# Homer, Hypertext, and the Web of Myth

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There is no way to study orality as an object independent from literacy. Orality is the creation of literacy, even when the two concepts are thought to be mutually exclusive: literacy then defines its imagined opposite, orality, by its own absence. But what is literacy? This question was not high on the agenda of the early theorists of orality, who were more interested in defining what orality was. Conceiving of the advent of literacy in historical contexts (such as archaic Greece in the 8th century B.C.E.) in terms of the writing practices known to themselves, these scholars were construing a historical reality (orality) as a function of their own ideology (literacy).

Yet we have become aware since of what we have come to call our "logocentrism." And due to the work of scholars working on the more richly documented Middle Ages, such as Bäuml (1980, 1993), Clanchy (1993), and others, we have learned that "writing" is not an unquestioned constant applying to all times and places: in historical contexts such as the European Middle Ages or archaic Greece, the writing and reading of texts have been very different from our own cultural routines; in fact, these activities and the conception underlying them, may have been quite "oral" (cf. Bakker 1997: 18-32).

Such defamiliarization of writing must not stop with the study of writing in certain historical contexts. It encompasses us. We are ourselves in a historical context that forces us to rethink and redefine writing, our own. The growing importance of the internet and the emergence of hypertext present us with profound changes in our writing routines, which

challenge the ways in which we conceive of them. Far from being self-evident and to be taken for granted as a technology, writing has again become highly visible. In this essay, I would like to explore some consequences of the new perspectives for the study of orality. I will focus on Homeric poetry, in particular the *Odyssey*.

From Hypertext . . .

Electronic writing has taken us far beyond the conventional written text. What actually happens on our hard disks and in the files we save or download has nothing to do with the characters that make up alphabetic writing, which in turn have nothing to do with the sounds of the speech that they transcribe or report. And yet we speak of "speaking" and "saying" when we report on our own or someone else's thought expressed in writing, and we speak of "writing" when we key in our texts at our PC screens. The old medium persists in the new one as a metaphor; the new medium fictionalizes the old one (cf. McLuhan 1964). The new medium can do what it does by the mechanisms and the momentum of the previous one, which can even derive prestige from the fact that it has been supplanted.

In spite of this continuity, new media tend to be seen as rupture, and their introduction as moments of disturbance and discontinuity. The advent of writing has been characterized as a "revolution" with profound and instantaneous impact on the way people think and organize their society. By the same token, orality, once it was recognized as a "medium" in its own right, was sharply distinguished from its successor, in psychology, mindset, and poetics. The same celebratory tone is discernible in the discourse of the advocates of the new medium of computerized text. Seeking binary oppositions, theorists of hypertext draw attention to the ways in which the new medium upsets a number of key concepts of traditional textuality (e.g., Landow 1997; Snyder 1996). Hypertext is fluid and transient

rather than fixed, and in linking a potentially infinite number of documents as nodes in networks that have no inherent center, it disrupts our notions of linear order.

The nonlinear nature of the web of interrelated texts does not provide any natural beginning or entrance point; the reader (if that is the right word) may approach the labyrinth from any direction, and move through it in his or her own way. Potentially any text may provide context for any other, producing an infinitude of contexts that clashes with the notion of texts as self-contained and autonomous. No author of any of the constituent texts has any control over the perspective within which the text is read by browsing readers; the latter are indeed potential authors themselves by the possibility for them to add links or even whole new texts to the maze. Far from being the decoders, passive receivers, of any pre-established message, readers engage in activities that are not dissimilar to what writers do themselves: they construct meaning by choosing the path that best fits their needs. Indeed, the democratization inherent in the shifting of power relations and the diminished control of authors makes up an important part of the enthusiasm with which hypertext is advocated.

Theorists of hypertext are keen to point out the points of convergence of the new medium with contemporary literary theory: hypertext embodies poststructuralist criticism in its conception of textuality and authorship (Landow 1997). The open-ended, decentered structure of hypertext is prefigured in the work of authors with such household names as Bakhtin, Barthes, Derrida, and Foucault. Bakhtin, for example, conceives of discourse, especially the discourse of the novel, as a "polyphony," a dialogic choir in which no single voice, not even that of the author, can have a monopoly. The French theorists come even closer to the practice of the Web, in insisting on such images as network, web, weaving, plurality, and path. Especially evocative is Barthes's (1974: 3-16; 1979) conception of "Text" as an open-ended network of quotes, a "galaxy of signifiers," whose virtuality lies in its being unfinalized by its very nature: "the Text is experienced only in an activity, a production" (1979: 75).

. . . to Orality

The insistence of hypertext theorists on the nonlinear nature of texts in the new medium has more parallels than the one with the work of the architects of postmodern thought; there is a striking similarity with the writings of oralists as well. Seeking to create a new discipline for the newly discovered phenomenon of oral poetry, scholars such as Lord (1960) and Notopoulos (1949) formulated a poetics opposed to that of written literature. In this oral poetics, composition was located in the very production, the performance of the song. The traditional song is thus fluid and multiform, a matter of the present rather than the reproduction of an original from the past (Lord 1960: 100). Furthermore, the originality of written style had to yield to the traditionality of oral poetry. Formulaic expressions were seen as re-usable prefabs, and ownership of the poetic words and phrases shifted away, in part, to the poet's forebears in his tradition. Oral poetics, moreover, stressed parataxis over hypotaxis on the level of sentential syntax, and episodic structure over linearity and hierarchical relationships on the level of plot. The linear order of beginning, middle, and end came to be replaced with images such as beads on a string, a narrative sequence that provided the oral poet numerous points of entrance and exit. In departing from an Aristotelian poetics based on linearity and hierarchical order, the oralists came close to the advocates of hypertext in some important respects.

Oral and hypertextual poetics as academic disciplines apparently share a number of important grievances against the conception of conventional textuality. But is the *actual practice* of oral poetry also similar to the use of the internet? Does oral poetry, Homeric poetry, share features with hypertext? These questions are compounded by the current situation in Homeric scholarship, the field in which the ideas on oral poetics were first

developed and tested. Most scholars today would maintain that the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* are a great deal more centered and tightly structured than the early oralists claimed they are. In fact, Aristotle's exposition of unity of plot and organic structure (*Poetics* chaps. 7 and 8&cf. Plato, *Phaedrus* 264C) that were viewed by oralists as a statement of a literate, non-oral poetics impeding our understanding of orality, were illustrated precisely with the example of Homer. For Aristotle, Homer's excellence lies in his being selective, in his arrangement of a series of events into a tightly structured plot sequence. An epic on the entire Trojan War or on the life of Odysseus from his birth to his death would have been a matter of disconnected patchwork, in which poets could have jumped from any episode to almost any other with structural impunity.

Aristotle's conception of poetic unity has subsisted for over two millennia, and has usually been cast, starting with Aristotle himself, in value terms: decentered, nonlinear plots are "bad," linear structure and strong thematic orientation are "good." For Aristotle, the Homeric poems conform to his theory because of Homer's genius as an author, a maker, and most scholars today would agree. In what follows, however, I would like to suggest a different way in which the author may enter the Homeric stage. Rather than with a difference between good and bad authors, the structure of the Homeric poems has to do with the *creation* of authorship. The idea of the poet as maker, I shall argue, was associated with the emergence of a new medium that was to be the primary vehicle for the transmission and diffusion of Homeric poetry.

## From Weaving . . .

In approaching Homeric poetry as oral poetry, there is something to be gained from

distinguishing between Homeric poetry itself and the way in which it represents poetry. Aristotle admires Homer, but he may well have different thoughts on the poets represented by Homer. These make their performances in the *Odyssey*, the epic most concerned with its own medium, epic poetry. One of the characters first to appear in the poem is Phemios, whose name, programmatically, means "Sayer." Phemios is not a creative author. He is the bard of the court of Odysseus, the absent king, and he sings by compulsion (*Od*. 1.154). He has no control over the subject matter of his songs; the Suitors of Odysseus's wife, Penelope, make him sing the song of their choice. He has to sing of the "sorrowful return of the Achaeans" (*Od*. 1.326-7), a subject that is obviously pleasing to his audience, as it confirms their deepest desires that Odysseus will never return.

The *Odyssey* does not inform us on the precise nature or content of Phemios's songs. This is different in the case of another Homeric bard, Demodokos, singer at the court of Alkinoos, king of the Phaeacians, on whose island Odysseus has washed ashore. The blind bard Demodokos makes his performances at the banquet in honor of the stranger, who is Odysseus. In the first song he sings, Demodokos seems to be fully in charge of his choice of topic. He sings of the "Quarrel of Odysseus and Achilles," a mysterious subject that is curiously reminiscent of the quarrel of Achilles and Agamemnon, with which the *Iliad* begins. It has been suggested that Demodokos's choice of subject is a deliberate subtle hint: he knows that the mysterious stranger is Odysseus, and is telling this indirectly to King Alkinoos by means of the song (Ahl and Roisman 1996: 75). The bard's last song at the banquet, by contrast, is fully staged and manipulated by the audience. It is Odysseus himself who asks the bard to sing about the Wooden Horse, Odysseus's own ultimate ruse as the architect of the fall of Troy.

Odysseus's request contains an imperative form of the verb *metabaínein* (*Od*. 8.492) that can mean either "skip ahead" or "shift paths." Either sense implies a link with Demodokos's earlier song from the Trojan saga. The sense of movement along a path is

also conveyed by the technical term for "song" with which Demodokos's first song is introduced: *oíme* (*Od*. 8.74), which is commonly translated as "song path," the sense by which the word was also understood by the ancients themselves, whether or not its etymology is correct. Both words express the conception of singing the epic song as knowing one's way, or of obeying the orders of one who knows.

Another common metaphor for poetry is weaving, creating a fabric or text(ure). The word for weaving, *huphaínein* is in Homer not directly applied to poetry; it is only later, in the lyric choral poetry of Pindar and Simonides (5th cent. B.C.E.), that weaving becomes a standard metaphor for songmaking. But we find *huphaínein* frequently used in Homer for ruses, stratagems, or counsel, and once for speechmaking (*Iliad* 3.212), designated, significantly, with the term *mûthos*, the ancestor of our "myth." It seems reasonable to assume, therefore, that the metaphor of "weaving" for poetry is older than the actually attested instances.

The typical quality of things woven, whether actual fabrics, ruses, speeches, myths, or songs, is expressed with the epithet *poikílos*, which can be glossed as "varied," "with many colors," or "in many shapes." Fabrics consisting of words (texts, etymologically) are always different, according to the context in which they are perceived or the purpose for which they are produced. They also interact with other fabrics, in answering them, contradicting them, or simply in being woven within the context of other webs. The variety of verbal fabrics, then, does not only reside in the inherent richness of their texture, but also in the shifting perspectives within which they are received, or in the points of contact with other texts. The fabric of myth, of which poetry is the prime manifestation, is *poikílos* by the interrelatedness of its numerous constituent parts.

It need hardly be pointed out that the metaphors of weaving and pathways are strikingly convergent with the imagery of poststructuralist theory and the internet. Like text or the internet, the world of myth is a network within which one has to find one's way, and the

one who is capable of weaving the primary units of mythic narrative may not have control over the paths that connect them. Odysseus's request that Demodokos "shift paths" is not unlike the volitional act of the internet browser who jumps from a text to another that is thematically related and that interests him. The Trojan War and its numerous episodes, recounted in a wide array of$potentially conflicting$oral traditions, is in fact a huge text in its poststructuralist understanding, in Barthes's words, "a galaxy of signifiers, not a structure of signifieds" (1974: 5). Faced with this infinitely varied fabric that has no inherent beginning or end, Demodokos can in principle choose any point of entrance he likes or that best suits his present needs. And the text he weaves is surely not exclusively of his own making. Odysseus's intervention is more than an eager request for more; in asking the bard to sing of the Wooden Horse, Odysseus actively creates meaning. He has the bard go along this path in order to prepare the weaving of his own adventures: the Wooden Horse will provide a seamless narrative transition to the story of the Return, told by Odysseus himself in the books that follow.

It appears, then, that the picture presented in the *Odyssey* of oral poets and their practice rather strikingly enacts Roland Barthes's concept of "text," in particular his conception of *writerly text*, the text that is not simply consumed by readers, but is actually created by them, the text whose reception is its being rewritten. Barthes speaks of this writerly text as "the novelistic without the novel, poetry without the poem, the essay without the dissertation, writing without style, production without product, structuration without structure" (1974: 5).

Demodokos's songs, I suggest, are the embodiment of such a writerly text. It is not poems, works, that Demodokos sings; rather, he "brings forth the singing."[1] His song is not heard, "read," for the first time, but neither is it the repetition of any preexisting "first" song. In living oral traditions, a song cannot be but what is for Barthes the essence of text: its being "reread" by its very nature. "Rereading," as Barthes remarks, "draws the text out

of its internal chronology ('this happens *before* or *after* that') and recaptures a mythic time (without before or after)." Rereading, in other words, defies the Aristotelian notions of linearity, temporal sequentiality, and narrative logic. The bard's song, the actual enactment of mythic events, appears to be the practical embodiment of Barthes's writerly text, whose temporality is a perpetual present. Just like the writerly text, Demodokos's singing is a process, not a finished product; and just as the author of the writerly text, Demodokos is a doer, not a maker.[2]

Barthes distinguishes the "writerly text" from the "readerly text." The readerly is what can only be consumed (or rejected) by a reader, whose role is passive, reactive. The readerly text, for Barthes, is the essence of "work" as a literary institution, based on the "pitiless divorce…between the producer of the text and its user, between its owner and its customer" (1974: 4). The readerly text, whose rereading is a repetition, is not part of a universe; it is a universe itself. This opposition between the writerly and the readerly may now prompt us to move from Demodokos's singing to Homer's poem.

. . . to Stitching

The 5th-century B.C.E. philosopher Democritus is reported to have said: "Homer, endowed with a divinely inspired nature, has crafted [*etekt_nato*] an ordered universe [*kósmos*] of all kinds of songs [*ép_*]" (fragm. 21 Diehls-Kranz). The wording and metaphors are suggestive, and very different from the way in which the performances of Demodokos are represented in the *Odyssey*. Homer is compared to a carpenter (*tékt_n*), who creates something complex (a house, furniture, or a wheel) out of different pieces of timber. A different, but related, metaphor for the creation of the complex out of simple components, is that of stitching, or sewing, expressed with the verb *rháptein*. The root of

this verb is present in the very name of the performers of Homeric poetry, the *rhapsodes*, who are thus song-stitchers (Nagy 1996: 61). These professionals, performing at public festivals rather than at private banquets, do not weave their fabrics in response or interaction with any other text; they perform parts of a single whole.

In spite of what we might suspect given the sense of "stitching" in English, the result of rhapsodic activity is not haphazard or makeshift (cf. Nagy 1996: 76). On the contrary, the complex garment created is carefully tailored and well proportioned. Democritus's use of the term *kósmos* is revealing in this regard. Meaning "order," "proportion," or "embellishment in Homer, the term comes to mean "universe" in 5th-century philosophy and science. Instead of being part of a universe, a labyrinth of songs, Homeric poetry comes to be seen, and wants to be seen, as a universe in and of itself. This structured universe is, to reverse Barthes's formulation, a structure of signifieds, rather than a galaxy of signifiers.

A crucial role is played here by the figure of Homer himself, whose very name, according to a recently proposed etymology, means "joiner," "fitter" (e.g., Nagy 1996: 74). The essence of Homer is his being a maker, a poet, an author. Homer's presence makes a difference: whereas Demodokos the Phaeacian bard is "stirred by the Muse" (*Od*. 8.499), the rhapsode reenacts a singer who is, and who can subsequently be construed as a primordial "maker." The performance is not entirely "present" anymore. For the performer and his audience something preexists: not only an original maker, but also his work. The rhapsode's performance is thus constrained and regulated: he has to begin at the beginning and proceed all the way to the end. The sheer length of the compositions attributed to "Homer" is so enormous, however, that performance in the manner of Demodokos is impossible. An organization by relay is necessary, whereby each rhapsode starts at the point where the previous one leaves off. The relationship between these individual "rhapsodies" is their being part of one and the same trajectory to one and the same end, subordinate to one and the same whole.[3]

The precise status of this rhapsodic practice is the main issue in the Homeric Question today, the age-old debate on the origin of the Homeric poems and the nature of their composition and transmission. Most scholars hold that rhapsodes, as more or less mechanical reciters, have to be distinguished from the oral bards of which Homer himself is the prime example. In this view, the rhapsodic performance of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* is subsequent to their actual composition, which is ascribed to the genius poet endowed with the "divine nature" attributed to him by Democritus, as well as by everyone else in Antiquity.

Against this majority view, there is the vision of Gregory Nagy, who in a long series of publications (most recently 1996) has argued that rhapsodic performance is not the recitation but the very essence of Homeric poetry, its legendary composer being a product of the Homeric tradition, not its source. In this view, Homer becomes a culture hero who is retroactively credited with the sum total of the entire cultural institution (Nagy 1996: 76-77). In Nagy's conception, the sharp distinction between poet and rhapsode, creator and reader, yields to a merger of the two in which listening becomes composing, and reading writing.

The fact that the discourse of the rhapsode bears the signature of "Homer," in each performance anew, suggests that consumption in an immediate present is not its primary goal. This poetry wants to be used and re-used, and reach beyond any immediate context in which it is sung. For Nagy, the prime engine for this re-use, and drive toward Homeric authorship, is Panhellenism, the tendency, starting in the 8th and 7th centuries B.C.E. to express the common denominator of the emergent Greek city-states in a number of shared cultural institutions, Homeric poetry being one of them. Others would rather see the durability of Homeric poetry in its sheer quality, as the creation of the single genius poet.

Yet in spite of this fundamental difference there is an important convergence in one respect. Both sides see the scenario they propose as a matter of oral poetry *tout court*; their

difference is a difference in conception of oral poetry. Those in favor of Homer the individual would think of an exceptional oral poet, whose work$the culmination of the oral tradition$is discovered by a Milman Parry *avant la lettre*, who records his monumental compositions as an "oral-dictated text." The creative oral phase ends, and a reproductive, written phase of Homeric transmission begins. For Nagy, the fixation of the Homeric poems is not a one-time event but a long, evolutionary process which not only produced, over time, our written text, but also Homer the author. Two radically different versions of orality, one sustaining the conventional assumptions about authorship, the other questioning them. The very implausibility of a Homer in the early archaic age dictating thousands of lines to a primordial scribe is enough to give Nagy's scenario full consideration. Yet to deconstruct Homer as author, as Nagy does, rightly to my mind, is to assign to the Homeric tradition a crucial feature that is not confined to "orality."

## Homer, Hypertext, and the Web of Myth

The ancients thought of stitching and craftsmanship as convenient metaphors for Homeric poetry, as we saw. Yet beyond craft, there is an even more fundamental issue: control. As an image that brings out the issue of authority and control, I propose the hour glass. The image of the hour glass has been used to typify "classical" journalism in the age of the printing press (Newhagen and Levy 1998): large amounts of information pass through a narrow bottle-neck, to be redistributed as "news" across large quantities of readers. At the narrowest part sits the newspaper editor, who selects, combines, and edits the numerous chunks of raw material that enter, thus exercising considerable control over

the generation of news, facts, and meaning.[4] This model of information flow comes to be replaced with the network model prompted by the advent of hypertext and the internet. The control of the classical editor vanishes, for each reader, as a node in the network, is now not only a receptor, but also a generator of facts and news: everyone can add "news" to the Web faster than a newspaper can be printed and delivered. The role of the editor gets demoted to that of pathfinder providing guidance to an active readership.

The loss of control in the age of the internet, I submit, is mirrored by its reversal in archaic Greece: the gradual establishment of control exercized by the Homeric tradition as a concerted effort to overcome the vagaries of the oral tradition. Pathfinders such as Phemios or Demodokos, who showed the way to demanding audiences, had to give way to Homer, the agenda setter, and regulator of the multifarious detail of myth. The local had to yield to the panhellenic, the variant to the canonical version. Homeric poetry never names this friction explicitly, but the choral poet Pindar (5th cent. B.C.E.) has an apt formulation for what must have been a problem throughout the archaic age: "Why, there are many marvels, and among them, it seems, the speech of mortals that goes beyond the true version: craftily embellished with many varied [*poikílois*] lies, myths do their work of deception" (Pindar, *Olympian Ode* 1.28-9). The aspiring canonical poet takes on the chaotic network of myth, which he characterizes as "multifarious lies," using the epithet *poikílos*, which, as we saw, is also used for things woven in their intertextual relationships.

Pindar speaks of "varied lies," Nagy of the variants of local traditions; both come close to what Michel Foucault (1979), in an article on the (de)construction of authorship, calls the "proliferation of meaning." The world of fiction, according to Foucault, is potentially dangerous in an era of individualism and private property: it is prone to multiplication and could easily serve the interests of any third party. The answer to this threat is the author. For Foucault, the author is an owner tag on a discourse, which "impedes the free circulation, the free manipulation, the free composition, decomposition, and recomposition

of fiction." The author, then, is a "label" which not only marks a discourse as special, not immediately consumable; he is also "the principle of thrift in the proliferation of meaning" (1979: 159).

As a historical function, the author is regulation and constraint: quite the contrary of the usual conception of the author as an inventor, a creator, potentially a genius. This mismatch is precisely what makes the author an ideology in Foucault's account. The ideological status of the author inverts his actual function, and is a natural consequence of a certain type of society. When discourse was still an act, rather than a product, a matter of doing rather than making, there was no need for authors (1979: 148). Foucault could imagine a form of society where the author-function has become unnecessary. Theorists of hypertext would say that this moment has now come with the advent of the Web and the development of new writing technology. The reverse development has taken place, I submit, in archaic Greece.

Proliferation of meaning is precisely what occurred in the Greek world of the archaic age, when increased inter-city contacts in a more global, panhellenic environment led to a freer exchange of oral traditions. The shortcomings of the local traditions became apparent, and the system of constraint that had been in place hitherto, the Muse inspiring the local bard, was incapable of resolving their mutual conflicts. Nagy's scenario for "Homer" as an answer to this problem strikingly enacts Foucault's author-function. Hailed by the ancients as the divine poet, creator, Homer is no less a restriction, a limitation. Homer controls, subdues the polyphony of myth (though without silencing it completely), and replaces the endlessly varied web of myth with a firm trajectory. The result is the tight plot structure rightly admired by Aristotle, but I would add that structure, the poem's control over its own path, is a function of its control over its own reception and distribution.

Homeric discourse as discourse "owned" by someone whose speech has to be reenacted is essentially a new medium. Yet no rupture or discontinuity is involved. "Homer" means

the works whose fixation in writing was eventually logical and inevitable. But "Homer" is not the transition from "orality" to "literacy." The new medium is grafted on the oral tradition that precedes it, and it can do what it does only by making use of the prime mechanism of the epic tradition: performance. The old medium is not only essential for the success of the new one; it is its typifying metaphor. Encapsulated within Homer's narrative, it can acquire the status of a prestigious past, on a par with the epic heroes themselves. Demodokos, the blind bard, plays the *phorminx*, a lyrical instrument pointing to the archeology of the Greek epic tradition. Sitting isolated on his remote island, he achieves without effort and without struggle what Homer the great poet of Panhellenism had to fight for: making the past come alive, veracious and uncontested, constrained only by the vision of the Muse.

Footnotes

[1] *phaîne d'aoiden*, *Od.* 8.499$note that the Greek word for poem, *poíema*, lit. "thing made" does not appear before the 5th cent. B.C.E..

[2] On this distinction, see further Bakker 1997: 158.

[3] The so-called Panathenaic festival, instituted in Athens by the middle of the 6th century B.C.E., seems to have been pivotal in this regard, see Nagy 1996: 69-70.

[4] Cf. Bäuml's (1997) illuminating discussion of the creation of "facts" in a literate culture.

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