

MODERN THEORETICAL APPROACHES TO HOMER

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[380] ‘Modern’ and ‘theory’ are notoriously imprecise terms. Before attempting to define their use in the present essay, it would be naive not to draw attention to the inevitable impermanence of any study with the word ‘modern’ in its title. When the present *New Companion* has aged as much as Wace and Stubbings’ original *Companion to Homer* now has, what critical shifts will have taken place to render this essay passé, and will the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* continue to float somehow intact above these sea-changes? Let me insist that any despondency engendered by this eventuality is misplaced, as I hope to show in my discussion of the postmodern condition and its unabashed distrust of the search for permanent verities.¹

Wace and Stubbings contained no chapter remotely corresponding to the present one. That volume itself had been first conceived, and some of its chapters actually written, more than twenty years before its publication in 1962. During that entire period between conception and publication what would have passed for ‘contemporary theory,’ at least among the community of classicists, would have been what we call New Criticism and archetypal criticism inspired [381] by Jungian psychology. But these influences would be all but overshadowed by the most important development in Homeric studies in the twentieth century. For Wace and Stubbings as for most homerists of the period, Milman Parry’s investigations of Homer’s work as oral poetry, slow to merit much attention or to catch hold in the United States, was now the thing to be looked at, for it seemed to offer a defensive profession the chance of taking a giant step in its aspiration to become a ‘hard science’ and to forswear the soft belletrism and impressionistic aestheticism that had characterized so much of its literary appreciations. Few literary analysts would be able (or perhaps even willing) to match the way in which Cedric Whitman, in *Homer and the Heroic Tradition* (1958), blended an appreciation of Parry’s findings with the sensitivity to verbal texture, symbol, image, structure, ambiguity, and irony central to the New Criticism. Despite the brilliance with which he managed this, many, if not most, homerists believed the devices designed for the interpretation of written literature simply incompatible with Parry’s theory of Homer as oral

1. There have been many rich and thought-provoking literary studies of Homer with little involvement, at least little *explicit* involvement, in contemporary theory. Regretfully, the present study is constrained by limits of space to take little notice of them. (For twentieth-century critical trends, chiefly Parryism and reactions to it, prior to structuralism, poststructuralism, deconstructionism and postmodernism, see James P. Holoka’s masterful essay, “Homer, Oral Poetry, And Comparative Literature: Major Trends and Controversies in Twentieth-Century Criticism” in *Zweihundert Jahre Homer-Forschung: Rückblick und Ausblick*, ed. Joachim Latacz [Stuttgart and Leipzig, 1991], 456-81.) Neither shall I have much to say of studies that claim a contemporary theoretical approach but do not live up to the claim, ‘theory’ being in such cases no more than a fashionable overlay for more traditional critical (often New Critical) practice. Neither will I consider studies whose primary focus is narratology, the theory of oral poetry, or myth analysis, all of which involve explicit theory, but which are dealt with elsewhere in this volume. As for those scholars and works actually considered, the present essay makes no attempt to be exhaustive, but rather selective and exemplary of method, providing samples rather than full reviews of arguments which are far too complex for treatment within the limited scope of an essay such as this.

Portions of the present essay are drawn from Peradotto, *Man in the Middle Voice* (Princeton 1990).

poetry. Perhaps the most extreme read on the implications of Parry's thesis was expressed by Frederick Combellack in a 1959 article:

The hard fact is that in this post-Parry era critics are no longer in a position to distinguish the passages in which Homer is merely using a convenient formula from those in which he has consciously and cunningly chosen *le mot juste*. For all that any critic of Homer can now show, the occasional highly appropriate word may, like the occasional highly inappropriate one, be purely coincidental -- part of the law of averages, if you like, in the use of the formulaic style.²

With varying degrees of emphasis the same attitude taken toward formulaic phraseology was taken also toward the artistic manipulation of traditional *narrative themes*. Since then there have been a number of studies which, without contesting the powerful influence of a traditional style, structure, and set of narratives, still portray a poet in control of that tradition, capable of originality and innovation, to counter the questionable image of a compliant replicator and a frozen tradition.³ Nevertheless polemics are still prevalent in a clash [382] between those more inclined to espouse the cause of the innovative artist and those more inclined to insist on the sway of tradition.

In the classical community contemporary debate about what constitutes an appropriate scholarly reading tends to represent it as taking two forms.⁴ One faces toward the past and concerns itself with sources, origins, historical considerations. The other faces forward and emphasizes the context and situation of the modern reader. More traditional (or, in the parlance of the opposition, 'reactionary') theories identify with the backward facing form and look to recover original truth or original authorial intent or original audience response as governing protocols that will yield readings more or less impervious to change. They argue that anything departing from or adding to original authorial intent and original audience reception is an inauthentic, contaminated reading. More contemporary (what the opposition calls 'radical') theories favor the forward facing form that affirms the large part played by the reader in the production of meaning and harbors an abiding skepticism about immutable meanings. They argue that what Gadamer calls the modern reader's 'horizon' is inescapable, that original authorial intent and original audience reception are themselves 'contaminated' reconstructions that simply shift the problem of interpretation to a different (often more inaccessible) level and to different texts, and that the literary artifact leads an

2. "Milman Parry and Homeric Artistry," *Comparative Literature* 11 (1959) 208.

3. One of the best of the oral theorists, John Miles Foley, while insisting on a performance-based orientation to oral texts, recognizes the potential contribution of contemporary theory (especially Bakhtinian dialogism) to the elucidation of oral texts. He also distinguishes himself from the older Parryites by his awareness of the thorny problematics involved in reconstructing any 'tradition'. See especially his *The Singer of Tales in Performance* (Bloomington, 1995) xi-xii.

4. See Frederick Danker, *A Century of Greco-Roman Philology: Featuring the American Philological Association and the Society of Biblical Literature* (Atlanta, 1988) 218. A. J. Boyle ("Intellectual Pluralism and the Common Pursuit: Ramus Twenty Years," *Ramus* 20 [1991] 116-18) cautions against the too simplistic view that some have taken of an opposition between 'old philology' and 'new theory'.

unintended ontological afterlife in an unpredictably altered state of its own language and other signs.⁵

This linear, oppositional metaphor of reading is challenged by Robert Scholes, properly, I think. In its place he offers a slightly better one based on the paired notions of centrifugality and centripetality, alerting us nonetheless to the danger it shares with the metaphor of backward- and forward-looking.

Centripetal reading conceives of a text in terms of an original intention located at the center of that text. Reading done under this rubric will try to reduce the text to this pure core of unmixed intentionality. Centrifugal reading, on the other hand, sees the life of the text as [383] occurring along its circumference, which is constantly expanding, encompassing new possibilities of meaning....But this is still a two-term or binary system, all too easily shifted into an invidious polarity of centrist conservatives and marginal radicals, reducers and expanders, truth-seekers and sophists, or what you will.⁶

We are conditioned to think of classical philology as defined more by backward-looking or centripetal reading than by the other kind. That is of course far less true of the eighties and nineties than of the period in which Wace and Stubbings was written and published. A profound change has taken place to erode the institutional resistance to centrifugal reading. To be sure, this change was taking place when and even before Wace and Stubbings was published. The difference is that now it is impossible to ignore. We call it the postmodern condition. That is what 'modern' in my title refers to, for I have chosen deliberately to ignore the misleading chronological and historical association of the term 'postmodern.' I have also chosen deliberately to use 'postmodernism' not in a narrow sense to designate one among a variety of contemporary theoretical approaches, but rather as a generic term that focuses on presuppositions, questions, strategies, methods of analysis common to these otherwise different theoretical approaches.⁷

As a condition of reading and thinking, the postmodern condition is not likely soon to disappear, even if, and however often, some new name is conjured up to designate the set of theoretical and epistemological stances that characterize it. Indeed, it may be said always to have been there, but ignored or suppressed. "Paradoxically", as John McGowan has observed,

most of the materials for a radical questioning can be found in the tradition itself if we look in different places (noncanonical works) or with new eyes at familiar places ... a Western tradition that now appears more heterogeneous than previously thought even while it appears insufficiently tolerant of (open to) multiplicity. At the very least, postmodernism highlights the multiplication of voices, questions, and conflicts that has

5. See Peradotto *Man in the Middle Voice: Name and Narration in the Odyssey* (Princeton, 1990) 12-14, and Holoka, "Homer, Oral Poetry Theory...", 479.

6. *Protocols of Reading* (New Haven, 1989) 8.

7. See Simon Goldhill, "The Failure of Exemplarity" in *Modern Critical Theory and Classical Literature*, edd. Irene J.F. deJong and J.P. Sullivan (Leiden, 1994) 32-33, for a fine discussion of the losses that result from insisting too resolutely on the discreteness of different theoretical enterprises.

shattered what once seemed to be (although it never really was) the placid unanimity of the great tradition and of the West that gloried in it.⁸

[384] It is for this reason (and for others I shall mention later), that Homeric studies finds itself not uncomfortably at home in so-called postmodern territory.

It is crucial not to misunderstand what we are talking about. The postmodern condition was brought about by what Richard Rorty called the twentieth-century's 'linguistic turn.' Fundamentally, it involves a dismantling of the encoded forms of folk epistemology dominant in what has been called 'Standard Average European' and perhaps in all Indo-European language and thought.⁹ In this view, the one postmodernism assails with questions, 'reality,' the 'world,' is composed of more or less stable substances, 'things,' which are given more or less directly to awareness, predominantly visual. Language, when it is 'true to' this direct perception, represents, literally re-presents, things pretty much as they are in themselves. 'Postmodern' and similar (e.g., Heraclitean) readings of the world are accordingly dismissed as aberrant, questioning as they do, not only the priority of 'substances' over 'accidents,' 'qualities,' 'attributes,' 'relations,' 'actions,' 'events,' but the very ontological status of 'substances.' Such questioning seems easy to discredit for it flies in the face of unreflective, everyday experience. It also seems often to fail in consistency and clarity, to fall into oxymoron and paradox, doomed as it is to express itself in a language which collaborates with the realist position, because it is the chief means whereby that position is maintained and disseminated. Your realist man-in-the-street knows in his heart that you *can* step into the same river twice. He knows this because that is what he *sees*. He also knows in his heart that, grammatically speaking, nouns (substantives) are more real than verbs, because nouns stand by themselves, while verbs are predicated of nouns, mirroring the fact that substances are what 'stand under' (Aristotelian *hypokeimena*) changes, actions, appearances, while actions must be actions *of* something. He knows this because that's what he *sees*. Stephen Tyler offers a tidy summary of this way of looking at the world and of what it implies:

(1) *Things*, both as fact and concept, are hegemonic in Standard Average European language and thought.

(2) The hegemony of things entails the hegemony of the visual as a means of knowing/thinking. *Seeing* is a privileged sensorial mode and a key metaphor in S[andard]A[verage]E[uropean]. [385]

(3) The hegemony of the visual, among other things: (a) necessitates a reductive ontological correlation between the visual and the verbal; (b) creates a predisposition to think of thinking/knowing as seeing; (c) promotes the notions that structure and process are fundamentally different and that the latter, which is only sequentiality, can always be reduced to the former, which is simultaneity, and thus being dominates becoming, actuality dominates possibility.

8. "Postmodernism" in *The Johns Hopkins Guide to Literary Theory and Criticism*, edd. Michael Groden and Martin Kreiswirth (Baltimore, 1994) 587.

9. The term 'standard average European' is Whorf's. See Stephen Tyler, *The Unspeakable: Discourse, Dialogue, and Rhetoric in the Postmodern World* (Madison, 1987) 149-50.

(4) The hegemony of the visual, of this way of seeing things, is not universal, for it, (a) has a history as a common sense concept in Indo-European influenced particularly by literacy; (b) is not 'substantiated' in the conceptual 'structures' of other languages; and (c) is based on a profound misunderstanding of the evolution and functioning of the human sensorium.¹⁰

This last observation, being the summary of a complex argument, not the argument itself, certainly does not disprove the realist's view, but it should at very least raise a suspicion in his mind that what he holds, what he *sees*, is not something that 'goes without saying,' and that the relationship between words and things, between texts and facts, may be more problematical than he thinks. His epistemology will prevent him from making any sense of the main focus in what has been called 'postmodern anthropology,' which is characterized by Tyler, in sharp opposition to naive realism, as follows:

Postmodern anthropology is the study of man -- 'talking'. Discourse is its object and its means. Discourse is both a theoretical object and a practice, and it is this reflexivity between object and means that enables discourse and that discourse creates. Discourse is the maker of the world, not its mirror, for it represents the world only inasmuch as it is the world.... Postmodern anthropology replaces the visual metaphor of the world as what we *see* with a verbal metaphor in which world and word are mutually implicated, neither having priority of origin nor ontic dominance. Berkeley's *esse est percipi* becomes 'to be is being spoken of.' Postmodern anthropology rejects the priority of perception, and with it the idea that concepts are derived from 'represented' sensory institutions that make the intelligible, the sensible 're-signed.'¹¹

So much for narrowing (or has it been expanding?) the sense of 'modern' in my title. What of 'theory'? There is a problem here if by 'theory' we understand an unassailable, foundational 'master narrative' [386] or, in Stanley Fish's representation, "an attempt to *guide* practice from a position above or outside it" or "an attempt to *reform* practice by neutralizing interest, by substituting for the parochial perspective of some local or partisan point of view the perspective of a general rationality to which the individual subordinates his contextually conditioned opinions and beliefs."¹² Theory, so understood, would be incompatible with the postmodern perspective, which disputes decontextualized, nonlinguistic, nonsituational sources of justification.

In speaking of theory, one may distinguish at least two fundamental operations in current literary discussion: description and theory-development. To describe is, in Tzvetan Todorov's neat formulation,

to try to obtain, on the basis of certain theoretical premises, a rationalized representation of the object of study, while to present a scientific work [i.e. a theory] is to discuss and

10. Tyler, *The Unspeakable*... 149-50.

11. Tyler, *The Unspeakable*... 171.

12. *Doing What Comes Naturally* (Durham, 1989) 319.

transform the theoretical premises themselves, after having experienced the object described.¹³

(Reading is distinct from both of these operations, though obviously it may be affected by them.) Classicists themselves have had little to do with literary theory-formation, tending to apply to classical texts theoretical premises developed elsewhere. Opposition to theory arises mostly from the belief that it inserts something alien (a contaminant) between the reader and the text. “The simple response to this,” in Terry Eagleton’s often quoted remark,

is that without some kind of theory, however unreflective or implicit, we would not know what a ‘literary work’ was in the first place, or how we were to read it. Hostility to theory usually means an opposition to other people’s theories and an ignorance of one’s own.¹⁴

In the long run, ‘theory’ as applied to the reading and analysis of Homer, as of any text, offers one among many explicitly considered frameworks for reading the text, for giving a rational account of it, as opposed to a reading that proceeds within a framework either inexplicit or unknown to the reader.¹⁵

Unfortunately, there is an unnecessary but not infrequent discrepancy between most theoretical writing and a style that is clear, coherent [387] and aesthetically appealing, something cherished if not always practiced by classicists. This has played no small part in creating the climate of impatience with and distrust of theory among literary scholars who come out of a tradition that ranks stylistic clarity and elegance high in its list of cherished humanistic values. Even more sinister in their eyes is the damaging effect theory may be perceived to have on the aesthetic appeal or pleasure one derives from ‘reading’ a text. There are many who, even if they concede the legitimacy and importance of theory, still consider it isolable from the act of reading literature and insist on its suspension if the work is to be enjoyed. They would argue that to expose the rules of the game, the process and devices of construction that ground and authenticate the representational surface of the work, is to spoil the pleasure we derive from that representational surface. But much of what I am calling contemporary theory forces us to question how far this suspension of disbelief can really go, or should really go. Such ‘innocent’ reading of any texts can be morally alienating and socially damaging. In other words, much of contemporary theory goes beyond giving an ‘account’ of texts within an explicit theoretical framework to become *social criticism*. “It reveals,” says Umberto Eco (speaking particularly about semiotics), “ways in which the labor of sign product can respect or betray the complexity of ... a cultural network, thereby adapting it to (or separating it from) *the human labor of transforming stages of the world*.”¹⁶ Sign production -- with Homeric poetry we are concerned mainly with *narrative* sign production -- may constrain or enhance the human enterprise of

13. *Littérature et signification* (Paris 1967) 7.

14. *Literary Theory* (Minneapolis, 1983) viii.

15. See especially Charles Martindale *Redeeming the Text: Latin Poetry and the Hermeneutics of Reception* (Cambridge, Eng., 1993) 11-18.

16. *A Theory of Semiotics* (Bloomington, 1976) 297, emphasis added.

transforming the world to its own desire and design, or it may sustain and authorize the interests of one social group to the detriment of another in that enterprise. Contemporary theory questions the powerful unquestioned assumption that language, particularly narrative language, functions according to principles which are the same as, or even remotely like those of the phenomenal world or that literature is a reliable source of information about anything other than its own language.¹⁷

The “ways in which the labor of sign product can respect or betray the complexity of ... a cultural network” is, of course, more explicitly, if not exclusively, the concern of Marxists and feminists than it is of those whose transaction with the text reveals little moral, social [388] or political motivation, not to speak of those who openly insist that such motivation is either inappropriate or futile.

Peter Rose, in the first two chapters of *Sons of God, Children of Earth: Ideology and Literary Form in Ancient Greece*,¹⁸ develops a Marxist analysis of the Homeric texts that shows a subtle sensitivity to postmodern epistemology and a sure grasp of its tools, even as he maintains a stout historicist stance. No naive seeker after authorial intent or ‘original’ audience response, he yet tries to reconstruct the historical crises that engendered these texts. He finds the *Iliad* torn between two representations, one that validates an ideology linking kingship with divine genealogy and another that criticizes “the irreversible trend toward plutocracy represented by Agamemnon” and insists on “claims of inherited excellence as valid only when demonstrated through risk taking and actual success on the field and in the trials of community deliberations” (90). As for the *Odyssey* Rose disputes the way in which the ambiguities in the text, its self-conscious preoccupation with punning and naming and with the potential duplicity of poetry are hypostatized by purely literary analysts as results of the inherently polysemous nature of all discourse and sign systems. He prefers rather to see these qualities primarily as “creative responses to the political, social, economic, and psychological ambivalences of specific historical actors at a specific historical juncture,” and as products of “a concrete crisis in text production itself associated with the transition from an oral to a literate culture” (139). He draws from the text a credible picture of a poet whose “ambiguous allegiance results, on the one hand, from his role as the bearer of the elite culture and partial dependent of the aristocratic ruling element, and on the other, from his status as a wandering craftsman and his proximity to the discontented peasants and marginal elements in society” (139).

As with Marxism, so also with feminist approaches, the social, reformative aim is primary, explicit and insistent. The most recent and perhaps most insistent of these in Homeric studies is Lillian E. Doherty's *Siren Songs: Gender, Audiences, and Narrators in the Odyssey*.¹⁹ The [389]

17. See Paul De Man, “The Resistance to Theory,” *Yale French Studies* 63 (1982) 11.

18. (Ithaca, 1992). For those little conversant with Marxism Rose's Introduction, “Marxism and the Classics,” should be required reading. In it he traces the development of Marxist theory culminating with a summary of Frederic Jameson's concept of the double hermeneutic.

19. (Ann Arbor, 1995). As the present essay was being written, Doherty's book was still in press, but the author kindly supplied me with page proofs of her two introductory segments where her purposes and methodology are most explicitly enunciated.

larger framework within which her reading of the *Odyssey* takes place is an active critique of the androcentric (and to a lesser extent the class-based) assumptions she sees informing not only Homeric epic, but also contemporary social conditions, including what becomes especially problematical for feminist classicists, the limited canon of works the focus of which is almost wholly androcentric. Using mainly tools associated with narratology and audience-response criticism, she focuses on two questions: (1) Is the *Odyssey* a *closed* (redundant) text, i.e., “one that by its self-consistency and adherence to convention seeks to limit the possibilities of interpretation,” or an *open* (plural) text, i.e., one that “disrupts its own structural patterns or the conventions of its genre, thereby making room for -- even requiring -- more interpretative activity”; and (2) What strategies are available to feminist readers of the *Odyssey*? Her conclusion, a not uncontroversial one, is

that the *Odyssey* presents itself primarily as a closed text, and that this has serious consequences for female readers, whose responses it models in elaborate and seductive ways. At the same time, the existence of conspicuous narrative breaks or silences interferes with the text's redundancy. These ‘openings’ represent opportunities for the reader who would resist textual determinacy.

As one would expect, the feminist movement has brought keener attention to Homer's female characters, Penelope in particular, even in studies in which a feminist agenda is muted or barely perceptible.²⁰ Nancy Felson-Rubin's *Regarding Penelope: From Character to Poetics*²¹ adroitly supports a moderate feminism with perspectives drawn from narratology, possible-world semantics, audience-oriented criticism, Peircean semiotics and Bakhtinian dialogism in exploring the character of Odysseus' embattled spouse. Speaking of an audience's capacity to occupy the subject position of the poem's characters, Felson-Rubin maintains that “the division between the genders is not necessarily so [390] restrictive as scholars commonly imagine.” Accordingly, she finds in the text a more deliberate and effectual critique of its own androcentric tradition than Doherty would probably want to concede. In this reading, Penelope is seen as the most enigmatic and puzzling character in the *Odyssey*, a judgment powerfully confirmed by the observation that, while the actions of Odysseus, the suitors, even the gods themselves are routinely forecast, leaving fairly little doubt about the poem's major eventualities, no authoritative voice ever makes clear what Penelope will do, before she does it. Instead, a number of hypothetical narrative outcomes (chiefly the Argive plot of Clytemnestra's treachery) are kept constantly within the range of possibility before finally yielding to the actual conclusion of successful second courtship and reunion.

Felson-Rubin eschews that strain of postmodernism that distances the reader/critic from what she calls the “emotional content” of the text. This stance, combined with her desire to bring

20. The publication of *The Distaff Side: Representing the Female in Homer's Odyssey*, edited by Beth Cohen (Oxford, 1995), occurred when the present essay was nearly complete. Among the highly commendable essays in this collection, a quick perusal turned up the following essays with a more or less explicit contemporary theoretical perspective: Seth L. Schein, “Female Representation and Interpreting the *Odyssey*,” Sheila Murnaghan, “The Plan of Athena,” Lillian Doherty, “Sirens, Muses and Female Narrators in the *Odyssey*,” and Froma Zeitlin, “Figuring Fidelity in Homer's *Odyssey*.”

21. (Princeton, 1994).

as much coherence as possible to the fictional world of the *Odyssey*, makes her deliberately less skeptical about the problematics of artistic unity and of psychologizing character than many late twentieth-century theorists are inclined to be. They tend to stress the gaps, the disjunctions, inconsistencies, contradictions and indeterminacies in literary characters and plots. Marilyn A. Katz takes this tack in *Penelope's Renown: Meaning and Indeterminacy in the Odyssey*,²² diverging in a fundamental way from Felson-Rubin,²³ even though their books otherwise exhibit frequent points of convergence. Katz turns into a virtue the textual inconsistencies that scandalized the analysts, and refuses to settle for a sense of unity derived either from simplistic notions of authorial intent or from audience-oriented criticism. The referentiality of the poem is, as she says, "forever open to question." And "it is the figure of Penelope through whom this indeterminacy is encoded into the text." As for character, she is relentless in her assault upon the [391] unitary notion of the subject -- "the idea, that is to say, that character is constituted around a core of true being represented by certain 'characteristics,'" rather than, as Katz insists, around narrative exigencies. However, the indeterminacy in Penelope's case is not unproductive. The "absence of integrity" in the development of her character, Katz concludes,

can be understood instead as performing a specific function in the text, that of calling into question the relation between semblance and being, between disguise and truth. This disruption of the fixity of Penelope's character, then, functions, like Odysseus's disguise, as a strategy of estrangement -- we do not know, in a certain sense, 'who' Penelope is. Her 'character' is thus rendered so as to represent an analogue to her state of sociological indeterminacy, which is defined by her lack of a *kyrios* or authorizing agent.

Katz's suspicion regarding the stable subject and consistency and continuity of character and her insistence that character is subservient to narrative exigencies are shared by John Peradotto in *Man in the Middle Voice: Name and Narration in the Odyssey*, where he argues that from this austere and, for the conventionalist, discomfiting point of view, 'Outis' turns out to be the only *proper* name for the emptiness that in reality all narrative persons share, but that is nonetheless the improper ground on which their spurious claims to absolute distinctness rest. Odysseus's deliberate abrogation of distinctness in the Polyphemus's cave displays him as the narrative agent par excellence, as therefore capable of becoming *any* character, of assuming *any* predicate, of doing or enduring *anything*, of being, in a word, *polytropos* -- the negativity capable of the fullest and most polymorphic narrative development. This theme develops out of Peradotto's larger analytic frame, which views the *Odyssey* as a tense, never resolved opposition between tragic 'myth' and optimistic 'folktale,' recognized as vehicles for contrasting ideological opinions on the world. With terms drawn from Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of 'dialogism,' the

22. (Princeton, 1991).

23. In *Disguise and Recognition in the Odyssey* (Princeton, 1987), Sheila Murnaghan, who seems to occupy a tense middle ground between these two positions, sums up admirably the dilemma of dealing with literary character (128): "The figure of Penelope in the *Odyssey* exemplifies with particular clarity the double life led by most characters in literary plots, as both figures in an orderly artistic design and as representations of human beings making their way through experiences whose patterns they cannot perceive or predict. In Penelope's case these two aspects of her role in the poem yield perspectives on her character and behavior that are so different that they cannot easily be reconciled."

poem's two voices are characterized as 'centripetal' and 'centrifugal' -- the one associated with dominant political power, with the conventional, the official, and the heroic; the other with the personal, the disempowered and the popular, with the antics of the Autolycean trickster and outlaw. Peradotto finds an analogous polarity between two views of poetic activity revealed in the *Odyssey*, distinguished from one another by the extent of their subservience to the external pressures of tradition and verisimilitude. One is a discourse of *representation*, embodied in the blind Phaeacian bard Demodocus, [392] who gracefully repeats a fixed tradition given to him in inspiration by the Muses to keep the past intact; the other is a discourse of *production*, embodied in Odysseus himself, who freely designs fictions out of his own ingenuity to control present circumstance and to serve his purpose for the future.

Most of the studies referred to so far are in varying degrees *intertextual*. Intertextuality, understood in the weakest, least provocative sense of the term as a set of relations among texts, is certainly no new phenomenon in the literary critical lexicon of classicists. A familiar practice of traditional philology has been the search for one text's allusions to others, especially its sources (*Quellenforschung*), but also including such non-literary 'texts' as social, political, biographical codes, influences and institutions that constitute the 'context' of the text under study.²⁴ But allusiveness in traditional studies, with the privilege it attached to recovering 'original' meaning or the 'original' performance, was understood to be strictly bound by time's arrow: the texts alluded *to* had to be earlier or contemporaneous with the text under study. When it came to Homer, this restriction generally sanctioned the study of allusions to the *Iliad* in the *Odyssey*, but looked with grave suspicion on any that might be considered to move in the other direction, (even though, with ironic inconsistency, the prior composition of the *Iliad* has had no solid proof).

But intertextuality in the strong or postmodern sense disavows, or at least refuses to privilege the premises on which this more traditional study of allusiveness is based, foremost among them, the view that texts are self-sufficient, with more or less absolute closure and resolution. By contrast, postmodern intertextual practice views texts as fragmentary, referring endlessly to other texts, the way a dictionary definition refers explicitly or implicitly to other definitions, no single one of them occupying a privileged, stable, univocal center. Accordingly, authors lose their authority, failing, as all language users necessarily fail, in their attempt to make language their own. Their intentions, even where they can be somehow demonstrated (as in Homer they obviously cannot), carry less weight than the incessant allusiveness of the language they use. Furthermore, the very notion of a privileged, autonomous 'literal' meaning, to which a connotational [393] allusive meaning must be considered additional and superfluous, is itself an arbitrary construct.²⁵

24. See Thomas Rosenmeyer *Deina ta Polla: A Classicist's Checklist of Twenty Literary-Critical Positions* (Buffalo, 1988) 40-42, where the author prefers the term 'contextual' to 'intertextual'.

25. For the special pertinence of this observation to Homeric studies see especially Pietro Pucci, *Odysseus Polutropos: Intertextual Readings in the Odyssey and the Iliad* (Ithaca, N.Y. and London, 1987) 236-45.

In Homeric studies, Pietro Pucci's *Odysseus Polutropos: Intertextual Readings in the Odyssey and the Iliad*²⁶ makes most extensive and daring use of this and other deconstructive premises.²⁷ One should not be misled by the title. Although the work could be described as a dialectic or, perhaps better, a duel between the two Homeric texts, the site on which it is played out is mainly the *Odyssey*. But this is definitely not to say that Pucci privileges it over the *Iliad*. On the contrary, he sees the two poems and their heroes as representing “two opposite economies of life, two exemplary extremes in conceiving our relationship with life and death and accordingly two different ways of writing and circumventing our anxiety about death” (173). But these two poetic representations imply or, perhaps better, implicate one another, irrespective of their temporal relationship: “the textual force of the *Odyssey* and of the *Iliad* lies in their linguistic relationships, differences, and similarities. This textual relationship is to some extent indifferent to the priority of one text over the other” (48). There is a yet bolder implication in this, the invitation to understand the two texts as giving one another what Pucci calls a ‘specular reading’: “One text would rewrite the other, but it would simultaneously be written by the other” (42). There is, however, a moment when Pucci forgets this complicated balancing act and does seem to authorize the Odyssean perspective. It is a *felix culpa*, if *culpa* at all: a brilliant reading of Odysseus as reader of the *Iliad* (226):

Through the song of Demodocus, the *Odyssey* has induced us to read its own reading (of Odysseus’ reading) of his own tradition and to become conscious of the thematic continuity and difference that the text constantly maintains with respect to the heroic tradition. Odysseus has become a fellow reader of the heroic tradition: he is no longer a hero of that genre but is now the character whose pathos points at the business of survival and pleasure. This business is epitomized by his transformation from an actor in the Trojan War into a passionate and pitiful reader of that war's story.

[394] That what I have been calling postmodern concerns in fact correspond to the conceptual environment of the Homeric poems is a premiss on which these and other contemporary studies proceed. And that this is especially the case with the *Odyssey*²⁸ shows itself in the steady stream of books on that poem in recent years, ranging from those whose perspective combines the best in traditional philological analysis with an equally traditional humanist aesthetic,

26. For a detailed and sympathetic reading of this demanding book, see Victoria Pedrick, “Reading in the Middle Voice: The Homeric Intertextuality of Pietro Pucci and John Peradotto,” *Helios* 21 (1994) 75-96.

27. The exception to this generalization may well be the consistently provocative work of Ann Bergren (see bibliography).

28. My sampling of theoretical approaches has concentrated on works addressed to the *Odyssey* for the obvious reason that its own preoccupation with textuality, with signs, with the problematics of language, the poetic transaction, subjectivity and other concerns of postmodernism is more patent. One should by no means overlook the brilliant, if often obscure, study of the *Iliad*, by Michael Lynn-George Lynn-George, *Epos: Word Narrative and the Iliad* (Atlantic Highlands, N.J., 1988), in which the tools of deconstruction and Bakhtinian dialogism are wielded with uncommon skill. Michael Naas's *Turning from Persuasion to Philosophy: A Reading of Homer's Iliad* (Atlantic Highlands, N.J., 1995), which promises a sensitive postmodern reading, appeared as the present essay was being completed.

to Derridian, deconstructionist, intertextual readings of the poem. And there are others, and not a few, yet in the works.²⁹ One may, of course, find other explanations for this concentration on the *Odyssey*. It is certainly no new discovery that this text is extremely self-reflexive about the processes of its own poetic production³⁰ and of its relation to the narrative tradition that lies behind it. But those attuned to current theoretical discussions have turned these into major concerns. They would argue further that the *Odyssey* is a truly perplexed and disruptive text, and was no less so to nineteenth- and twentieth-century philologists who, to blunt its scandal, scanned and dissected it, stratified it into earlier and later parts, better and worse parts, sifted it for inconsistencies, all in the search for an uncontaminated original to match their own implicit model of the work of art as an organic and harmonious whole, and of the human subject as a consistent and harmonious whole. However, in the wake of theoretical movements culminating in the set of perspectives comprised by the term postmodernism, this same perplexed and disruptive text becomes a [395] paradigm for a less authoritative, less confident, more dialectical view of text production -- writing, and of text reception -- reading, and indeed for a more discordant view of the human subject. No one should expect any of this to make reading Homer any easier, but, in Pucci's words (225),

Readers of the *Odyssey* are expected to possess the same intellectual gifts as the poet and the character of the poems: otherwise they will read this amazingly subtle and complex text as a mere fable for grown-up children.

29. Among authors of recent *Odyssey* studies Charles Segal deserves special mention for a consistently remarkable stream of work on Homer bridging the period between the publication of Wace and Stubbings and the present. This work ranges from elegant, discriminating *explication de texte* (as in his 1962 *Arion* essay "The Phaeacians and the Symbolism of Odysseus' Return") to the latter half of *Singers, Heroes, and Gods in the Odyssey* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1994), where his focus is on many of the issues dear to contemporary theory, e.g., the poem's self-reflexive character, the strategies of its internal narrators, the reactions of their audiences, and the clues these provide to the *Odyssey's* moral dimension.

30. For an extensive bibliography on the self-reflexive poetics of the *Odyssey*, see Goldhill, *The Poet's Voice: Essays on Poetics and Greek Literature* (Cambridge and New York, 1991) 57, note 98.