

PERILS OF SONG IN HOMER'S *ODYSSEY*

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AN IMPORTANT CONCEIT OF THE *ODYSSEY* is its setting at the critical moment when heroic actions were making their way into epic song. The *Odyssey* abounds in poets performing songs and beside them heroes, who are the subject of song. This feature of the *Odyssey* has received much attention, often with the implication that Homer retrojects poetic values onto the heroic world in an effort to glorify his profession and the authority of the Muses.¹ I shall argue instead that the presentation of song in the *Odyssey* is not unequivocally positive. Throughout the poem there is a tension between song, which is envisioned even in heroic times as dealing with the past, and the accounts given by the heroes themselves. The latter are more current and a more likely source of information about the living. For both these reasons the heroes' accounts prove to be more valuable than song in confronting the problems at the center of Odysseus' return. On one level, this proximity of heroic accounts and songs on the same themes provides a homeric explanation for how oral traditions might have originated. By recapturing this proto-tradition, before song, the *Odyssey* certainly makes a great claim for its ability to evoke the past vividly, for which the Muses were an essential source of knowledge (*Il.* 2.484–492).² Nonetheless, internally the implications of song for the actual characters are potentially unsettling. Songs of the past impinge narrowly on the action of the *Odyssey*, and the prospect of future songs also motivates characters through their concern for *kleos*.³ Since a notion of song influences the poem not only formally and externally but also with regard to its internal developments, it becomes an obstacle that characters must themselves negotiate. They strive simultaneously to maintain their distance ahead of song as it incorporates their world into a memory of the past, all the while remaining conscious of the contribution of song to their own immortal glory.

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¹Important discussions of poetry and the Muses in Homer include Kraus 1955: 65–72; Marg 1957: 8–23; Maehler 1963: 21–34; Schadewaldt 1965: 54–86; Murray 1981; Clay 1983: 9–25; Macleod 1983; Thalmann 1984: 113–133; Murnaghan 1987: 148–175; Ford 1992: 90–130; Segal 1994: 113–163. The essays in Spentzou and Fowler 2002 adopt non-traditional approaches to the Muses; see esp. Spentzou's introduction (1–28).

²On Homer's tendency to elide any impression of a tradition by instead invoking the Muses, see Ford 1992: 90–101.

³On *kleos* and poetry, see Nagy 1974: 244–252. Olson's observations (1995: esp. 15–16) on the wider range of meaning in *kleos*, from hearsay to poetic glory, are especially important for understanding the genesis of traditions in the *Odyssey*. Nagy (2003: 39–48) is able to explain such divergences in the meaning of *kleos* by his theory of diachronic skewing. Scodel (1998) provides further analysis of accounts in Homer.

Some preliminary remarks on the *Odyssey's* poetic orientation are important for this discussion. The poem's preoccupation with bards and song has long been recognized as an indication of a high degree of poetic self-consciousness. By taking as its subject not only the stories and themes of the past but also the actual phenomenon of song, both its making and reception, the *Odyssey* draws attention to Homer's profession. In the process Homer characterizes his poem as exceptional and perhaps even as something different from epic poetry as it was known to Homer's audiences.⁴ But when poets become characters in the story they bring with them their guardians the Muses. We are always reminded that poets in the *Odyssey* depend on the Muses and so they too, even if only implicitly, become intertwined in the story's events rather than being exclusively distinct entities assisting the poet of the *Odyssey* from without. To whatever extent readers may feel poetry is exalted by this inclusion of poets and Muses in the poem, this treatment of song also risks diminishing its mystique. Representing poetic inspiration on the level of the story entails objectifying it in a way that allows clear description. Its incorporation within the poem necessarily deprives the phenomenon of the Muses' gift of song of its independent and fundamental status for the poem as a whole; instead song becomes something that can be analyzed and compared to other modes of storytelling that are presented in the poem.

That Homer had this effect in mind is suggested by the preparations he makes in the opening lines to shape the poem's perspective toward its subject matter. In the proem of the *Odyssey* Homer rejects a presentation that would characterize his theme as a relic of the past in favor of a treatment that manages to portray the story as current, or at any rate incomplete. The poem's theme is Odysseus' return and this is an event whose fulfilment still lies in the future from the perspective of the poem. As a result the proem can only focus on events already behind Odysseus at the point where the action of the poem begins, while specifics about his actual return are carefully avoided.⁵ In its search for an appropriate starting point, the poem itself displays a degree of indecisiveness with respect to its chosen theme that anticipates the questioning about Odysseus which will soon become a major theme in the experiences of the characters.⁶ This omission gives the *Odyssey* an open-ended view of the future and creates the feeling early on that Odysseus' long awaited *nostos* lies in doubt, an impression Homer strives to maintain in other ways throughout the poem.⁷ Indeed, the *Odyssey's* complex narrative structure is

⁴Cf. Redfield's remarks (1973: 144–146) on the *Odyssey's* awareness of and attempt to overcome its own decadence. In his discussion of the *Odyssey*, Maehler (1963: 21–34; esp. 22–23) examines the poem's novel treatment of the idea of individual worth generally and with specific reference to poets.

⁵On the interpretation of *Od.* 1.18–19, see Heubeck, West, and Hainsworth 1988: 74.

⁶For the shortcomings of the proem as an index of the poem's content, see Rüter 1969: 45–46; Heubeck, West, and Hainsworth 1988: 68–69; Pedrick 1992: esp. 39–42; de Jong 2001: 5.

⁷For example, the comparison maintained throughout the entire poem of Odysseus' homecoming and that of Agamemnon creates the expectation that Odysseus' return might turn out differently than it should. On this effect, see Olson 1990: 63.

in part an attempt to overcome the difficulty of coordinating events happening simultaneously in different places and with different characters, one effect of which is to create a heightened feeling of immediacy and suspense. Thus in spite of the proem's failure to announce the sequence of events with any accuracy, it effectively creates a tone of ambiguity that is thematic for both the events of the poem and their telling. Owing to these features, the *Odyssey* is characterized as a poem that defies its place in the remote past, with the resulting paradox of being a poem that anticipates the tradition that produced it.

This mannered artistic effect can be better appreciated when compared to the perspective of the *Iliad*. Its theme of Achilles' wrath is immediately realized in the opening book and the poem recounts the events that follow directly from it in a linear progression. Moreover, the *Iliad* proem looks forward to the resulting Achaean sufferings that figure in the rest of the poem with the certainty of knowledge about the past; all events of the poem's internal future are expressed in past tenses (*Il.* 1.2–6). By defining its subject matter as belonging to the past, the *Iliad* is separated in time and space from the actions it describes. Beyond its proem, the *Iliad* maintains this distance through its repeated invocations of the Muses, which simultaneously emphasize the disjunction of the song's immediate context of performance and its subject matter, while also supplying a means to bridge this gap. The proliferation of invocations in the *Iliad* can in part be explained by its poet's need to rehearse more names and mention more characters.⁸ Even so, to whatever extent Muses are thought to supply information, this very function also contributes to the general characterization of a poem as a cultural artifact that represents a dimly recollected past. After all, Muses embody the poetic tradition.⁹

In contrast with the *Iliad's* promotion of its traditional status, after the invocation of its proem the *Odyssey* trades Muses as active participants in the making of the poem for Muses who work internally. Pedrick has shown that the *Odyssey* proem introduces the poet in a state of uncertainty with regard to his subject matter. But whereas the dialogue she detects between poet and Muse is explained by Pedrick as emphasizing the poet's creative resolution to his quandary, I believe instead that this uncertainty implicates poet and Muse alike and presages the dubious authority of poetry within the story.¹⁰ The treatment of the Muses and song throughout the *Odyssey* coincides with its perspective on its theme, since

⁸Narrative content is entailed in Minton's (1960; 1962) approach to invocations; for recent criticism, see Minchin 2001: 169–170. Invocations occur at *Il.* 1.1–7, 2.484–487, 2.761–762, 11.218–220, 14.508–510, and 16.112–113. In addition to these are the “faded” invocations at 5.703–704, 8.273, 11.299–300; cf. 12.176, 16.692–693. On these passages, cf. de Jong 1987: 45–53 and Edwards 1991: 3.

⁹For vividness as a poetic ideal in the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, see Ford 1992: 126–129, though to my mind vividness attained by the Muses advertises itself as an affectation that undermines any actual objective of transporting the audience. Thus I find Ford's analysis more applicable to the *Odyssey* than to the *Iliad*.

¹⁰Pedrick 1992: 43–50; as she observes, the dialogue already draws the Muses within the poem as characters in the poem's narrative discourse (40–41). Still, as Clay (1983: 9–25) argues, after line 10

properly speaking their authority only pertains to completed actions, whereas the *Odyssey* strives to place poem and narrative perspective at the moment of action.¹¹ In this setting heroic deeds and poetic tradition come face to face within the poem, producing interactions between heroes and song that are highly dynamic. While characters in the *Iliad* such as Helen (6.356–358) and Achilles (9.186–189, 412–416) are conscious of song and its relevance to them in the distant future, in the *Odyssey* song is immanent and surrounds characters closely, and therefore requires a more direct response and one conditioned by the specific situations in which characters find themselves.

THE LAST SONG OF RETURN

The collection of songs known as the *nostoi* that recounted the returns of the Greeks from Troy has a dual function in the *Odyssey*. In the proem this tradition is alluded to briefly in order to emphasize the late return of Odysseus. We learn that all the other Greeks have met their various ends by now, while Odysseus alone still remains unaccounted for (1.11–15). Used here to help define the poem's theme and dramatic moment for the audience, the reference to earlier returns then gives way to a more striking comment on Odysseus' absence. When the Ithacan bard Phemius sings his song of the *Nostoi of the Achaeans* later in the same book (1.326–327), it then appears that these events are far enough in the past to be a subject of song already. His song is coordinated with the allusion in the proem by the emphasis on disasters in both accounts.¹² The theme of Odysseus' return is set against that of the other Greek returns, and when the latter then reappears as a song within the poem we are made to believe the final return of Odysseus will

everything is attributed to the Muse according to the strict implications of the invocation; my point is that the *Odyssey's* opening lines seem to undermine the usual confidence of an invocation.

¹¹ Minchin (2001: 174–180), who also resists Minton's explanation for invocations based strictly on narrative content in favor of an explanation concerned with narrative shaping, offers a different explanation for the relative absence of invocations in the *Odyssey* by relating the presence of Muses to the careful setting up of a tale, and their absence to the resolution. As Minchin explains, the *Odyssey*, unlike the *Iliad*, begins temporally at the moment of resolution and therefore avoids referring to Muses. While Hesiod famously attributes knowledge of the future to poets (*Theog.* 33, 38), this conflation of prophecy and poetry seems not to apply in Homer (*Il.* 1.70). Even the Sirens, whom Schadewaldt (1965: 85) described as demonic counterparts of the Muses, sing songs of past events; they promise to sing of the Trojan War (*Od.* 12.189–190), which is now history and known to Odysseus, while in context the aorist subjunctive of line 191 is most easily understood as limited to the past. Interestingly, Proteus, a deity who does impart knowledge of the future to a mortal, is associated in later tradition not with poetry, but with prophecy (Callim. *S.H.* fr. 254.5 and Virg. *Georg.* 4.392–393; cf. 4.387 and 450–452). Similarly, when Athena expresses lack of confidence about her forecast of future events, she does not distinguish herself from a poet, but from a prophet (*Od.* 1.200–202).

¹² Phemius' νόστον . . . / λυγρόν (1.326–327) restates the αἰπὺν ὄλεθρον of the proem (1.11), which itself fits into a passage where *nostos* is repeatedly activated as a theme (νόστον, 5; νόστιμον ἡμαρ, 9; οἶκοι ἔσαν, 12; νόστου, 13; οἰκόνδε νέεσθαι, 17; ἦν γαῖαν ἰκέσθαι, 21).

bring the tradition of *nostoi* to completion.¹³ The action of the poem will coincide with the formation of a tradition, represented by the *Odyssey* itself. And so an integral relationship between poem and hero is suggested since the poem will only attain its distinctive place in the tradition of the few safe returns if Odysseus survives to report his ordeals.¹⁴

Phemius' song comes as the culminating statement of a scene whose primary function is to build an impression of Odysseus' complete disappearance and the effect of his absence on his family. On Ithaca no word is available about Odysseus' fate, a direct consequence of which is the utter confusion in his home. The suitors have descended upon Ithaca in the belief that Odysseus is dead. Penelope refuses to give in to them as long as there is a shred of hope that her husband will return. And Telemachus is caught in the middle, vacillating between hope that his father might still return and confidence that he is already dead.¹⁵ As Telemachus says, Odysseus has disappeared, unseen and unheard (ἄϊστος, ἄπυστος, 1.242), whereas it would be better had he simply died at Troy and at least left behind knowledge of his fate.¹⁶ Athena's last act before leaving is to propose a plan to resolve this situation (1.279–292). Telemachus should go searching after word of Odysseus from the heroes Nestor and Menelaus.¹⁷ It is thus only after the theme of Odysseus' disappearance has been firmly established and a plan to overcome this problem arranged that Phemius' song is mentioned. In this position it acts as a coda to what has already been expressed, reasserting the circumstances in Odysseus' house in a different mode. Not only is Odysseus absent from the reports of men, but he is also missing from the songs that have by now encompassed the fortunes of his former companions—all this an indication of just how long Odysseus' return is overdue. The tradition of song that Phemius produces can say nothing of Odysseus' fate since it still lies ahead and epic song only incorporates

¹³ Cf. Thalmann 1984: 157–158 and Ford 1992: 110.

¹⁴ A similar, though less pronounced, effect can be felt in the *Iliad's* dependence on Achilles' ultimate return to battle.

¹⁵ *Od.* 1.114–116, 160–168; cf. Rüter 1969: 208; Olson 1995: 76–78; de Jong 2001: 25 (*ad* 158–168) and 38 (*ad* 353–355). The tone of ambiguity in Telemachus' feelings about Odysseus becomes especially prominent when it is maintained less rationally in Athena's alternating expressions of confidence and uncertainty about Odysseus' return (1.194–204, 267–269, 287–292).

¹⁶ *Od.* 1.234–241; κλέος means immortal fame in 240, but this idea is subjected to the desire for information about Odysseus, which is the framing concern of this passage as the terms ἄϊστον (235) and ἀκλειῶς (241) indicate.

¹⁷ Ford (1992: 101–110) discusses well the quest for knowledge in the *Telemachy*, but prefers to see two independent traditions, that of humans which depends on word-of-mouth reports, and that of divine poetry which comes directly from the Muses. His view of parallel traditions does not explain what seems to me the indication of the poem, that some lag time exists between action, report, and song. He also arrives at his illustration of the Muses' divine knowledge by reading the *Odyssey* in reverse; he interprets the role of the Muses as witnessed in Phemius' song in light of Telemachus' search, whereas Telemachus' quest for knowledge seems rather to be a response to the shortcomings of the song.

what is already past.¹⁸ Otherwise a simpler plan would be for Telemachus merely to request the lay of Odysseus' wanderings from the bard. Instead, he must go after accounts from heroes, who are envisioned here as a source for the most current information. This is the reason Athena mentions that Menelaus is the last of the Greek heroes to return from Troy (1.286). Phemius, on the other hand, will be stuck singing the same old song until some more recent news arrives that can add to his theme.

On this point I think the notion of novelty as it applies to Phemius' song is often given the wrong emphasis.¹⁹ When Telemachus defends Phemius against Penelope by claiming that an audience always favors the newest song (1.351–352), he does not imply that Phemius has sung the *Nostoi of the Achaeans* for the first time only moments before. The term νεωτάτη (1.352) is relative and only implies that no more recent theme has been received. The poem is clear on this point. Penelope complains that this song *always* wears away at her heart (1.341–342), meaning that she has heard it numerous times before.²⁰ So too, after this song Telemachus shows no change from his former attitude concerning Odysseus (1.354–355), nor adopts any new plan for the future. The verb ἀμφιπέληται (1.352), which is a Homeric hapax used by Telemachus to describe the presentation of a song to an audience, might even retain the root sense of circulation as it would apply to the transmission and spread of a tradition that is gaining familiarity.²¹ In short, Phemius' song is coterminous with the current state of knowledge (or lack thereof) and his song of other *nostoi* is symptomatic of the general state of stagnation on Ithaca. In heroic times song can already be antiquated, even if it is still closer to the events it describes than are Homer and his audience. Ithaca eagerly awaits the new song that will retrospectively describe its future, and the suitors' greatest wish is Penelope's and Telemachus' greatest fear, namely, that Odysseus will eventually find his way into the theme of Phemius' song with its gloomy emphasis on misfortune and death (νόστον . . . / λυγρόν, 1.326–327; αἰοιδῆς / λυγρῆς, 340–341; cf. 354–355). In a sense, the *Odyssey* invokes these other *nostoi*

¹⁸ Svenbro (1976: 19–21) argues that Phemius actually included the death of Odysseus in a lying song, this based on the tears of Penelope and Telemachus' assertion at 1.354–355. On the latter, see below. Penelope's sadness depends on her fear that Odysseus has met a similar fate. The same process of emotional association in listeners is witnessed in Peisistratus' reaction to Menelaus' reminiscence of Odysseus (4.184–188); while Menelaus, Helen, and Telemachus shed tears for Odysseus, Peisistratus cries over his brother's death at Troy, which Menelaus' words prompt him to think about. For criticism of Svenbro's idea of a lying song, cf. Ford 1992: 108–109.

¹⁹ For example, Maehler 1963: 31; Murnaghan 1987: 156; Ford 1992: 109; Pedrick 1992: 59; Finkelberg 1998: 94; cf. Thalmann 1984: 125.

²⁰ Cf. Scodel 1998: 185.

²¹ So too apparently Finkelberg (1998: 94), who translates, the song "which comes the newest to their ears." Cf. Chantraine on πέλωμαι and compare too *Il.* 3.286–287 for the simplex used in a related way. Telemachus' assertion here is related to the statement at 8.73–74, which does emphasize breadth of transmission (see below, 200).

traditions to assert the need for its own genesis,²² and just as importantly, as a foil to the kind of story it would like to tell. While Odysseus is still absent from Phemius' song there is still some hope that he is alive, and as Telemachus goes off to visit Nestor and Menelaus he hopes to step forward beyond the reach of current song and find confirmation of this possibility.

Telemachus clearly defines his enterprise in these terms when he first addresses Nestor. The fates of all the other heroes have been reported, while only Odysseus remains unaccounted for (3.86–88). Telemachus' diction (λυγρὸν ὄλεθρον / . . . ὄλεθρον, 3.87–88) recalls the theme of Phemius' song (νόστον . . . / λυγρόν, 1.326–327) and before that the proem of the *Odyssey* itself (αἰπὺν ὄλεθρον, 1.11), making it clear that what he wants is the continuation of the saga as it pertains to Odysseus (καίνου λυγρὸν ὄλεθρον ἐνισπεῖν, 3.93). He presses Nestor to recall for him whatever he knows and to tell him truthfully (τῶν νῦν μοι μνησαί, καί μοι νημερτέζ ἐνίσπεε, 3.101). In effect, he confronts this potential source of information in the very way Homer confronts his Muses through invocation (e.g., ἔσπετε, *Il.* 2.484 and μνησαίαθ' ὅσοι ὑπὸ Ἴλιον ἦλθον, 492)—and for the same reason. Telemachus hopes that Nestor will have seen something with his own eyes, or at least have heard something from someone who has (3.93–95; cf. 8.491), and so allow Odysseus to be removed from the category of ἄϊστος and ἄπυστος (1.242).²³ In Nestor's report we are given the tale of the return (λυγρὸν . . . νόστον, 3.132) as he experienced it, though unfortunately he was separated from Odysseus at an early point (3.162–164, 184–185) and therefore can at best add only incrementally to Telemachus' knowledge of Odysseus' experiences after the fall of Troy. Nonetheless, despite meager results, the point of this exchange could not be clearer. In a world where heroic actions are still current, the resources of poetry overseen by the Muses are replaced by the accounts that people like Nestor are able to give based on their own involvement.²⁴ To these personal experiences are added the resources of report (ῥόσσα, 1.282), and this appears to be the source for Nestor's knowledge about events on Ithaca and the returns of several other Greek heroes (3.186–194 and 211–213; φασί, 188 and 212).

How much of all this was familiar to Telemachus already either from other accounts or from Phemius' song it is impossible to say; certainly his song would have been fairly unimpressive if it did not cover some of these events.²⁵ On one point, however, we can be certain of Telemachus' former ignorance. Athena had

²² Ford 1992: 110.

²³ The same elements of invocation are repeated in Telemachus' meeting with Menelaus (4.323–325, 331). Murnaghan (1987: 158–159) conditions Telemachus' search for Odysseus with a "desire to learn about his father's death," which it seems to me the openness of his inquiry does not support.

²⁴ For the way Homer allows characters in the *Odyssey* to tell most fully the stories that pertain to their own experiences, see Thornton 1988: 43–47.

²⁵ For a different view, see Finkelberg 1998: 94, n. 78.

said that Menelaus arrived home last (1.286), and this would seem to be the extent of Telemachus' knowledge. He shows his ignorance of Menelaus' long delay in Egypt by his request for Nestor to explain where Menelaus was when Agamemnon was murdered (3.247–253). Here at least we have an example of a *nostos* that is presented as being too recent to be recorded in song and at an intermediate stage between other returns and the incomplete return of Odysseus. This interpretation is supported by Telemachus' comment about Orestes' murder of Aegisthus and Clytemnestra, an event that anticipated Menelaus' return by a matter of hours (3.311). He says the Greeks will pass on Orestes' *kleos* and a song for future men (3.202–204), the implication of which is that no such song is available yet. The fact of Orestes' recent action enables us to take strictly this prospective view; indeed, in the *Odyssey* the telling of this tale is still on the lips of characters other than poets.²⁶ So too, when this event is first introduced into the poem it is in the conversation of Zeus and Athena. In this passage Aegisthus' punishment is treated as if it were claiming the gods' attention for the first time and so belongs to the present moment (*vûv*, 1.35, 43).

On Nestor's advice Telemachus goes next to Menelaus, who is again described as the last to have arrived (3.318). This reiteration of his recent return contributes to the overall impression that Telemachus is moving ever closer to the present stage of the unfolding return saga and anticipates song by greater and greater degrees. Before Telemachus even makes himself known, however, it becomes clear that Menelaus will be of limited assistance with the specific inquiry since he is at the same loss with regard to Odysseus' current whereabouts as everyone else (4.109–110). His independent worry establishes in Sparta the same mood of questioning where Odysseus is concerned that dominated the opening scene on Ithaca and before that the proem. Even so, Menelaus is able to offer what he learned from Proteus. At the time shortly before Menelaus returned home, Odysseus was trapped on Calypso's island longing to make his way home (4.555–560). While still leaving the question of Odysseus' return in doubt, this vital piece of information at least confirms that he has survived the fall of Troy by some seven years or so, making it more likely than ever before that he will eventually return home. Despite limited results, the quest for word of Odysseus can only be regarded as successful since it has actually come closer to the more optimistic of the two alternatives Athena had set as Telemachus' goal at the outset: εἰ μὲν κεν πατρὸς βίοντος καὶ νόστον ἀκούσῃς (1.287). Telemachus has learned through the report of Proteus' account that Odysseus is—or was at the time he was last seen—still alive and that his return home is the focus of his thoughts (4.558–560). Thus Telemachus' choice (though in the outcome he does not have to make it) can only be, as Athena advised, to endure the situation on Ithaca for another year in anticipation of his father's return.

²⁶ Athena as Mentēs (1.298–300); Nestor (3.193–198); Menelaus (4.512–547); cf. Odysseus' exchange with Agamemnon in the Underworld (11.457–464).

Telemachus' journey has taken him from the past of Phemius' song, to the near present of eyewitness accounts, and ends with Menelaus' account of Proteus, who combines the all-seeing ability of the Muses from later tradition with the possibility of vision into the future (4.561–569). Proteus speaks of Menelaus' fate in a truly prophetic manner,²⁷ and unbeknownst to Telemachus the report of Odysseus he receives is actually the present stage of this final *nostos* (1.13–15). In the real time perspective of the *Odyssey*, this is as close as one can get to the story—disseminated not by the Muses, but by rumor, report, and ultimately by prophetic utterance. When Telemachus returns to Ithaca he reports to Penelope everything he has learned of Odysseus' return (17.101–149) and introduces the first substantial addition to the knowledge preserved in Phemius' song.²⁸ Significantly perhaps, immediately after their conversation, it is again a figure of prophecy, now Theoclymenus, who then gazes into the future toward the final outcome of Odysseus' return (17.152–161). The sequence of events in the opening books of the *Odyssey* seems to show that Hesiod's famous statement on the powers of poetry to treat past, present, and future (*Theog.* 38; cf. above, note 11) does not apply to song as it functions in Odysseus' world. While the stories of Troy and the catastrophic stories of return, which are already at some temporal remove from the narrative moment, have already been turned into song, the story of Orestes' vengeance and Menelaus' own *nostos* apparently had yet to take this form. Meanwhile Odysseus' own physical absence from Ithaca is impressed upon us by his absence from both traditions. The relationship thus established between accounts given by heroes and the Muse-inspired songs of poets suggests that from his own late position Homer was able to imagine how the stories, which he must have learned in some form from poets older than he, could ultimately go back to the actual figures whose experiences these poems were intended to preserve. The vision of nascent song traditions thus created anticipates the role Odysseus will play at a later point in the poem.

ODYSSEUS AMONG THE PHAEACIANS AND THE TROUBLE WITH *KLEOS*

The movement from poetic artifact to living account introduced in Telemachus' adventures is redirected once the poem has caught up with its hero. Whereas Telemachus was prompted by Odysseus' absence from song and left Ithaca in search of a tradition that might lead to his father's successful return, Odysseus arrives on Scheria to find himself already the subject of song. In the performances of Demodocus, Odysseus comes face to face with himself, both as he once was under the walls of Troy and perhaps more significantly as he will be remembered by later tradition. It is an intensely emotional experience for Odysseus to be reminded of his past glories since entailed in this experience is the realization that he has given up some portion of his own vitality. For the living at least,

²⁷ Much as Teiresias does of Odysseus (11.100–137).

²⁸ Cf. Murnaghan 1987: 160.

immortalizing *kleos* carries with it a certain measure of loss. In the process of securing his own homecoming, Odysseus must confront the old songs of Troy and establish a theme that will bring him closer to the fulfilment of his journey and song of return. In this way the hero can be reconnected with the stories about him and so be placed in the category of others like Nestor, Menelaus, and Helen who made it back from Troy alive. Odysseus will then join them in being able to give his own reports about his experiences and so remove the threat that his *kleos* in song owes itself ultimately to his demise. In effect, Odysseus' status as a survivor will be defined to an important degree in direct relation to song and living accounts.

In the court of Alcinous, Demodocus sings three songs of which the first and last have Odysseus as their theme. The impulse for his first performance comes from the Muses, who prompt the bard to sing the glories of men (κλέα ἀνδρῶν, 8.73). This phrase is used elsewhere to describe the theme of song and carries a distinct sense of a distant past.²⁹ The glories (κλέα) are the things heard and the theme of Demodocus' present song likewise enjoys a hearing (κλέος) that reaches the sky (8.74). Homer imagines that Demodocus' theme (οἶμης) was framed in the songs of many poets and even stipulates its currency at that time (τότ', 8.74).³⁰ Meanwhile, the breadth of the theme's transmission (οὐρανὸν εὐρύν, 8.74) is itself demonstrated by the fact that even the distant Phaeacians are treated to it. The *Odyssey* in fact displays a special interest in εὐρύν as an epithet of κλέος in connection with the active transportation of *kleos* from one place to another that is envisioned in this poem as an aspect of a vital tradition.³¹ This description of the song's popularity also recalls Telemachus' defense of Phemius' *Nostoi* as the song to which the audience gives *kleos* because of its newness (1.351–352). The ample preparations Homer makes for Demodocus' song thus create a certain tension between the antiquated subject matter and its comparative newness as a theme in song. The surprise is of course that Odysseus plays a leading role in this song, and consequently the temporal ambiguities of the song's introduction are embodied in Odysseus himself, the living subject of a Muse-inspired song that properly concerns itself with the past. At this moment the epithet εὐρύν suddenly ceases to have its ideal meaning and the spread of Odysseus' *kleos* through song has actually been reversed since it ends up back with its protagonist instead of spreading ever more widely away from its point of origin. The contradictions involved here point to the unlikelihood of such an outcome and help define the unnatural circumstances in which these songs are performed.

²⁹ Hom. *Il.* 9.189, 9.524: τῶν πρόσθεν ἐπευθόμεθα κλέα ἀνδρῶν; Hes. *Theog.* 100: κλεῖα προτέρων ἀνθρώπων; Hom. *hymn* 32.18–19: κλέα φωτῶν αἰσομαι ἡμίθεων (the ἡμίθεοι are themselves defined as προτέρη γενεή at Hes. *Op.* 159–160).

³⁰ For discussions of οἶμη as a technical term cf. Ford 1992: 41–43 and Finkelberg 1998: 51–58, which distinguishes between οἶμη as theme and ἀοιδή as specific song.

³¹ Wide *kleos*: 1.344, 3.83, 3.204, 4.726, 4.816, 19.108, 19.333, 23.137; cf. 1.298, 9.20, 9.264. *Kleos* can be transported (φέρειν): 1.282–283, 2.216–217, 3.204, 19.333; cf. 16.461, 23.137. Cf. Olson 1995: 11–14.

In response to Demodocus' song Odysseus is brought to tears, while the Phaeacians for their part take pleasure in the song (8.83–92). His tears here and after Demodocus' final song on the Trojan Horse distinguish Odysseus from the other listeners, and yet tears are a completely appropriate reaction when his situation is analyzed with the implications of song in mind. Odysseus returns to the world of men only to find himself relegated to song, keeping company with two men, Achilles and Agamemnon, with whose early deaths Odysseus was all too familiar at this point (11.385–540). In his long absence, the only lingering aspect of his existence is his association with the deceased. His situation thus expresses differently the great dilemma of Achilles, whether to live without *kleos* or die with it (*Il.* 9.410–416). In that passage Achilles' *kleos* is described as imperishable (ἄφθιτον, 9.413), a term that points to the trouble with *kleos* for Odysseus.³² Since *kleos* is thought to outlast the person and to compensate for his mortality, it necessarily entails an expectation of the hero's death.³³ This idea still abides in the *Odyssey's* treatment of Achilles (24.93–94), although Odysseus' encounter with that hero in the Underworld provided little comfort in this compromise (11.478–491). As Demodocus has shown, Odysseus' fame in song is already firmly established, and Odysseus' own claim to this effect (9.19–20) underscores the ambiguity of his position because he does not look forward to *kleos* as is typical, but can assert it himself as a fact already proved by Demodocus' songs.³⁴ Unbeknownst to Odysseus, at this moment his *kleos* is also being transmitted on Ithaca and throughout Greece (1.344, 4.724–726 = 4.814–816), presumably the product of reports of the Trojan War like those of his former companions Nestor and Menelaus. There too, the separation of the man from his *kleos*, as well as his absence from the growing tradition of *nostoi* songs, leads all too easily to the fear and assumption that Odysseus might have perished already. Penelope assumes as much in the passages just cited, and Telemachus too has made Odysseus' death at Troy a precondition of a *kleos* to follow (ὀπίσσω, 1.240; cf. 24.32–33), as has Odysseus himself (5.308–312). In short, when Odysseus washes up on the shore of Scheria, he ends up on the wrong side of his *kleos* because of the false implication of his own death that it entails.

In his *katabasis* Odysseus undergoes a kind of death in order to secure his safe return. That scene serves as a metaphor for his present status as a man who is both living and dead at once, and it is the more effective in this regard because of Achilles' apparent reevaluation of his exchange of death for *kleos*. Even more important for this discussion, his encounter with song as it is practiced by the Sirens (12.37–54, 184–191) tempts Odysseus to forget his *nostos* (12.42–43) and abandon himself to his past song of Troy, so that by experiencing a real death

³² On ἄφθιτον with κλέος, see Nagy 1979: 174–189.

³³ Cf. Murnaghan 1987: 150–152.

³⁴ Segal (1992: 87) notes the anomaly of Odysseus' personal claim to his own *kleos*. Song and the *kleos* it preserves are consistently associated with the distant future; for example, 3.204, 8.580, 24.196–201; *Il.* 6.357–358.

he would give up all opportunity to provide themes for future songs.³⁵ This confrontation with the Sirens seems to imply the danger of confronting one's own *kleos* in song. These experiences portray Odysseus as a man returned from the gates of death; however, among the Phaeacians Odysseus discovers that he is, in a manner of speaking, still imperilled by the powers of song. Like the world of the *Odyssey* more generally, Odysseus is a man poised on the brink of being remembered and his sadness can be explained as his response to the realization of just how narrowly he has escaped the threat of passing out of actual existence. Now he must retrieve himself from the insubstantiality of song, which he does first by setting himself in authority over his tradition and then by carrying his story forward beyond the limits of song.

Some time after Demodocus' second song of Ares and Aphrodite, Odysseus ceremoniously praises the bard (8.477–481). Strangely his praise is directed not at the second song which actually gave him pleasure (8.367–369), but at the song that moved him to tears (8.487–491). He is in awe of Demodocus' ability to recount so accurately all the experiences of the Greeks in the Trojan War, and to explain this ability he supposes that either the Muses or Apollo were his teachers (8.488). As with the invocation before the Catalogue of Ships in the *Iliad* (2.484–493), divine support is thought to give poets access to a kind of eyewitness perspective on the events described (ὥς τέ που ἢ αὐτὸς παρεὼν ἢ ἄλλου ἀκούσας, 8.491). But here uniquely the tradition of song, represented by the poet and the Muses, ends up in the presence of the hero himself. Though Odysseus has maintained his anonymity to this point, Homer's audience has the advantage of knowing that it is only by his own involvement that he can assert how accurately Demodocus treated his subject matter.³⁶ When Odysseus next requests that Demodocus sing of the Trojan Horse, he does so with several purposes in mind. With its emphasis on Odysseus (8.494–495) this song will promote his own *kleos* especially and so give further point to the ideal of *autopsia* already at stake in this passage's appraisal of song. But these points are coordinated with a challenge that frames this address. If Demodocus can sing this song with the same degree of accuracy as the first, Odysseus will proclaim the poet's divine gift of song to all (496–498).³⁷ Whether or not we believe in actual divine inspiration, what is most important here is the way Odysseus establishes himself as an authority over the bard and his tradition that encompasses the Muses, not only directing the theme of song but promising to pass judgment on its accuracy. Ultimately, even the Muses' knowledge cannot compete with the authority of actual experience. Here then we see Odysseus

³⁵ This point is supported by Pucci's (1998) observation of specifically Iliadic qualities in the Siren episode. Cf. Segal 1992: 100–104 for the perversion of song represented by the Sirens.

³⁶ The exact implication of κατὰ κόσμον (8.489) is disputed; for discussion and bibliography, see Finkelberg 1998: 121–130; cf. Walsh 1984: 7–9 and Ford 1992: 122–125. Note the persistence of the idea of orderly cataloguing as a sign of truth and persuasiveness in Lys. 1.5.

³⁷ For reciprocity between poet and the subject of song, cf. Nagy 1974: 250–251; Thalmann 1984: 132; Goldhill 1991: 92.

emerging confidently from his place in song to actually take control over it in preparation for the revelation of his identity to his host that must come.

Odysseus' renewed tears are the only indication we are given of the bard's success. Demodocus' song still leaves Odysseus trapped in his past and it is a past whose glories are far away from him now. His tears on this second occasion are more amply described by a simile (8.521–531) that is especially important for understanding the ambivalence of song as it pertains to the living. Odysseus cries like a woman whose husband has fallen while fighting on behalf of his city. Far from creating any impression that Odysseus views the glories of his past with pride, the description implies instead an overwhelming feeling of loss at hearing his most significant achievement recalled in song.³⁸ To the extent that this simile intensifies the essential act of crying it also forces us to compare the cause of sorrow. If Odysseus is the captured woman now deprived of the autonomy of her previous freedom, the glories of his song are the fallen hero, taking his final breaths. Thus for Odysseus the experience of hearing himself represented in song resembles that of a person mourning over the death of one of the most dearly loved family members. What should have been a song of celebration is instead interpreted by its living protagonist as a threnody. The description of Odysseus' reaction thus shows more definitively the fear of death that was only implied by Penelope's similarly tearful response to Phemius' song of *nostoi* (1.336; 340–342).

In Odysseus' case, Demodocus' ability to retell the events of his life with such accuracy effectively drives a wedge between the hero and his past. As a subject of song Odysseus loses some control over his own person, just as the fallen soldier's wife of the simile looks forward to a life of slavery in which she will relinquish authority over her person. As Agamemnon's case illustrates (3.267–272), a song can function as a virtual replacement for the hero. When he departed from Mycenae, he left a poet to keep his house in order and it was only by removing the memory of Agamemnon which the poet presumably maintained that Aegisthus was able to persuade Clytemnestra to live with him and join in his plans eventually to eliminate Agamemnon. In this episode the identification of song with hero—while he lives and is absent—is conceived as being so strong that the death of Agamemnon's song can prefigure the actual death of the hero. Here too it is interesting that Agamemnon exerts control over the poet and his song in order to maintain his identity while away. In this respect the challenge Odysseus poses to Demodocus takes on new meaning. We may see in it an attempt to discover the limits of song with regard to Odysseus' experiences; it is at the point where song leaves off that Odysseus' status as a living survivor becomes important since he will then carry the tale forward himself. Odysseus' inclusion

³⁸ For the idea that tears mark the response of those somehow close to the subject of song, cf. Rüter 1969: 237; Nagy 1974: 255–257; Nagy 1979: 97–101. Others interpret Odysseus' second bout of tears in close connection with the simile that follows and see his reaction as an indication of a greater understanding of human suffering which allows him to commiserate with his fallen enemy: cf. Lord 1963: 50; Segal 1992: 120–122; Redfield 1973: 152–154; Dimcock 1989: 104.

among the living—the central theme of the entire poem—will then be worked out and demonstrated most effectively when he assumes the authoritative role of narrator of his experiences.

With Odysseus' second bout of tears Alcinous can no longer restrain his curiosity over his guest's seemingly inappropriate reaction to the performances. His inability to comprehend Odysseus' response is directly connected to his view of song. As the case of Troy's fall shows, the gods spin out ruin for mortals in order that there may be a song for later generations (8.579–580).³⁹ This presentation of song as the divinely authorized *telos* of human suffering is predicated on actual death (ὄλεθρον, 579) and so emphasizes the notion that epic song properly deals with the past. Influenced by this view, Alcinous supposes Odysseus has lost some relative or companion under the walls of Troy (581–586), since it is inconceivable to him that a figure from song could actually be sitting in his hall. Accordingly, when Alcinous later praises Odysseus' personal account, he can only describe the impression Odysseus has made on him by resorting to the experience more familiar to him (and Homer's audience) of hearing such tales from singers (11.363–371). Nor can Alcinous' view of song be treated as idiosyncratic since it shares its concentration on ruin and death with the earlier references to Phemius' song and points further to the implications of the preceding simile for Odysseus' tears.⁴⁰

Alcinous now intervenes and at last urges his anonymous guest to identify himself. Odysseus does not miss the opportunity and proceeds to report his wanderings since the time he left Troy, carrying the account presented by Demodocus forward to his arrival on Calypso's island where he had left off before (7.241–297). He stops short of repeating himself to the same audience since that is the task of bards.⁴¹ Having returned to the human world, Odysseus can at last supply an answer to the question on everybody's lips and complete the songs of the past where they petered out. Odysseus' meeting with Demodocus has been intensely studied and many fruitful observations have been made based on the identification of Odysseus as bard both on Scheria and in his tales on Ithaca in the later books.⁴² And yet, by pressing this correlation unconditionally we run the risk of obscuring the effect Homer seems to have managed so carefully from the start of his poem. Odysseus is in actual fact no

³⁹ A similar view is expressed by Helen (*Il.* 6.356–358).

⁴⁰ Phemius' song is the νόστον . . . / λυγρόν (1.326–327) and the point Telemachus derives from the song is: οὐ γὰρ Ὀδυσσεὺς οἶος ἀπώλεσε νόστιμον ἦμαρ / ἐν Τροίῃ, πολλοὶ δὲ καὶ ἄλλοι φῶτες ὄλοντο (1.354–355). To a certain extent then, even Homer's fictional bards of the past maintain epic distance from their subjects: cf. Nagy 1990: 150. This helps to explain why Nestor and Menelaus, who are still living, are treated as offering something different from Phemius, as though survivors were categorically excluded from the purview of song.

⁴¹ Cf. Finkelberg 1998: 93.

⁴² On Odysseus as bard, cf. Rüter 1969: 237–238; Moulton 1977: 145–153; Segal 1992: 85–109; Thalmann 1984: 157–184; Murnaghan 1987: 148–154; Lowenstam 1993: 171; de Jong 2001: 221.

more a bard than either Nestor or Menelaus were earlier.⁴³ Like them he is presented as the original source of knowledge for events that would, given time, become the subject of song. When he begins the account of his wanderings, which will fill the next four books, Odysseus does something that marks this entertainment as something altogether different from what has preceded. By emphatically setting his name upon the story's content and laying claim to the misfortunes as his own (9.12–20), Odysseus does what no bard could.⁴⁴ These harsh experiences are the gifts of the gods to him (9.15) and they contrast sharply with the pleasing songs that are thought to be the Muses' gift to poets. As a result, when Odysseus launches into his actual account (9.37–38), there is no demand for mediation by invocation, only the authoritative voice of a primary witness passing on to his listeners the tale of his own *nostos* in the first person (νόστον ἐμὸν . . . ἐνίσπω, 37). With Odysseus at hand the songs of Demodocus become suddenly antiquated, just as Phemius' song was proved to be by Telemachus' journey. As in that case, Odysseus here replaces the poet as the culminating entertainment, holding his listeners under his spell throughout the night (11.373–376).⁴⁵

This is not to deny an important connection between Odysseus' assumption of the narrator's role and poetry. From the perspective adopted by the poem, Odysseus becomes the first authority for any song that will recount his wanderings, and at the same time, the sustained first-person narrative of these books allows the *Odyssey* to reach the height of its poetic claim. By presenting a sequence of events covering retrospectively the major portion of Odysseus' travails as though it comes from the hero himself, the poem effectively places itself before the tradition on which it depends, banishing the Muses to an undefined future. In effect, the poem shows itself able to achieve the poetic ideal of *autopsia* that Odysseus had expressed just moments before in his appraisal of Demodocus' songs (8.489–491).⁴⁶ Odysseus thus becomes complicit both in the making of the *Odyssey* and also in its claim to superiority. He is an extension of Homer's own poetic voice and helps create the impression that the *Odyssey's* maker is somehow more effective and privileged than the other poets within the poem who

⁴³ The passages usually cited to support this view certainly elevate poetry, but do not conclusively make Odysseus a bard. That Odysseus' tales should be compared by way of simile to the effect of a bard actually precludes thinking that he is in fact a bard (11.363–371, 17.518–521). Instead, these passages emphasize the way Odysseus has made the bard obsolete. Strictly speaking, to say that Odysseus is a singer on the basis of 14.463–467 would also require that we imagine Odysseus as laughing and dancing here as well; the passage primarily brings to mind transgression and doing what one ought not.

⁴⁴ Cf. Scodel 1998: 173–174.

⁴⁵ Finkelberg (1998: 91–94) views "enchantment" (θέλγειν) as applying only to new information of the sort Odysseus can supply, but familiar songs cannot.

⁴⁶ Pedrick (1992: 52 and 58) believes Homer is already setting up Odysseus' personal account in the poem.

cannot access the tale which Homer presents.⁴⁷ On Scheria Odysseus comes away unscathed from the glories of his past and, by eluding the Siren-like allure of his *kleos* at Troy, establishes the vitality of his own person and secures the possibility of future acts of glory in his successful return home and victory over the suitors. In this we can appreciate the *Odyssey's* self-aggrandizing claim; for it is the *kleos* of this return that forms the chief component of the *Odyssey*, the poem that survived and was established by Odysseus. Meanwhile the songs of Demodocus lost their independent status to become incorporated within it.

At the first opportunity after he reestablishes himself with his family, Odysseus gives Penelope a full record of his experiences after the fall of Troy (23.310–343) and reperforms more completely Telemachus' report on his father's fortunes shortly before (17.101–149). Even as Odysseus presents his own report he still has an eye toward his song. From the ranks of the suitors only two were spared, on Telemachus' advice—Medon the herald and Phemius the bard (22.356–360). Phemius' plea to Odysseus is significant, for he warns Odysseus that he will regret killing the singer in the future (αὐτῷ τοι μετόπισθ' ἄχος ἔσσεται, 22.345). The threat, as both Odysseus and Phemius realize and the poem has now shown, is based on the traditional idea that without a singer the final transformation of Odysseus' experiences into poetic glory cannot be achieved.⁴⁸ Nonetheless the double emphasis on the future in Phemius' warning returns the *kleos* of song to its proper place and confirms the vitality that Odysseus has now regained. At the same time that the *Odyssey* works toward a consummation and culmination of the tradition of returns, the living voice of Odysseus, with its major contribution to the poem, boldly distinguishes the *Odyssey* as a song predicated not on death, like Phemius' *Nostoi* and the tale of Agamemnon particularly, but on survival.⁴⁹

The significance of Odysseus' view to the formation of his song is made clearer when it becomes a theme taken up by Agamemnon in the second *Nekuia* of the final book. From the descending spirits of the suitors he learns of Odysseus' safe return to Ithaca and reunion with Penelope. Odysseus' good fortune, in which the Mycenaean king himself rejoices, depends on Penelope, and accordingly Agamemnon extols her virtues (24.191–196). Moments before in his conversation with Achilles, Agamemnon made death the defining feature of his own *nostos* (ἐν νόστῳ γάρ μοι Ζεὺς μῆσατο λυγρὸν ὄλεθρον, 24.96). His diction here recalls themes treated by Phemius in his *Nostoi* and forges Agamemnon's

⁴⁷ Ford (1992: 110–121) discusses in detail elements of competition in the Phaeacian episode, though he suggests a showdown between Demodocus and Odysseus.

⁴⁸ As one of the anonymous referees suggests to me, Medon's role is not without interest here since he too conveys his master's words to others. This is the very point Odysseus makes when he bids Medon to proclaim to others the simple (if banal) lesson to be derived from the suitors' experience, namely "how much better εὐεργεσίη is than κακοεργίη" (22.374).

⁴⁹ In this respect Odysseus' role as narrator further illustrates the different perspective on *kleos* shown in Odysseus' meeting with the Iliadic Achilles in the Underworld (11.488–491); cf. Rüter 1969: 252–253; Nagy 1979: 35–36; Clay 1983: 96–112.

place in that song. In addition he specifically implicates Zeus in devising this outcome and thereby recapitulates Alcinous' assertion that gods bring doom on men that there may be a song for them (8.579–580). Zeus' plan for events that would eventually produce this song has been alluded to earlier by Nestor (καὶ τότε δὴ Ζεὺς λυγρὸν ἐνὶ φρεσὶ μήδετο νόστον / Ἀργεῖοις, 3.132–133), and before him by Telemachus when he makes Zeus ultimately responsible for the themes of Phemius' song (1.347–349). From the opening scene on Olympus, Zeus, under the influence of Athena especially, is shown to be orchestrating Odysseus' *nostos* too; but with its happy ending the *Odyssey* now ultimately diverges from the pattern of Agamemnon's own miserable homecoming. Appropriately then, it is Agamemnon who foretells the creation of a poem in Penelope's honor that will balance the song of Clytemnestra's disgrace (24.196–202). The song alluded to from the poem's internal perspective is of course the *Odyssey* itself.⁵⁰ With these expressions of confidence about its genesis, the *Odyssey* takes one last glance back at its initially ambivalent status relative to the other *nostoi* traditions, from the comfortable position of having now successfully avoided the ruin such a song would impose on its hero.

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⁵⁰ Cf. Clay 1983: 109–112 and Lowenstam 1993: 231–232.

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