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Demodocus, Odysseus, and the Double Standard of Authority in Speech

Abstract: *Od.* 8 and 22 provide valuable information about the profession of the bard. An analysis of the relationship between Odysseus and Demodocus and between Odysseus and Phemius shows that the bard's voice is authoritative not only because he learns the subject matter of his song from the gods, but also because his story is validated by those who were protagonists or eyewitnesses to the events narrated. Even in epic poetry, before historiography, there is a reflection on the conditions under which an oral tale can be considered reliable.

Keywords: *Odyssey*; Homeric poetry; composition in performance; poetic authority.

Book 8 of the *Odyssey* contains the most complete and detailed description of a singer in action. It is uncommon in Homeric poems, and more generally in archaic epics, to see a poet in action depicted, and for this reason the entirety of Book 8 constitutes a document of exceptional importance for those who wish to understand the mechanisms of *composition in performance*, in all the wide range of manifestations that this practice entails. In this paper we will focus mainly on the interaction between Demodocus, the resident poet at Alcinous' court, and his audience, with the mysterious guest who is the object of the Phaeacians' attentions. We shall see how the relationship established between Odysseus and Demodocus in the course of the various epic performances attended by the hero allows us to follow the lively process of the construction of an authoritative narrative. The premises established in Book 8 are also able to explain the particular form taken by the subsequent narrative of Books 9–12, the *Apologoi*, perhaps the most famous and universally known section of the entire poem.

Demodocus enters the scene almost immediately. After the banquet preparations and once a large audience has gathered in the palace of Alcinous, the herald Pontonous leads the bard into the hall.

Od. 8. 57–92

Filled were the porticoes and courts and rooms with the men that gathered, for many there were, both young and old. For them Alcinous slaughtered twelve sheep, [60] and eight white-tusked boars, and two oxen of shambling gait. These they flayed and dressed, and made ready a goodly feast. Then the herald drew near, leading the good minstrel, whom the Muse loved above all other men, and gave him both good and evil; of his sight she deprived

him, but gave him the gift of sweet song. [65] For him Pontonous, the herald, set a silver-studded chair in the midst of the banqueters, leaning it against a tall pillar; and he hung the clear-toned lyre from a peg close above his head, and showed him how to reach it with his hands. And beside him he placed a basket and a beautiful table, [70] and a cup of wine, to drink when his heart should bid him. So they put forth their hands to the good cheer lying ready before them. But when they had put from them the desire of food and drink, the Muse moved the minstrel to sing of the glorious deeds of warriors, from that lay the fame whereof had then reached broad heaven, [75] even the quarrel of Odysseus and Achilles, son of Peleus, how once they strove with furious words at a rich feast of the gods, and Agamemnon, king of men, was glad at heart that the best of the Achaeans were quarrelling; for thus Phoebus Apollo, in giving his response, had told him that it should be, [80] in sacred Pytho, when he passed over the threshold of stone to enquire of the oracle. For then the beginning of woe was rolling upon Trojans and Danaans through the will of great Zeus.

This song the famous minstrel sang; but Odysseus grasped his great purple cloak with his stout hands, [85] and drew it down over his head, and hid his comely face; for he had shame of the Phaeacians as he let fall tears from beneath his eyebrows. Yea, and as often as the divine minstrel ceased his singing, Odysseus would wipe away his tears and draw the cloak from off his head, and taking the two-handed cup would pour libations to the gods. [90] But as often as he began again, and the nobles of the Phaeacians bade him sing, because they took pleasure in his lay, Odysseus would again cover his head and moan. (transl. A. T. Murray)

The first thing said about Demodocus concerns his blindness: he had been much loved by the Muses, but the goddesses, to compensate for the gift of poetry, had taken away his sight. In accordance with a tradition widespread in various cultures, the inspired bard is blind.¹ He sees things with an ‘inner’ eye, which distin-

¹ See Scoditti 2003, 29–30: “In Kitawa, too, they think that a great poet must be blind: he closes his eyes to the outside world to open them wide to his mind. He is a man who looks inside himself, and in this inner silence he runs after images, even those of ancestors and old poets. And in the silence of the mind *he sees* the words that he gradually aligns one after the other” (my transl.). In the Japanese culture of the Heian period (8th–12th century CE), the activity of *biwa hōshi* flourished, *blind* Buddhist priests and monks who performed ancient stories of oral tradition while accompanying themselves with a string instrument called *biwa*. In Sicily, one could watch until the 1960s the performances of the “orbi”, a congregation established by the Jesuits in 1661 that aimed to disseminate poetic texts in Sicilian dialect on religious subjects to the people. In Spain, the term “ciego” was used to designate street musicians in general. In the Dalmatian area, Giulio Bajamonti recalls the custom of inviting oral poets to cheer fairs and festivals, “nel qual musico uffizio d’ordinario s’impegnavano i ciechi”, “where the blind were ordinarily engaged to play and sing” (Bajamonti 1797, 80; my transl.). On the blindness of soothsayers and prophets see Buxton 1980 and Camassa 1982. On the specific blindness of Demodocus see Marg 1971, 22–23. On the blindness of epic poets in different traditions see Bowra 1952, 420–422; Lanata 1963, 10 *ad* 64; and Ercolani (forthcoming).

guishes him from other human beings, who are bound exclusively to the perceptions of the ‘outer’ eye. Demodocus is immediately presented as a prominent figure, a man who already by the marks he wears on his body declares the special relationship he has with the divinities of poetry.²

Proportionate to the prestige Demodocus enjoys appears the consideration with which the herald Pontonous treats him. Demodocus is made to sit on an elegant seat, decorated with silver studs; beside him is placed a beautifully crafted small table on which are placed a basket with food and a cup for drinking wine “whenever he wishes”. The herald then hangs the *phorminx*, the instrument indispensable to the success of the performance, above the singer’s head and teaches him how to find it.³ In the banquet hall, Demodocus, leaning on a tall column, occupies the centre, a position that makes him equally visible to all and allows the establishment of that bond of empathy that constitutes one of the most important characteristics of oral communication.

At the end of the banquet, the bard may begin his performance. In this first performance, the choice of theme is dictated solely by reasons internal to the bard’s mind. It is the Muse, in fact, who urges Demodocus to sing of a theme whose fame then reached high heaven: v. 74 οἴμης τῆς τότ’ ἄρα κλέος οὐρανὸν εὐρὸν ἴκανε. The use of this famous formula serves not only to emphasise that the theme on which Demodocus is induced to sing was then famous, but also to insinuate the possibility that, precisely by virtue of his universal fame, the *αἰοδός* might have come to know that matter even in the remote and inaccessible world where the Phaeacians live,⁴ a detail that, as we shall see later, is of far from secondary importance.

The inspiration of the Muses has a pregnant significance. In this case it is the Muses who choose to sing an episode whose protagonist is the unknown host. Among the infinite possible topics, the choice falls on the quarrel that opposed Odysseus to Achilles, an episode unknown to the *Iliad*, unknown to the poems

2 As Grandolini 1996, 116 clearly explains, given the exceptional nature of the gift of poetry, which gives the poet access to the divine sphere through knowledge of events at which he has not been present, it is necessary for the singer to have an evil to restore the cosmic balance based on the opposition men/gods; see also Schadewaldt 1951, 70.

3 The importance of these objects in describing the activity of the singer is emphasised by Segal 1992, 24–25.

4 According to Olson 1995, 13–14, when Odysseus introduces himself to Polyphemus (*Od.* 9, 259–266, esp. 264), his words presuppose that the stories of the Trojan War have also reached the remote and inaccessible world of the Cyclopes.

of the *Cycle*, and known only through this account of the *Odyssey*,⁵ thanks to which we learn that this quarrel was mentioned in a prophecy received at Delphi by Agamemnon as a sign of the imminent conclusion of the Trojan War. If recounted in full, this episode could have taught us something interesting about the treatment of a Trojan theme outside what we know of the Epic Cycle, but unfortunately we are frustrated in our desire for details, because Demodocus' account is reported in the form of a very brief summary (only seven verses, 75–82) and in the third person. On the other hand, the summary form and third-person narration are the 'normal' way in which the words of second-degree bards recounting an epic story within an epic poem are reported.⁶

The performance of Demodocus generates a split in the audience, which reacts in two contrasting ways: on the one hand, there are the Phaeacians, who greatly appreciate the performance and urge the bard to resume his singing whenever it is interrupted;⁷ on the other hand, in absolute solitude, there is the unknown guest, who bursts into a fit of weeping upon hearing Demodocus' tale and only ceases weeping when the singer stops, to resume weeping, his head hidden in his cloak, whenever the singing resumes. If one considers that the banquet and the epic performance had been organised precisely to honour the recently arrived guest, Odysseus' weeping decrees the complete failure of Alcinous' initiative, who immediately realises that the performance does not please his guest at all and takes steps to divert the entertainment in another direction. The choice of theme could also be judged unfortunate in relation to Demodocus, were it not for the fact that it was the infallible goddesses, the Muses, who induced him to opt for this theme. And then emerges the real reason why Demodocus' choice fell on this episode: Odysseus' direct involvement in the story told is the reason for his weeping. His reaction would be abnormal for anyone except one who, hearing the tale of those distant events, was forced to retrace with his memory

5 It is difficult, not to say impossible, to specify whether the existence of an account on this theme is the result of invention or corresponds to reality. On the different positions see Grandolini 1996, 119.

6 The issue is quite wide-ranging. I have tried to give an explanation of this phenomenon in Palmisciano 2007.

7 This episode very clearly describes the fact, already highlighted by Lord 1960, 14–17, that a singer's performance is always the subject of a negotiation between the singer and his audience, which has an active role in guiding the poet's choices; see also Skafte Jensen 2009, 46–47 on this point. Moreover, the performance is not a continuum that cannot be interrupted, but involves a *stop-and-go* procedure that is useful for the singer precisely in order to verify the reactions of his audience more carefully. If he is incited to continue, as happens in the court of the Phaeacians, then the performance is fulfilling its purpose and one can continue on the same track. On the relationship between bard and audience, see the systematic study by Segal 1992.

the painful stories of which he was protagonist. This natural reaction puts Odysseus in a special light, makes him an object of special attention on the part of Alcinous, who begins to glimpse behind the appearance of the castaway asking for help and hospitality the identity of a hero. The prince of the Phaeacians immediately takes the initiative to overcome the impasse and proposes to move outside to admire a spectacle of athletic competition. Demodocus is also led by Pontonous to the competition field and once again the consideration shown to him is emphasised, demonstrating the social esteem he enjoys. The herald, in fact, led him along the same path that the other princes of the Phaeacians had taken: *Od.* 8. 107f. ἦρχε δὲ τῷ αὐτὴν ὁδὸν ἣν περ οἱ ἄλλοι / Φαιήκων οἱ ἄριστοι.

The competitions take place before the eyes of a multitude of spectators who are all enthusiastic and take great delight in the spectacle (vv. 109–132, in part, v. 131), but at this point an unexpected twist occurs: Laodamas, the son of Alcinous, turns to Odysseus to invite him to take part in the competitions, but Odysseus shrugs off the idea, recalling that his soul and body have been severely tested by the many hardships he has experienced. More than glory in the contests, he longs for a return home. This response provokes the insolence of Euryalus, who insults Odysseus by saying that he was clearly not a skilled athlete, but rather a merchant accustomed to worrying above all about the integrity of the load he was transporting by sea. To these words Odysseus responds indignantly with words appropriate to the ethos of a man of heroic status. He then grabs a discus and, after weighing it up, hurls it far beyond all the throws of his younger competitors, thanks also to the help of Athena, who manifests herself to the hero. Feeling supported by the goddess, Odysseus utters words of challenge to all the young Phaeacians, calling on them to compete with him in any athletic speciality, including running. A few fragments emerge from Odysseus' proud words that help reconstruct the hero's identity. Odysseus boasts that he is second in archery only to Philoctetes, and recalls that, with the sole exception of Philoctetes, he was able to outdo all the other Achaeans in this speciality (vv. 219–220). At this point Alcinous intervenes. He is displeased by Odysseus' resentful reaction and reminds the hero that the Phaeacians are a peaceful people, who do not excel in wrestling and boxing, but in running and seafaring. He therefore invites the best of the Phaeacian dancers to put on a dance performance under the leadership of Demodocus.

Even the sporting entertainment, therefore, did not achieve the purpose that Alcinous had intended. The host once again is displeased, even though he had at first enjoyed the spectacle offered. However, both the first performance of Demodocus and the episode of the races must be considered, rather than failures of Alcinous – evidently not enjoying one of his best days as host – as steps towards

the identification of the mysterious host, who has already revealed himself to be one of the Achaean heroes who fought beneath the walls of Troy.

At this point the performance begins. Demodocus stands in the centre of the space prepared for the performance (v. 260 χορόν) surrounded by a group of talented, young dancers who perform a dance on a mythical subject. This time there is a diaphragm between the singer and his audience that prevents the empathy typical of epic performance. Demodocus does not interact with the audience, but with the group of dancers he leads, with the sound of the phorminx and the voice of the song, in an orchestral-mimetic performance based on a mythical theme linked to hierogamy. This is not a narrative epic performance⁸ but a spectacular interlude that has a special discourse status and probably reproduces dramatic actions of a ritual character (see Palmisciano 2012). It is no coincidence that Demodocus' performance of this piece is not introduced by any formula that recalls inspiration from the Muses, nor is anything said about the chosen theme. It was evidently a traditional mythical theme, well known to both the bard and his audience, which required no other skill to be transformed into poetic discourse than that of finding an effective form of communication. At the end of this second performance, Odysseus finally feels joy, as do all the other Phaeacians (v. 368 τέρπετ' ἐνὶ φρεσὶν ἦσιν ἀκούων ἠδὲ καὶ ἄλλοι / Φαίηκες). The performance of Demodocus and the dancers recomposed the unity of the audience. This newfound harmony is followed by the delivery of the rich hospitable gifts by all thirteen princes of the Phaeacians who rule the country. Odysseus is reconciled with Euryalus, who now addresses him with appropriate words and presents him with a splendid sword. Then he is led back into the house, washed, and dressed in beautiful clothes. At last Odysseus has recovered his heroic appearance. What is still missing for his heroic identity to be fully restored is his name, his own, that of his father, and that of his homeland. Odysseus re-enters the banquet hall and sits next to Alcinous. This too is a significant difference from the first performance, when nothing is said about his position in the hall during the banquet. Evidently the intention is to emphasise that the guest is now in the position he is entitled to based not only on his status as a foreign guest, but also on the social rank that his outward appearance declares. Once the banquet is over, the scene is repeated of Demodocus' entrance into the hall. The bard is 'honoured by the people' (v. 472 λαοῖσι τετιμῆνον), an epithet that reminds us, once again, of the high esteem in which the poet is held in this ideal society. But after the bard

⁸ For this reason, when Odysseus compliments Demodocus a little later on for his skills as a singer (8. 487–491), he does not mention the *Loves of Ares and Aphrodite* at all, but refers only to the first performance.

has taken his position in the centre of the room, the initiative, this time, is taken by Odysseus. He cuts a succulent, fatty piece from the rear of a roast pig and hands it to Pontonous to offer to Demodocus. This rich portion of meat, a veritable γέρας,⁹ is the way in which he wants to show the poet the consideration he deserves, since the bards are worthy of honour (τιμῆ) and respect (αἰδῶς) among all men, because the Muse, who greatly loved the lineage of the bards, taught them the ‘themes’ (v. 480 s. οὐνεκα ἄρα σφέας / οἶμας Μοῦσ’ ἐδίδαξε, φίλησε δὲ φῦλον αἰδιῶν). The bard willingly accepts Odysseus’ homage. Then all the guests approach the table and, when they are full of wine and food, the first to speak is once again Odysseus, who makes an explicit request to the singer:

Od. 8. 487–498

Demodocus, verily above all mortal men do I praise thee, whether it was the Muse, the daughter of Zeus, that taught thee, or Apollo; for well and truly dost thou sing of the fate of the Achaeans, [490] all that they wrought and suffered, and all the toils they endured, as though haply thou hadst thyself been present, or hadst heard the tale from another. But come now, change thy theme, and sing of the building of the horse of wood, which Epeius made with Athena’s help, the horse which once Odysseus led up into the citadel as a thing of guile, [495] when he had filled it with the men who sacked Ilios. If thou dost indeed tell me this tale aright, I will declare to all mankind that the god has of a ready heart granted thee the gift of divine song.

(transl. A. T. Murray)

Odysseus’ elaborate speech is clearly divided into two complementary sections: the first (vv. 487–491) contains a eulogy of Demodocus’ poetic qualities, stating that he is an authentically inspired poet; in the second, a request is made to sing a new and different theme: the deception of the wooden horse that led to the destruction of Troy. This dense discourse contains some fundamental concepts. First of all, Demodocus is praised because he sang the fate of the Achaeans perfectly (v. 489 λίην γὰρ κατὰ κόσμον). Evidently, Odysseus says, either the Muse or Apollo himself instructed the poet, because he sang those facts with the same competence that a direct witness or someone who had heard them from the voice of an eyewitness might have had (v. 491 ὡς τέ που ἢ αὐτὸς παρεὼν ἢ ἄλλου ἀκούσας).¹⁰ This last statement cannot go unnoticed, because in the course of Book 8 a

⁹ In *Il.* 7. 321 Agamemnon gives Ajax, fresh from a glorious fight with Hector, a rich piece of the back of a roasted ox. The verb used to indicate the act of bestowing this privileged portion is γεραίρω.

¹⁰ The formula seems to have a generalising character and universal validity. However, it can also be understood in a sense appropriate to the specific context of Book 8, as does Accame 1963, 281, according to whom blindness prevents Demodocus from being an eye-witness to any event

great deal has accumulated to build up the portrait of Demodocus as an authoritative poet, a voice respected and listened to by the community within which he performs his function and in which he occupies a high position. That he was a man favoured by the Muses was said from the outset, ever since it was mentioned that his blindness was a tangible sign of Demodocus' special relationship with the divinity. The praise of Odysseus would have been perfectly coherent with the way Demodocus has been described so far, if v. 491, which we have quoted above, did not intervene to complicate the picture by introducing a second criterion of speech authorisation, of a completely different nature. Demodocus' words are not *only* true because Demodocus' voice is inspired by the Muse, but they are *also* true because a protagonist of the facts, namely Odysseus, certifies their truthfulness by stating that that account corresponded to the truth of the facts as if it had been given by an eyewitness or by someone who had learned those facts from an eyewitness account.¹¹ This second level of authorisation is secular in nature, in that it is completely beyond the control of divinity and places on the same level the words one can speak about events one has witnessed or learned from other witnesses and the words spoken by the poet solely by divine inspiration. It is the human criterion that makes the traditional description of poetry as a gift from the Muses credible. It is the second level of discourse authorisation that demonstrates the divine origin of Demodocus' skill. The discourse seems to anticipate methodological reflections on the eye and ear as sources of information that will be central to Herodotus' work. These are reflections that we are used to ascribing to the historiographical sphere, whereas perhaps it is an extension of considerations on the veracity of oral discourse that this passage from the *Odyssey* allows us to move back in time.¹²

and thus the origin of his song is detached from any external contact; see also below on αὐτοδίδακτος in *Od.* 22. 347.

11 The problem of the veracity of the tale would be foreign to the Homeric poems according to Verdenius 1983, 25–26, 38 (at 25: “Homer seems to be unconscious of the fact that beautiful poetry may be untrue”). For Verdenius, every epic tale, insofar as it is inspired by the Muses, is true.

12 The ‘historical’ character of the idea of the truth of discourse that emerges in the Homeric poems is supported with good arguments by Puelma 1989, 66–73 and Olson 1995, 12–16. Both, however, tend to underestimate the importance of divinity as a source of authoritative discourse. A synthesis between the historical truth of the epic tale and divine inspiration is proposed by Setti 1958, 145 according to whom the task and merit of the poetic work lies essentially in the truth of the tale, but such merit is divine and can only come from those who know from the gods. See also Accame 1963, in part. 278–279. Conversely, Bouvier 2019, 90–91 states that Demodocus is called upon here to perform not a truthful tale, but a tale favourable to Odysseus (p. 91: “Demodocos ne doit pas être ici maître de vérité”).

This second criterion of authorisation does not remain suspended in the theoretical sphere of mere enunciation. It is immediately applied and concretely experienced afterwards. Odysseus, in fact, after praising Demodocus, explicitly asks him for a new song on a subject he has chosen: the horse's deception, the episode of the Trojan War in which Odysseus' leading role is most prominent. If Demodocus succeeds in accurately singing this episode as well (v. 496 αἶ κεν δὴ μοι ταῦτα κατὰ μοῖραν καταλέξῃς), then he will have deserved to be considered a divine singer and the host will repeat this truth to all men. The conjunction αἶ κεν with which the verse opens introduces a sentence enunciating the conditions for the validity of Demodocus' speech. Demodocus' definitive certification as a bard authentically inspired by the gods is subject to passing a very difficult test, which consists of improvising a story on a theme chosen not by the bard but by someone from the audience, which must be convincing, first and foremost, to the person who proposed the theme.¹³ If the first performance of Demodocus impressed Odysseus, however, it did not convince him completely. In his own words, only the third performance could elevate Demodocus to the rank of a truly inspired poet. The mysterious host centres the function of validator of the tale on himself. In v. 496, which is the keystone of the entire authorisation process, Odysseus elevates himself to the place of criterion, as he twice uses a second person singular marker (μοι ... καταλέξῃς) to make it clear that it is to him that Demodocus must render the tale and that he is the person to be convinced. Demodocus must sing above all for that single listener who has elevated himself to the rank of judge of the veracity of his words and who can, if convinced, spread Demodocus' fame as a genuinely inspired poet to all the men he meets. Odysseus' words might even be judged irreverent or presumptuous if the poem's ancient and modern listeners did not know from the outset that it is the protagonist of those exploits who is speaking.

The difficulty of the test Demodocus is subjected to does not lie so much in composing on a theme chosen by others, since this is a common practice in oral composition poetry,¹⁴ but in the fact that the theme proposed by Odysseus could hardly have been known to Demodocus through any other route than that of divine inspiration. It is no coincidence, I believe, that Demodocus' first performance was introduced by words stating that the subject he had chosen, the dis-

13 Already Semenzato 2017, 48 had read Odysseus' request as a test of Demodocus' abilities. According to Harrison 1971 the request contains a deliberately wrong detail, which is to function as a test: the wooden horse would have been led to the Acropolis by Odysseus, who was instead inside. And Demodocus promptly corrects the mistake in vv. 502–503. The proposal is suggestive, but perhaps excessive.

14 Calhoun 1938a, 163 "He [*scil.* Demodocus] is also expected to sing at a moment's notice any lay for which one of his hearers may ask".

pute between Achilles and Odysseus, was a theme whose fame at that time reached the vast heavens: v. 74 οἴμης τῆς τότ' ἄρα κλέος οὐρανὸν εὐρὺν ἴκανε. This formula seems to contrast with what Nausica says in Book 6, i.e. that no mortal, with the exception of Odysseus, can reach the land of the Phaeacians, since they live apart, at the edge of the world (vv. 204–205 οἰκέομεν δ' ἀπάνευθε πολυκλῦστῳ ἐνὶ πόντῳ / ἔσχατοι, οὐδέ τις ἄμι βροτῶν ἐπιμίσγεται ἄλλος). The formula employed in v. 74 could be explained by pure reasons of *composition in performance*, but it could also have a pregnant meaning. In other words, it could have been employed to leave Odysseus (and the audience) with the suspicion that the subject matter of the song of the first performance, by virtue of its great notoriety, could somehow reach the remote island of Scheria. On the other hand, nothing similar is said about the theme of the horse's deception, the subject of the third performance of Demodocus. In this way, Odysseus' request for a performance on a theme chosen by him appears all the more justified: this alone would definitively establish whether Demodocus is truly an inspired poet, since the subject of this third performance is an οἴμη that in no way could have reached Demodocus' ears through human means.¹⁵ Nor is it said of Demodocus' third performance that the Muses inspired the singer, because this time it was Odysseus and not the Muses who has dictated the theme of the performance.

The test to which Demodocus is subjected is indeed a difficult one, as is also underlined by another clue in the text. The verse introducing Demodocus' performance, contains an interesting notation: v. 499 ὡς φάθ', ὁ δ' ὀρμηθεὶς θεοῦ ἤρχετο, φαῖνε δ' ἀοιδῆν. The syntactic interpretation of this verse is far from unambiguous. The one that leaves ὀρμηθεὶς alone and makes θεοῦ dependent on ἤρχετο seems more convincing.¹⁶ The translation would be: “and he, taking his cue, began with the god. He sang...” Adopting this syntactic arrangement, one could read into this verse a clear allusion to the proemial function, which would seem particularly pertinent here given the difficulty of the proof. In an attenuated form, this phrase is reminiscent of the invocation to the Muses in the *Catalogue of*

¹⁵ See Marg 1971, 12: “undeutlich bleibt, woher Demodokos diese Kenntnis vom Stoff hat”. Olson 1995, 46–47 uses *Od.* 1. 241–242 to support the idea that the Phaeacians of Scheria could not have heard the story of the Trojan Horse before.

¹⁶ Good arguments in favour of this interpretation already in Calhoun 1938b; the proemial function is recalled by Pagliaro 1961, 41–42, followed by Setti 1958, 165 n. 1 and Accame 1963, 277; Hainsworth's note in Heubeck / West / Hainsworth 1988, *ad* 499 is excellent; see also Grandolini 1996, 145 *ad* 499 for an account of the different interpretations. Those who prefer to connect ὀρμηθεὶς to θεοῦ (as genitive-ablative), leaving ἤρχετο independent, emphasise the inspiration that the god exerts on the poet, in analogy with what the Muses did in the first performance of Demodocus.

Ships, another nodal point in which the invocation emphasises the importance and difficulty of the matter being narrated. In the *Odyssey*, Demodocus also needs special support from the deity because the stakes are so high. The challenge proposed by Odysseus invests the very credibility of the poet. On the other hand, in this detailed and circumstantial portrayal of a singer in action, the reminder of the proemial function could not be absent without leaving the mosaic bereft of an important tile.

The test is brilliantly passed. We know this implicitly through the description of the unknown host's reaction. After Demodocus has recounted the *Iliou persis* (vv. 500–520), recalling Odysseus' exploits several times, from the building of the horse to the extermination caused by the Achaeans on the city's last night, the host bursts into a fit of weeping. Nothing else is said about this execution, but as in the tale of the quarrel between Achilles and Odysseus, the hero's emotional reaction can only be explained by the fact that Demodocus' words have been able to bring to life with intensity events in which he was deeply involved. Here one encounters an emotional intensity that can only be triggered by a tale that is true to the facts, and furthermore capable of arousing through that tale powerful emotions that only an inspired bard is able to provoke. And here we touch on another essential point, because if it is true that the case of Odysseus shows that a person who has been a protagonist or witness to the facts narrated can judge the truth of those facts, it is equally true that only the word crafted by a specialist who has received from the divinity the gift of the inspired tale can transform those truthful contents into a tale capable of touching the sensitive chords of the human soul, in the direction of pleasure (τέρψις),¹⁷ or in the opposite direction, if that tale brings back painful memories. Odysseus' violent reaction is the clearest proof that Demodocus' tale has fully hit the mark. There is no need to add words either from the hero or from the other guests present. Perhaps it is no coincidence that a very long and elaborate simile (vv. 523–530) is used to describe Odysseus' weeping, which is in itself a moving little tale: the hero weeps like a woman who has seen her husband die in battle and while shedding tears over her man's corpse is struck from behind with the spear-shafts by her enemies, who thus remind her of her fate as a slave. Comparing a hero of the greatest caliber with a woman grieving over the death of her husband does not seem a random choice. By expressing his grief with such an unheroic cry, Odysseus has shown everyone that he was overwhelmed by the emotions Demodocus aroused

17 The τέρψις is one of the main purposes of the epic tale (see Lanata 1963, 8–9 *ad* 45); Alcinoos himself says so of Demodocus: *Od.* 8. 44 s. τῷ γάρ ῥα θεὸς πέρι δῶκεν ἀοιδίην / τέρπειν, ὄππῃ θυμὸς ἐποτρύνῃσιν αἰεῖδειν. The τέρψις is even inscribed in the patronymic with which the bard Phemius is named, Τερπιάδης (*Od.* 22. 330).

in him. The intensity of his grief is proportionate to the effectiveness of the singer's tale. At this point, once again, Alcinous intervenes to turn the situation in the guest's favour: the execution has not been appreciated by all (v. 538 οὐ γὰρ πῶς πάντεσσι χαριζόμενος τάδ' αἶδει), the guest is shrouded in unspeakable anguish, so it is better for Demodocus to interrupt his performance. Alcinous reassures his guest by promising him the help of the magical ships of the Phaeacians to reach his homeland and then asks him to reveal his identity, to tell of his travels, and to explain why the events of the Trojan War touch him so deeply. Alcinous' questions can now be answered. There is a very serious reason why Odysseus is not only willing to tell his name and homeland but is also prepared to recount in detail and at length all his wanderings from Troy to Scheria. Odysseus has before him a genuinely inspired poet, who has passed the difficult test to which he has been subjected. The hero is given the opportunity to recount his most astonishing exploits, his νόστος, before a bard he trusts. Telling Demodocus about these things means saving those deeds from falling into oblivion, since he was the only survivor of those events. If silence were to fall upon them, all the suffering the hero went through to accomplish them would have been in vain. Odysseus cannot let such an opportunity pass him by. And he answers Alcinous' three questions: in *Od.* 9. 19 he tells his name, in v. 21 his homeland, and in v. 37 he does not limit himself to satisfying the curiosity of the prince of the Phaeacians but begins the very long account of his νόστος, which occupies the entirety of Books 9–12, the *Apologoi*, an autonomous and coherent section of the poem, in which Odysseus is the only voice to narrate the hero's exploits from the end of the Trojan War to his arrival on the island of Calypso, passing through all the incredible events that made Odysseus universally famous. Perhaps it was precisely the exceptional nature of the subject matter narrated that made it necessary to construct such an articulate and complex metanarrative. What happens in Book 8 between Demodocus and Odysseus is the premise that justifies the extraordinary length of the *Apologoi* narrative. The *Apologoi* are represented in the *Odyssey* as the first account given by the sole survivor of those events before a singer, who can repeat those events after hearing them from a witness who proves credible. Odysseus' account, in fact, is also subjected to a process of validation. First of all, as we have seen, he was tested for his physical and moral qualities during the games organised by Alcinous. At the end of that test Odysseus had been recognised as a hero and had begun the process of reintegration into his status. Before beginning his tale, Odysseus states his patronymic and accredits his heroic dignity, but the exploits he recounts in the *Apologoi* concern extraordinary adventures that take place in a world usually separated from that of normal human experience. How can one tell whether the narrator of those events is worthy of belief? In his case, the only possible criterion is an internal one. His words cannot be verified by those

who were protagonists or witnesses, because Odysseus is the only survivor, the only one who can recount those events, which had never been recounted before that mythical occasion of which the *Odyssey* speaks. But his words stand out because their truth is demonstrated by the beauty of the images they produce. His words have the same μορφή as those of the bards, that is, they have the same capacity to produce images of reality in the minds of their listeners.¹⁸ This is the characteristic of the word of the inspired bards, and Odysseus shows that he possesses the skill of a true singer in relation to the story he has experienced firsthand.¹⁹

Od. 11. 363–369

Odysseus, in no wise as we look on thee do we deem this of thee, that thou art a cheat and a dissembler, such as are many [365] whom the dark earth breeds scattered far and wide, men that fashion lies out of what no man can even see. But upon thee is grace of words, and within thee is a heart of wisdom, and thy tale thou hast told with skill, as doth a minstrel, even the grievous woes of all the Argives and of thine own self.

(transl. A. T. Murray)

These words of Alcinous seal Odysseus' account by attributing to the incredible events he has narrated the necessary authority for them to be considered worthy of repetition. Demodocus refrains from any comment, but as it has emerged in our proposed reading of Book 8, he is the true recipient of Odysseus' performance. An attentive and silent witness of that tale, Demodocus may become the initiator of the performance tradition of Odysseus' νόστος. By describing Demodocus' activity in detail, the bards of the *Odyssey* wished to construct the myth of the birth of the epic material that was theirs. The tale that Odysseus performs in the *Apologoi* before Demodocus is necessary for his story, new and exceptional, to enter the circuit of oral memory of which the singers are the repositories. After that mythical, first performance of Odysseus' adventures, every subsequent performance of Odysseus' νόστος, even after some time has passed, will draw its authority from that first performance, to which each new version will be linked not so much by the verbal plot in which it takes shape, since this is always new, but rather by its fidelity to the themes dealt with, whose truth dates back to the direct protagonist of those extraordinary adventures.

¹⁸ Thus, acutely, Puelma 1989, 68–69, 72–73; Cerri 2003, 24 and n. 24; see also Maehler 1963, 25; Verdenius 1983, 25.

¹⁹ This does not mean that Odysseus can be considered an ἄοιδός. His art of speech stops at the narration of the events in which he was a protagonist. What he lacks is the ability to compose on any theme, even those proposed by others. The difference between Odysseus and a bard is effectively explained by Mackie 1997, 87–91; Cerri 2003, 24–26; see also Semenzato 2017, 41–49.

To complete the picture we are sketching, it will be worthwhile to examine another tale from the *Odyssey* from which useful elements on the condition and function of the bard emerge. I refer to the episode in Book 22 in which the protagonist is Phemius, the resident poet at Odysseus' court. He had already appeared in Book 1 of the poem in subjection to the suitors who invaded his king's residence. The situation in which Phemius lives in the court of Ithaca, in the absence of Odysseus, is like a negative image of the perfect society of the Phaeacians where Demodocus operates. Ithaca is a disorderly community, dominated by power relations and lacking any sense of justice. In this context, even the figure of Phemius does not appear in a favourable light. The bard of Ithaca has adapted to the new situation and conditions in which he finds himself, satisfying the desires of the mighty with his stories. His behaviour is not the only one possible, for another poet, the singer to whom Agamemnon had entrusted the surveillance of his house during his absence for the Trojan War, had not accepted the changes that had taken place after the king's departure and had been banished to a desert island for his loyalty to his king.²⁰ When Phemius reappears in the poem's finale, after the hero has slaughtered the suitors and regained his home and status, there would be many reasons to punish him severely. Phemius must think the same, because when he appears in verse 330 of Book 22, he is described as thinking about the best way to save himself, whether to take refuge at the altar of Zeus or beg Odysseus to spare him. The second possibility prevails. The words that Phemius addresses to Odysseus, there in the megaron where the slaughtered bodies of the suitors lie on the ground, are relevant to our discussion.

Od. 22. 344–349

γουνουῦμαι σ', Ὀδυσσεῦ· σὺ δέ μ' αἶδεο καί μ' ἐλέησον.
 αὐτῷ τοι μετόπισθ' ἄχος ἔσσειται, εἴ κεν αἰοιδὸν 345
 πέφνης, ὃς τε θεοῖσι καὶ ἀνθρώποισιν ἀείδω.
 αὐτοδίδακτος δ' εἰμί, θεὸς δέ μοι ἐν φρεσὶν οἴμας
 παντοίας ἐνέφυσεν· ἔοικα δέ τοι παραείδειν
 ὣς τε θεῶ· τῷ μὴ με λιλαίεο δειροτομήσαι.

By thy knees I beseech thee, Odysseus, and do thou respect me and have pity; [345] on thine own self shall sorrow come hereafter, if thou slayest the minstrel, even me, who sing to gods and men. Self-taught am I, and the god has planted in my heart all manner of lays, and worthy am I to sing to thee as to a god; wherefore be not eager to cut my throat.
 (transl. A. T. Murray)

²⁰ See *Od.* 3. 267–271, where we read of Aegisthus' persecution of Agamemnon's poet whose name we do not know. The ancients made various proposals for identifying him: see Grandolini 1996, 113–114. On the social conditioning the poet suffers, and the margin of freedom available to him, see Svenbro 1984, 34–50.

The poet makes the point that if Odysseus kills him, he will feel pain and remorse in the future. The reasons for this are not explained, but one can guess. Phemius is first and foremost, like any bard, a person dear to the gods. Therefore, raising a hand against him could provoke the wrath of the gods who protect him. This argument, however, cannot be considered sufficient, because Odysseus did not hesitate to kill the haruspex Leodes (*Od.* 22. 310–329) to punish him for his unfaithfulness, without having any regard for the link that binds the haruspices' art to the gods.²¹ And in fact, Phemius adds a second argument immediately afterwards, which is perhaps precisely what convinces Odysseus to refrain from striking the bard. In v. 347f. Phemius boasts of being an *ᾠοδός* inspired by the gods, who taught him the ways of song. His words have always aroused the interest of commentators, especially in connection with the two phrases *αὐτοδίδακτος δ' εἰμί*²² and *θεὸς δέ μοι ἐν φρεσὶν οἶμας / παντοίας ἐνέφυσεν* and their mutual connection. Within the present discussion, the words of Phemius fit perfectly into the first level of discourse authority we have identified: just like Demodocus, Phemius learned the art of singing directly from the deity. That is why he can be said to be *αὐτοδίδακτος*, because he did not learn from other human beings either the technique of his art or the subjects of singing. It is the deity who has placed all kinds of thematic traces in his mind, *οἶμας παντοίας*, which the bard can transform into song.²³ It is the divinity that induces the *ᾠοδός* from time to time to

21 Consider, then, that Odysseus could have punished Phemius, even without killing him, as Aegisthus had done with Agamemnon's bard, but evidently other reasons drove him to spare Phemius in Ithaca.

22 The term *αὐτοδίδακτος* has been interpreted very differently: for an account of the various positions see Fernández-Galiano in Fernández-Galiano / Heubeck 1986, 255–256 *ad* 347–349; Grandolini 1996, 160–162; Assaël 2001, 8–14. On the linguistic level, see the analysis of Belardi 1981, 4–13, esp. p. 12: according to Belardi, what Phemius emphasises about himself, is his “spontaneous knowledge”, which immediately places him who possesses it outside the common order of mortals. Lazzeroni 1998 reinforces Belardi's interpretation with useful comparisons from Vedic poetry. I fully agree with his interpretation of the passage, p. 101: “I am *αὐτοδίδακτος* because a god has placed in my soul all sorts of plots” (my transl.). Unlike Belardi and Lazzeroni, however, I believe that Phemius' words are not isolated; rather, they seem to me to form a system with what is observed in the epic performances of Book 8 (Grandolini 1996, 161 is of the same opinion).

23 So says Odysseus, very clearly, in *Od.* 8. 480–481, when he states that the singers are worthy of honour from men *οὐνεκ' ἄρα σφέας / οἶμας Μοῦσ' ἐδίδαξε*. Notice in this passage the use of the verb *διδάσκω*, whereby the singer is not without teaching absolutely, but receives teaching only from the deity. This conception is very similar to that which emerges from the words of an *akyn* Kara-Kirghiz collected by Radloff and published in 1870, later repeated several times in studies on Greek oral epic, e.g. Bowra 1952, 41: “I can sing every song; for God had planted the gift of song in my heart. He gives me the word on my tongue without my having to seek it. I have not learned

choose one of these topics, which are learned exclusively by divine inspiration.²⁴ In reality, what have been seen by some scholars as two distinct statements (αὐτοδίδακτος δ' εἰμί... θεὸς δέ μοι ἐν φρεσὶν οἶμας...), corresponding to two different moments of poetic activity, are in fact a single statement, aimed at declaring the exceptional and divine nature of the bard's knowledge.²⁵

After displaying his credentials, Phemius promises Odysseus that he will sing for him as carefully as he would sing in honour of a god.²⁶ Although immediately afterwards Phemius adds in justification of his past behaviour that he sang for the suitors because he was forced into a state of awe, it does not seem that this last argument makes much impression on the hero's soul. Phemius, on the other hand, touched a sensitive chord in Odysseus when he promised to sing for him. And this is where the second level of authorisation of speech comes into play, even if in this case it emerges in implicit form compared to the previous case of Demodocus. Phemius was an eyewitness to Odysseus' return to the palace of Ithaca. He knows all the events that took place there before the slaughter of the suitors. And precisely because in the Homeric conception the singer does not learn the material of song from other singers but only from the divinity, every

any of my songs; everything springs up from my inner being, from myself". For the etymology and meaning of οἶμη/οἶμος, see Pagliaro 1961, 34–40.

24 One will recall the formula with which this point is described in the first performance of Demodocus: *Od.* 8. 73f. Μοῦσ' ἄρ' αἰοῖδὸν ἀνήκεν αἰεδέμεναι κλέα ἀνδρῶν, / οἶμης τῆς τότ' ἄρα κλέος οὐρανὸν εὐρὺν ἴκανε. The object of the Muse's inspiration is the specific thematic track that Demodocus is about to sing. Brillante 1992, 14 finds in Phemius' words a self-defensive strategy: if it is the Muse who induces him to sing a certain story, he is not responsible for the song he performed at the Phaeacians.

25 In favour of the complementarity of the two statements of Phemius: Ameis 1868, 58 *ad* 347: "die zu αὐτοδίδακτος gegebene Erklärung θεός κτλ enthält den Sinn, dass er bloss der göttlichen Begeisterung seinen Gesang verdanke, was die Vorzüglichkeit des Sängers bezeichnet"; according to Pagliaro 1961, 34, the notion of αὐτοδίδακτος is explained by Phemius by the fact that a god had placed οἶμας παντοίας in his mind; see also Dodds 1951, 10; Marg 1971 (1957), 9; Setti 1959, 152–153; Lesky 1961, 30–31; Accame 1963, 387–388; Murray 1981, 97, who, however, insists too much on the active role the singer plays in the creative process; Verdenius 1983, 22, 38–39; Brillante 1992, 13–16; Semenzato 2017, 49–50. Conversely, others identify in the words of Phemius the emergence of an autonomy from the Muse in the creation of song: Lanata 1963, 13–14; Maehler 1963, 22–23; Fränkel 1969, 21 n. 27; Marg 1971, 9; Fernández Galiano, in Fernández Galiano / Heubeck 1986, 255–256 *ad* 347–349; Ritook 1989, 342–343; Assaël 2001, 18–19, 21. Both Marg and Assaël separate the conception of poetry referable to Demodocus from that expressed by Phemius.

26 This seems to be the meaning of vv. 348–349, which also present some difficulties due to the particular construction of εἶκα: see Fernández-Galiano in Fernández-Galiano / Heubeck 1986, 256–257 *ad* 348–349.

tale performed by his voice is worthy of being heard and held true.²⁷ Like a truly inspired bard, Phemius can become the authoritative voice that narrates the new stories that have been created before his eyes.

By sparing Phemius, Odysseus shows that he is concerned to have someone to narrate the second part of his exploits, the heroic deeds that led him to definitively regain his social status. After having entrusted Demodocus with the matter of his νόστος, Odysseus leaves it to Phemius to narrate what he has seen happen since Odysseus set foot in Ithaca. Once again, the genesis of a new epic tale becomes itself the subject of a tale with a mythical character. And in both cases, it is always a man who ultimately determines the level of authority of the poetic discourse in relation to the truth of the facts narrated.

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27 The specificity of the Greek epic’s conception on this point is well pointed out by Finkelberg 1990, 295–296, who distinguishes the Greek conception from that of the Serbo-Croatian epic, based on the transmission from singer to singer. According to Finkelberg, the idea that the αοιδός receives the material of the song directly from the deity allows for the inclusion in the epos of more recent history. Pizzocaro 1999 speaks of a ‘historical’ epos as a subgenre of the mythical epos. The recency of the *Odyssey*’s subject matter and the need to establish the reliability of these new tales are well explained by Mackie 1997, 78–82, 86, 89–91. Accame 1963 analyses the progressive “secularisation” and “humanisation” of poetic inspiration, from Homer to Hesiod.

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