Mimesis as Performance:
Rereading Auerbach's First Chapter

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Introduction

The reputation of the first chapter of Auerbach's *Mimesis* among classicists has gone up and down with the tide and fashions in Homeric studies. The privileging of the part over the whole attributed to Homeric style in the essay on Odysseus' scar gained wide currency at a time when Homeric scholars were concerned with parataxis and paratactic composition as the hallmark of Homer's oral style. But the influence of Auerbach's essay has diminished in recent years with the renewed interest in "literary" interpretations: we are now prepared to see more silence, more elliptic moments, and more "unplumbed depth" in Homeric poetry than Auerbach's insistence on Homeric style as a "uniformly illuminated foreground" might lead us to believe.[1]

Without questioning these developments, I propose to return to Auerbach's chapter, in order to put it in the perspective of Homeric studies, and view it in light of some recent advances in the study of oral poetry. Fifty years after the first publication of *Mimesis*, Auerbach's interpretative shortcomings stand out clearly; yet his account of Homeric style does contain a powerful core, which, if reformulated, may continue to say something important about the flow and quality of Homeric poetry.

The central element in Auerbach's discussion is his insistence on perception and illumination. Homeric poetry, he writes, is driven by a constant need for an "externalization of phenomena in terms perceptible to the senses" (Auerbach 1953: 6). Moreover, Homeric narrative style "knows no background;" it fills the reader's present entirely:

> Like the separate phenomena themselves, their relationships . . . are brought to light in perfect fullness; so that a continuous rhythmic procession of phenomena passes by, and never is there a form left fragmentary or half-illuminated, never a lacuna, never a gap, never a glimpse of unplumbed depths.
>
> And this procession of phenomena *takes place in the foreground—that is, in a local and temporal present which is absolute*. (Auerbach 1953: 6-7, emphasis added)

Vision and perception will also be central in my attempt in the following pages to reappreciate Auerbach's criticism. While essential in the study of the Homeric representation of reality, perception is at the same time a highly critical concept, which contains all the tension that is inherent in the paradoxical fact that Homeric poetry is an oral tradition that has come down to us in the form of a written text. Our stance with regard to this peculiar situation involves a crucial decision that has kept Homerists divided for decades: can or must we apply the standards of written literature to Homer, or does Homeric criticism require a different notional apparatus? In what follows, I will confront Auerbach's interrelated notions of foreground and perception against the background of this dilemma. In the process, we shall have occasion to reconsider the very concept of *mimesis*, and ask what it means for Homeric poetry to represent the reality on which its force depends.

Oral Poetry

Auerbach's appreciation of Homeric poetry took shape in a context that was completely removed from the then-current trends in Homeric criticism. Auerbach nowhere mentions "orality" in his first chapter, a concept that, by the time *Mimesis* was published, was beginning to make its imprint on Homeric studies. Orality had found its first, authoritative, formulation in the work of Milman Parry.[2] Studying the numerous formulaic repetitions in the Homeric poems, Parry had discovered an unmistakable regularity in the use of certain expressions, in particular the so-called "noun-epithet formulas." These formulas designate the principal gods and heroes, and give the style of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* its distinctive flavor (e.g., "swift-footed Achilles," "many-minded Odysseus," "owl-eyed Athena," "Zeus cloudgatherer," etc.).

Parry was able to show that the use of these phrases obeys certain rules imposed by the structure of the verse. His first conclusion was that such a poetic "grammar" could never have been the personal style of any single person. Homeric style, Parry argued, was *traditional*, independent from the "free will" of its poet. In a next step, Parry came to view this more or less mechanical style as a response to the specific demands of oral poetry, which had to be composed "live" before an audience, by way of improvisation: "traditionality" had yielded to "orality." Extensive fieldwork on the South-Slavic living oral tradition provided rich comparative material for the study of Homer under the new critical paradigm.

Parry's work would find an authoritative synthesis and extension in *The Singer of Tales*, written by his former student Albert Lord (1960). More importantly for my present purpose, some scholars were quick to pursue the aesthetic consequences of Parry's findings. James Notopoulos (1949) in particular did much to promote an "oral poetics," arguing that Homer's paratactic style and syntax is not merely "primitive" and "archaic," as opposed to the ideal of classical form we find expressed in the Parthenon at Athens and in Sophocles' *Oedipus the King*. The paratactic poetics of Homer and other archaic Greek poetry, Notopoulos argued, should not be judged with respect to the "hypotactic" aesthetics of later literature, first formulated authoritatively by Plato in his *Phaedrus*. The privileging of the part over the whole, of fragmentation over integration, was simply a consequence of the oral nature of this kind of poetry, which had to be composed under circumstances quite different from those under which written poetry comes into being.

We may note that Notopoulos's formulations often come strikingly close to Auerbach's. Thus where Auerbach calls the reality deployed in Homeric narrative "self-sufficient" (1953: 4, see also below), Notopoulos, speaking about the propensity of Homeric episodes and scenes to become autonomous, remarks about the Homeric similes that in them "the poet digresses beyond the original point of comparison and finds delight in the similes *per se* which reveal Homer's own world and nature" (1949: 8). And to Auerbach's "local and temporal present which is absolute" (1953: 6, cited above) we might compare the following passage of Notopoulos:

> The physical, technical, and psychological factors at work in the creation of oral poetry make the poet live largely in the moment and only secondarily in the larger framework of his material. When the poet composes by means of the formulaic diction, which Parry has shown in his studies, he must concentrate on the moment, on the immediate verse. (Notopoulos 1949: 15)

A little later, Notopoulos explicitly locates the attention for detail for its own sake, not just in oral composition, but in the very medium of speech: "It is easier to digress and lose sight of the original purpose in the spoken word than in formal writing which follows an organized text with

a beginning, middle, and an end" (1949: 16).

Auerbach's conception of the style of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* may seem literate and textual, in viewing the Homeric poems (as well as the Old Testament) as "finished products" (1953: 23), and in being silent on their origins, or their functioning in the contexts for which they have been originally designed. Yet the substance of his vision squares strikingly with the critical paradigm that sees in textlessness the essence of Homeric poetry, locating the aesthetics of the absolute present in the production of the epic verse.

"Orality" in its original form necessarily implied a key role for the oral formula as the specific difference between oral and written composition, the prime axiom of the theory. Yet no two oralists could agree on the definition of the Homeric formula. On a narrow, precise definition of the concept, oral-formulaic theory could be seen by its opponents as the branch of Homeric studies mostly concerned with mechanics, structure, and production, as opposed to the literary sector, where meaning and poetic intent were at the forefront of the attention. The Homeric poems, it was argued, were simply too good, and their overall narrative architecture too unmistakable, to be amenable to a simple analysis in terms of formulas and parataxis.

On the other hand, on a broader, more flexible understanding of the formula, the orality hypothesis could be subsumed by an avowedly literate literary criticism: the oral background of the poems was simply taken for granted, without any real implications for criticism and interpretation. On either definition, there was not much space for an independent oral poetics: in the widening split between the oralists and the "scripsists," the concept came to be considered by the opposite camp as mere terminology. In hailing parataxis as virtue, a property that had previously counted as vice, the oralists, it was thought, were simply imposing an impediment on the appreciation of the Homeric poems, in paying too much attention to an unfortunate stylistic inconvenience.

Auerbach's ideas on Homer were conceived independently from the orality hypothesis in its original form, but shared in its decline. Yet for all the similarity between Auerbach's and Notopoulos's formulations, one difference stands out clearly: the importance of vision and perception in Auerbach's conception. It is this aspect that comes to the fore in the revision of "orality" to which we now turn.

Performance and Mimesis

In the original conception of oral poetry, "performance" was the occasion on which the poet puts the system of formulas in practice, a moment incompatible with textuality.[3] In recent years this emphasis on composition-in-performance has diminished. We acknowledge that performance is not only, maybe not even primarily, an act of versification, but also an act of narration, a narrator addressing an audience. This storytelling event, moreover, is of central cultural importance, as the occasion on which the community allows a meaningful past to shape its present. Such a shift in emphasis is in a way a return to Parry's original concept of tradition, which had become slightly obliterated by the increasing emphasis on production and composition.[4]

In this new perspective, two aspects that have been neglected by oral-formulaic theory become increasingly important. First, the performance of Homer and other archaic poetry is not at all incompatible with writing and written texts. The acknowledgment of the existence of texts may lead, perhaps paradoxically, to a more "oral" understanding of Homeric discourse than the oral-formulaic approach has in fact yielded. Seeing the original texts of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*

as *transcripts* rather than as texts in the usual sense, the Homerist—and in general the student of any "early" work of literature—has to make the effort to thematize the notion of text, and study the poems in terms of the performed discourse of which their text is the transcription.[5]

This may lead to a perspective in which Homeric poetry is viewed not as *oral* poetry against a conceptual background of literate poetry, but as *special speech* against a background of speech, language as it functions in its actual spoken use. In a recently published monograph (Bakker 1997a), I have attempted to study Homeric poetry in this light. The central proposal is that the conception of Homeric poetry as a reified, textual *product* should recede in favor of its understanding as a *process*, a flow that has to be seen in terms of speech and spoken language. We shall see below that the distinction between "product" and "process" is crucial for the discussion of perception and Auerbach's notion of foreground.

The second aspect of performance in its new understanding is that what makes possible a Homeric performance is not only the system of formulas described by Parry and his followers, but also, from the standpoint of the performers and their audiences, the desire to recreate the heroic events of the past. In practice, this is listening to the "rumor" of the past, called *kléos* in Homer (*Iliad* 2.486). *Kléos* is the contribution of the poet's forebears to the tradition, or, even simply the memory of the previous performance. It is here that mimesis, the representation of reality, comes into play. Auerbach used the term to designate the relation between a text and its referent. Yet when "performance" rather than "text" is the primary reality of the Greek epic tradition, we may wonder what the consequences of this change in perspective are for the concept of mimesis. In other words, what does it mean for Homeric poetry to represent reality when its own primary reality is an epic performance, which is modeled on a previous performance?

The discussion of mimesis in connection with performance, in fact, is inevitable insofar as the very word *mím_sis* in Ancient Greek denotes an action, a performance. The substantive *mím_sis* is an action noun, the act denoted by the verb *mimeîsthai* ('represent', 'imitate'). Moreover, this verb is in the middle voice, which means that its grammatical subject is necessarily affected by the action denoted: *mimeîsthai* is what people do, not what things are. Thus *mím_sis* originally does not denote a relation between a text (as finished *product*, see above) and its referent, but *between an action* (i.e., a *process*) *and its model* (see also Vernant 1991: 165-66). This "performative" sense of *mím_sis* is prominent in the third book of Plato's *Republic* (393b-d, cf. Lee 1974: 150-51), where the word seems to be used for the first time as a theoretical term. *Mím_sis* is used here for the notion of *impersonation*, "becoming another," and it is applied to the passages in Homer that we would characterize as "direct speech" or "character's speech." In these passages, according to Plato, the poet, Homer, becomes the character, assimilates himself to him or her—a scenario that is rejected by Plato for reasons that do not concern us here.

Mím_sis, however, does not become essential for our present purpose until we widen its scope, and apply it, not only to the cases in which the performer plays the role of Achilles or Odysseus, etc., but also to the performance as such. In other words, we may use *mím_sis* to characterize the role of the poet, of Homer himself.[6] In this use of the term, recently propagated by Gregory Nagy (Nagy 1996: 59-86), the very performance of Homeric poetry becomes an act of representation: what is represented is not only the reality of the epic tale, but also its telling. The mimesis of Homer, then, is both subjective and objective: the "divine poet" (Homer, *Odyssey* 8.43) reenacts the prestigious past, but is in turn reenacted himself; he becomes the model for all the performers of the future (called "rhapsodes" in the Greek context), and so is present as long as the epic tradition is alive.

Memory and Visualization

We observe, then, that in its prehistory as a literary term, mimesis denotes not the properties of a textual artifact but a certain type of poetic action: the representation, re-presentation, of the previous performance, with the performer playing the role of Homer the quintessential narrator. Let us now go back, on this new understanding of mimesis, to Auerbach's ideas on foregrounding and realism. If Homeric poetry is primarily concerned with the dynamic business of reenacting its own previous occurrences, then what are we to do with its compulsory preoccupation with concrete, externalized detail as noted by Auerbach? First, let us examine an example of such foregrounded narrative. I have chosen a passage from the digression on Odysseus' scar: during a hunt, young Odysseus receives the wound whose eventual scar will later be the title of Auerbach's chapter:

> As the men advanced, urging on the hounds, the noise made by the feet of both reached the boar from this side and from that. Leaving his lair he came out to face them, his back bristling all over, his eyes flashing flame, and he stood at bay confronting his enemies. Odysseus rushed forward first, his long spear raised in his sturdy hand, eager to strike; but the boar was quicker, and thrusting sideways with his tusk he gashed Odysseus above the knee and tore away a great strip of flesh, only stopping short of the bone. Then Odysseus' thrust went home, entering the beast's right shoulder and making the point of the gleaming spear pass right through. With a shriek the boar fell straight to earth, and the breath of life fled away from him. (Odyssey, Book 19, vv. 444-54, trans. Walter Shewring)

This is all vivid, observable detail, in a style that ancient critics referred to as *enargeia*: the "graphic vividness" attributed to poetry that strives at achieving visual effects equivalent to a picture (on the "vividness" of Homeric narrative, see also Ford 1992: 49-56). Vision, in fact, is the privileged sense in Homer; the poetics of the Homeric tradition is an optic poetics. The Homeric narrator typically adopts the stance of an eyewitness to the events he describes (Bakker 1997a: 55), sometimes even staging his audience as spectators of the scene (e.g., *Iliad* 5.85-86: "you couldn't have told among whom Diomedes was fighting, on the side of the Trojans or among the Achaeans"). Such visual quality has been documented for other epic traditions as well (e.g., Fleischman 1990: 265-66).

The optic quality of Homeric epic, however, is much more than a mere pretense of its performers: it is the dimension in which poetry transcends human limitations. In a famous passage, Homer contrasts the typically human medium of *kléos* ('hearing', 'rumor') with the divine faculty of seeing:

> Tell me now, you Muses who have your homes on Olympos. For you, who are goddesses, are there, and know [lit: *have seen*] all things, and we have heard only the rumor [*kléos*] of it and know nothing. (*Iliad*, Book 2, vv. 484-87, trans. Richmond Lattimore)

The poet is privileged among mortals in having access to the divine vision of the Muses. These divinities have in later times been "reanalyzed" as symbols of poetic inspiration, but in the context of Homeric performance it seems preferable to see them in their more primordial, though no less poetic, role as agents, and warrants, of epic evidence. They were "out there," overlooking the battlefields of the Trojan War, and witnessing the enactment of the epic events. It is to them that Homer, the proto-poet of the tradition, owes the precision and detail with which the epic events have to be reenacted. And this allows the rhapsodes/performers to reactivate the epic

reality in the context of the performance (see also Nagy 1996: 61).

In Greek mythology, the Muses are the daughters of Zeus and *Mnemosyne* or Remembrance, and this reveals an important aspect of Homeric poetics. In order to be represented in a new performance, the epic tale must be recalled, remembered, and it appears that the Greek epic tradition has grounded this fact in a mythical genealogy. The Muses make the poet remember, and their association with seeing in the optic poetics of the Greek epic tradition is particularly important in light of recent research in experimental and cognitive psychology that stresses the relation between memory and spatial and visual organization.

In a recent study, the cognitive psychologist David Rubin has stressed the importance of imagery in the stability of oral traditions. Imagery, as Rubin notes (1995: 62), is "one of our most powerful mnemonic aids," based on the principle that what is easiest to image is easiest to recall. Images, or spatial relations between items, are easier to retain in memory than verbal, linear information. This fact can be experimentally proved, but is also confirmed by the actual experience of storytellers, one of whom is quoted here:

> You've got to see it as a picture in front of you or you can't remember it properly . . . I could see, if I were looking at the wall there, I could see just how they were—how they came in—the people—and how this thing was and that and the other.
> Yes, it's easier to tell a story right through, from the beginning, because it's there in front of you to the end, all the way. All you have to do is follow it. . . . There's was no vision ahead but just as you went ahead yourself, and the vision, kept pace with you just as if it were coming upon you, like that. (Rubin 1995: 59-60; quoted from MacDonald 1978)

The testimony of this Scottish bard is quite relevant for Homeric studies. Not only does he conceive of storytelling as a picture; he also speaks of *movement*: the pictures come to him as he goes, as if telling the story is a kind of mental walk or hike. Homerists will point out here that the technical term for "song" in the Homeric epic is *oím_* or "song-path."[7] It appears that this term is not just a Greek metaphor, but an experiential fact pertaining to human memory in general.

There seems to be a strong connection, then, between memory and vision, and this is probably why oral traditions all over the world are characterized by vivid, concrete, visual detail. If something is to be easy to remember, it must be easy to image and visualize. This is a very important aspect, and one that appears to be relatively neglected in the theory of oral composition and performance of Parry and Lord, with its insistence on formulaic repetitions. Some later writers on orality and literacy in Ancient Greece, did, however, recognize the importance of imagery and visualization. Eric Havelock, for example, has said on the supplication scene with which the *Iliad* begins that "[t]he priest does not come to promise a ransom; he carries it in his hands, and in his hand also is a golden staff with the badge of office on it. The attributes, unessential to the main story, evoke a visualization of the scene and its actors." (Havelock 1963: 187-88).

It is not difficult to find statements parallel to this one in Auerbach's essay. As with orality, Auerbach is silent on memory and performance, but that makes the convergence between his observations on the Homeric style and Havelock's formulations all the more striking. In fact, Auerbach's formulations potentially capture the essence of Homeric narrative even better than Havelock's. In particular, we note again the notion of detail for detail's sake:

> [Homer] does not need to base his story on historical reality, his reality is powerful enough in itself; it ensnares us, weaving its web around us, and that suffices him. And this "real" world into which we are lured, *exists for itself, contains nothing but itself*; the Homeric poems conceal

> nothing, they contain no teaching and no secret meaning. Homer can be analyzed, as we have essayed to do here, but he cannot be interpreted. (Auerbach 1953: 13; emphasis added)

The contention made in the last sentence of this extract is highly questionable, and would be rejected by most modern Homerists. What interests me here, however, is the phrase that I have italicized, the statement that the reality deployed in the Homeric poems is there for its own sake. Auerbach's observation that Homeric reality is self-sufficient is powerful enough, but in light of the present discussion we can go a step further. Given the functionality of visualization that I just reviewed, we have to say that Homeric realism is there for the sake of the recall of the story, and so for the very survival of the epic tradition: its transmission or re-performance. The "externalization of phenomena" that Auerbach so eloquently described is not a stylistic choice on the part of an author, but a phenomenon intimately connected with the functioning of the epic medium of performance.

Perception and Consciousness

At this point one might object that visual detail is in and of itself not at all confined to narrative that is to be remembered and re-presented. To stay within Greek literature, we may mention here famous passages in Thucydides' *History of the Peloponnesian War,* such as the account of the great naval battle between the Athenian and the Syracusan fleet in the harbor of Syracuse:

> Because of the narrowness of space, it often happened that a ship was ramming and being rammed at the same time, and that two, or sometimes more, ships found themselves jammed against one, so that steersmen had to think of defence on one side and attack on the other (…). While the issue of the battle at sea still hung in the balance, great was the stress and great the conflict of soul among the two armies on the shore, the Syracusans being all on edge to win an even greater glory than before, and the invaders fearing lest they might find themselves even worse off than they were already. (Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War* book 7, Chapter 70.6-71.1, trans. Warner 1954: 523-24).

This passage is intensely visual, even containing observers who are watching the spectacle from the shore, a *mise en abîme* that stages the reader as spectator of the historical events, and draws the reality represented into the reader's present. This mode of narrative blurs the usual distinction between "narrative" (involving temporal progression) and "description:" what happens in time is stripped of its temporal quality, and presented as a complex *tableau* whose primary dimension is spatial (Bakker 1997c:).

Yet narrative description such as Thucydides' passage occurs in Homer as well; we already noted the eyewitness quality of Homeric narrative, and saw an example of it in the description of the boar hunt. What, then, is the difference between the two narratives? Let us note first that Thucydides' prose is not easy to memorize, nor even meant to be recalled (Thucydides' prose, in fact, was already in Antiquity considered to be notoriously difficult). Homer's poetry, by contrast, is not only formulaic but also very rhythmical. This difference is obviously an important factor, since rhyme and rhythm are powerful cognitive constraints on memorization and recall.[8] But in the present context of imagery and visualization there is more. The formulas and rhythmical patterns that are for any reader the hallmark of the Homeric style are not only the *expression* of the images in the poet's (performer's) mind, with features that facilitate their memorization; they are also indicative of the very manner in which the image is *perceived*, of

how the poet mentally scans the picture of which the scene consists. The flow of Homeric discourse, in other words, provides evidence of cognitive processes, and this feature is entirely absent in the visualizing prose discourse of Thucydides. Put differently, the prose narrator *fictionalizes* the act of perception, in order to represent the reality described, whereas presentation on the part of the epic poet *is by itself an act of visualization.*

To clarify this differentiation, it is useful to turn once more to the cognitive psychologists. In the 1930s, Buswell studied the way people look at pictures. He found that there are two patterns of perception:

> One of these consists of a general survey in which the eye moves with a series of relatively short pauses over the main portions of the picture. A second type of pattern was observed in which a series of fixations, usually longer in duration, are concentrated over small areas of the picture, evidencing detailed examination of those sections. While many exceptions occur, it is apparent that the survey type of perception generally characterizes the early part of an examination of a picture, whereas the more detailed study, when it occurs, usually appears later. (Buswell 1935: 142)

In other words, people do not take in pictures as wholes; they typically orient themselves, and then start focusing on details of the picture, one at a time. Apparently human vision is not capable of focusing on more than one detail at any single moment.

This observation has been used, among other things, by the linguist Wallace Chafe to account for the specific nature of *speech* (Chafe 1980: 15, presenting the passage from Buswell just quoted). Studying the physical properties of taped speech data, Chafe has noted that spoken discourse typically proceeds not in an uninterrupted flow, but in short spurts or jerks, which he calls intonation units, drawing attention to their physical, intonational, properties in the flow of speech. Chafe submits that consciousness is responsible for this more or less fragmented flow: human consciousness is incapable of having more than a very limited amount of "information" in sharp focus at any one time. A speaking consciousness will verbalize its "focus" in a short phrase that is intonationally marked, and often preceded by a brief pause during which the information in question was "activated" in the speaker's consciousness. Consciousness thus imposes constraints on information flow and discourse when experience (be it actual perception or introspective vision) is turned into language (Chafe 1980; 1994: 29, 62-81).

Vision and consciousness, in fact, are very similar, as Chafe notes (Chafe 1980: 12-13; 1994: 53). Both consist of a limited selection, that of which one is conscious, or the visual experience that is in sharp focus. And this focus of consciousness or of vision is constantly moving, on its way to the next focus, the next moment of experience. It appears, then, that the workings of human consciousness provide a common denominator to the acts of looking at a picture and of verbalizing a visualization. The way in which people describe pictures from memory (visualizing them before the mind's eye, and turning the spatial information of the image into linear, sequential speech) strongly resembles the way in which they examine the picture when they actually perceive it.

The typical nature of vision and consciousness has important consequences for memory: these cognitive faculties will act as requirements for memorization and recall. In other words, a discourse that is to be remembered and re-presented will serve its function better if it proceeds in accordance with the flow of consciousness. This is the reason of being, I propose, of formulas in oral traditions. Moving beyond Parry's analysis, we can view formulas as the speech units of the special speech of the oral tradition, the stylization of the intonation units of ordinary speech. Many poetic traditions have a verse that coincides in length with those speech units (Bakker 1997a: 147).

In Homer, as I have shown elsewhere (Bakker 1990; 1997a: 49-51; 1997b: 291-93), the units, often easily recognizable as syntactic and semantic atomic wholes, tend to coincide with the half-lines of Homeric verse, before and after the middle caesura. Homeric discourse thus appears to proceed in the little blocks of information or parcels of experience that match the working memory of human consciousness. As part of narrative description, these units of discourse represent not so much details of the image itself as the way in which visual information is processed by a perceiving or visualizing consciousness. Let us now re-present the Homeric passage quoted above, presenting each Homeric speech unit as a separate line:

and he (= the boar) against them from his lair,
bristling his back all over,
glaring fire with his eyes,
and he stood opposite them,
and he as the very first, Odysseus,
he rushed forward raising the long spear,
with his heavy hand,
eager to stab,
and the boar, he struck him before,
above the knee,
and much flesh with his tusk he tore out,
thrusting sideways,
and he did not reach the man's bone,
and him Odysseus stabbed,
hitting him in the right shoulder,
and right through it went,
the point of the shining spear,
and he fell shrieking in the dust,
and his life flew from him.

We see that the construction is paratactic, and has no inherent end point other than the completion of the image in question; the Greek particle *dé* that has been translated with "and" may seem to function as a coordinating conjunction in our text, but in the speech represented, it serves to mark each unit as a new step in the progression of the discourse. The description is preceded, as often in Homer and in accordance with Buswell's principle presented above, by a general "label" of the scene as a whole: the juxtaposition of the hunters and the boar. And in the actual description, each line represents a single detail that is often visual, a focus of vision and of consciousness, shifting with each moment, and each new verbalization.

Let us now return to Auerbach's account of the Homeric style. As we saw earlier, Auerbach assigns "foreground" and lack of background as a general property of Homeric style. We can now appreciate at the same time the perceptiveness of this characterization and its limitations. Auerbach studies Homeric narrative as text, and assigns to it the features of a two-dimensional picture, a painting full of detail, without perspective or background. This is mimesis in a "static" sense, as a relation between a text as finished product and the reality to which it refers. Yet Auerbach's conception of foreground as "a local and temporal present which is absolute" is enriched on the more dynamic understanding of Homeric poetry as speech. When we perceive pictures and verbalize that perception, what we focus on at any one moment is by definition "foreground:" the detail is in sharp focus at a particular moment, the moment of perception and the moment of speech, the present moment (Bakker 1997a: 67). And as such it is foreground, even when it is background in terms of the picture that is scanned and conceived of

as a static object. In other words, in reading Homer, we witness a *process*, which Auerbach adequately characterized, but in terms of an inappropriate medium: the style of the written text rather than the action of speech.

So, finally, what does it mean for Homeric poetry as performance to represent reality? To Auerbach's static sense of mimesis I opposed a more dynamic understanding of that concept, the relation between the poet's performance and the earlier occurrences of the same discourse. The poet's "seeing" things is a remembrance of earlier poets' seeing of that same reality, ultimately the Muses'. The vision of the Muses was detailed and specific, which in less mystic terms amounts to emphasizing the importance of imagery for the Homeric performance as a cognitive act of recreation.

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[Footnotes]

* This article is a revised version of a paper read at the colloquium on Auerbach's *Mimesis* at Groningen University, May 1996. I wish to thank Bernhard Scholz and Meir Sternberg for their criticisms and suggestions.

1 See, for example, the assessment of Auerbach's importance in Segal 1994: 6-9; the paradigmatic importance of digressions in Homer (such as the passage on Odysseus' scar) has been stressed since Austin 1966. The application of narrative theory to Homer has further undermined Auerbach's authority; see, e.g., Sternberg 1978: 84-85 (arguing against Auerbach's elimination of the factor "suspense" in Homeric narrative), and, within Homeric criticism proper, De Jong 1985 (interpreting the episode of the scar as a recollection not of Odysseus but of Eurycleia) and, more in general, De Jong 1987.

2 Parry's original work in French has been translated and edited by his son in Parry 1971. The most recent assessments of Parry's achievements are Edwards 1997, Russo 1997, and Bakker (in press).

3 The existence of the Homeric text, at first sight a paradox in his perspective, was explained by Lord (1960) with the aid of the notion of oral dictation: an illiterate, oral bard, was alleged to have dictated the poems to a scribe, at the request of an outside interested party. For discussion, see Bakker 1997a: 21-22, 28.

4 For an overview of the changes in the study of Homer as oral poetry, see Bakker and Kahane 1997: 1-10. Nagy 1996 argues that the dimension of performance is an important factor in the transmission of Homeric poetry before the final redaction of the texts in the Hellenistic period.

5 See Bakker 1997a: 25-32. Oesterreicher 1993 speaks of *Verschriftung* to characterize the relation between a discourse and writing involved here: the simple transcoding of one medium (speech) to the other (writing). This operation has to be distinguished from more advanced processes of textualization, in which not only the medium of a discourse is involved, but also its "conception." Oesterreicher speaks of *Verschriftlichung* here. The important difference is that in the first case there is a discourse that precedes the text in time, being composed and presented without writing and its requirements playing a role.

6 This role model seems less a historical figure ("author") than a strategy on the part of the tradition to ascribe itself to a prestigious predecessor, serving as model for all performers (Nagy 1996: 74).

7 In Bakker 1997a: 54-71 (see also 1997b: 297-300) I argue that the idea of movement, the implicit conception of Homeric discourse as something processual, is apparent in its very syntax, with its various particles and discourse markers (previously largely seen in terms of the logical relations between sentences—see also Auerbach 1953: 6).

8 For Rubin (1995: 85-88; 183-84), rhythm is one of the *multiple constraints* to which oral traditions owe their stability (another one being imagery as discussed above).