J. Rewald, *Paul Cézanne*

In the face of the diversity and rapidity of change in the realm of literary criticism, it might seem to some that literary theory possesses only the frailty of the full-blown flower. From within the discipline of Classics we could always reassure ourselves that we have not missed anything in not yielding to the quickly withering flowers of fading "French fashions." To counter such a reaction it is perhaps pertinent to consider briefly something of sources from which recent narrative theory stems.

In his recent commentary, Hainsworth writes of "narratology, an art too novel for its application to Homer yet to have produced consensus."²⁴ The commentator remains unaware of the massive Platonic and Aristotelian heritage of "narratology" as suggested by Genette's oft-repeated motto, "Torniamo all' antico, sarà un progresso." At the same time, it should be said that "an art too novel" is often but a late echo of an art of the novel which was carefully being worked out at the turn of the century in the great prefaces of Henry James as he looked back over his large literary achievement. So much of narrative theory, in its concerns with "point of view" (or "focalization"), narrative and discourse, or narrative and the dramatic, owes a huge debt to this seminal theoretical work by James. The novelist was to write of those late prefaces, "They are, in general, a sort of plea for Criticism, for Discrimination, for Appreciation . . . , as against

²⁴ *The Iliad: A Commentary* 3 (Cambridge 1992) xiii.

the so almost universal Anglo-Saxon absence of these things; which tends so, in our general trade, it seems to me, to break the heart." It may be appropriate to conclude, then, with some of James's reflections on what he himself judged his best novel, *The Ambassadors*.²⁵

The scene is set in an old Paris garden, in which "were sealed up values infinitely precious," a setting capable of sweeping away the hero's "usual landmarks and terms." The spacious, secluded garden includes tall, bird-haunted trees, alive with spring, its bright, high new notes raised above a space flanked by "high party-walls." On the other side of the garden, grave *hôtels* stand for "privacy, . . . survival, transmission, association, a strong indifferent persistent order." In its combination of often seemingly irreconcilable values, the garden belongs to "the house of art"; and the central figure, the outsider entering into this world, was to recall, afterwards, the eyes of its residing artist, set within a face that was like "an open letter in a foreign tongue." The experience was to remain imprinted upon his memory "as the source of the deepest intellectual sounding to which he had ever been exposed." If it is not too literary a conceit, we might perhaps have something to learn from this reconciliation of the "new" and the "persistent," the co-existence of the open and the opaque, in this fictionalised experience of an art which offers a profound intellectual challenge.

Amid the warm radiance of a Sunday afternoon in summer (which James, in the novel, converts to a brave new spring), there is "that beautiful outbreak" of "a philosophy." The central figure, Strether, is himself transplanted, from the "very heart of New England." To be sure, the garden was at the centre of Paris, but "Paris" recedes as the character makes his way "through winding passages, through alternations of dark and night," in a quiet court of intense reflection in which the surrounding scene is "a mere symbol for more things than had been dreamt of in the philosophy of Woollett." James remarks in his Preface that the thoughts to which the hero gives utterance contain the essence of *The Ambassadors*—"his fingers close, before he has done, round the stem of the full-blown flower" And while here is not the place to consider the full flower of the philosophy that Strether gathers to articulate, there is an important aspect of James's aesthetic, and its bearings upon our theoretical endeavours, which can be approached simply by considering the significance of the place, the position of this episode in the novel, as he defines it:

The situation involved is gathered up betimes . . .—"planted" or "sunk," stiffly and saliently, in the centre of the current, almost perhaps to the obstruction of traffic. There it stands, accordingly, full in the tideway; driven in, with hard taps, like some strong stake . . . , the swirl of the current roundabout it.

²⁵The following quotations are taken from H. James, *The Ambassadors*, Book 5, Chapter 2.

Emerging from and opening up unexpected depths in the midst of a gentle afternoon ("spring at last frank and fair"), the stem stands "planted"; slender but strong, set firmly to stem the tide, to resist resistance, to persist in a "plea for Criticism"—a criticism that is both appreciative and less naive—quietly urging us to "stem our course" ("to make one's way against difficulties," *OED*), as we patiently apply our attentiveness to valued paper flowers.

Strether had the consciousness of opening to it, for the happy instant, all the windows of his mind, of letting his rather gray interior drink for once the sun of a clime not marked in his old geography.

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