

VISUAL SIGNS IN THE HOMERIC EPICS

The Ancient Greeks are considered the ones who introduced oculo-centrism in Western culture by overvaluing visual information and, correspondingly, undervaluing oral information. We should remember, among other things, the celebrated saying of Heraclitus “the ears are less trusting than the eyes”, a saying that is attested in Herodotus’ *Histories* (I, 8.3) where one can find a co-appreciation of hearing and hearsay, on the one hand, with what the travelling eye-witness sees, on the other.

If, in general, the discourse of classical tradition regarding viewing is considered, to some extent, self-evident, this does not hold true for the earlier Homeric epics, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, which, as oral-derived texts are dependent, in as far as their composition, transmission, and reception is concerned, on voice and hearing. It is no surprise then that the view, expressed in a laudatory text of 200 AD, the *Peri Omêrou [B]* attributed to pseudo-Plutarch, that Homer is the ‘teacher of painting’ *par excellence* sounds strange to our modern ears (Keeney & Lamberton 1996).

In what follows, I wish to say that the Homeric epics, despite their oral origins, were destined also for visual consumption and that their audience not only listened to them but, in a way, actually visualized them as well.

## I

It is a widely accepted truth that, in as far as the Homeric epics are concerned, composition is coterminous with public performance. However, 'performance' as a concept, defined as 'recitation' according to the oral theory of Parry and Lord, was, only recently, treated as a public 'presentation', that is to say, as a communicative event that takes place between the aoidos and his audience, the notional place where a heroic past, distant and yet alive, and also accessible through the means of poetic tradition, is activated in the spatiotemporal axis of 'here and now'. As an act, this presentation is predicated upon the fact that it is a re-presentation, in the sense that the poet recreates the heroic past in the present, modeling his performance on the previous public (re)presentations of the poetic text (Nagy 1996).

Consequently, the ordinary condition of the epic performance is not only something that facilitates the poet to recount narrative formulae and typical-scenes; rather the composition of the work itself consists of a process of *mimêsis*, in the manner of figurative arts. In contradistinction however with the other arts, i.e. painting, where *mimêsis* may be located in the static relationship between the completed work of art and its referent, in the epic the mimetic act is both a dynamic process and a self-reflexive one: the poet/performer represents or imitates, every single time, his former performances, his own work, and in a way, his very self (Bakker 2005).

So, in the framework of a composition that is contemporaneous with its performance, human memory or the act of remembering, if you will, acquires a distinct significance: it is neither merely a retrieval of stored facts from memory, nor a contemplative escape into a past reality, but rather a dynamic, cognitive experience

which enables the reality of the past to actualize itself in the present, as the epic performance requires. This is the reason why the verb *mimnêskomai* in the Homeric epics does not simply mean 'remember' but rather implies a condition of the mind in the present time. As a consequence, its syntactical object, i.e. in the exhortation, found in the *Iliad*, *mnêsasthai alkês* (remember your strength), always denotes an active experience in the present, which leads to direct and decisive action. If one remembers his own strength he is, in as far as physical action is concerned, physically strong in battle (Small 1997, Minchin 2001, Bakker 2005).

The active role of memory in the here and now of epic performance is related to what cognitive psychologists call 'mental imagery'. David Rubin, an American professor, whose work *Memory in Oral Traditions* (1995) has influenced those studies that examine the Homeric epics from a cognitive studies standpoint, has shown that mental imagery is one of the most effective means of reinforcing a bard's memory, thereby contributing to the stability of oral tradition. Rubin – who is incidentally sustaining his arguments by utilizing the Simonidean *ars memoriae* of 'loci', which says that the more we store something in the mental space of our brain where images are stored the easier it becomes for us to retrieve it later on (Small 1997, Sprigath 2004) – has shown that bards conceive of their epic narratives in the form of mental images, which succeed one another as the story progresses. In other words, in the 'camera of the mind', the epic story unfolds more or less as a 'mental walk', where the bard composes his own story in a manner similar to a film director's. Homeric studies scholars relate the poet's mental navigation amidst the successive narrative images in the time of the performance/presentation with the act of singing itself, an act which, in the Homeric epics, is also called an *oimê* (song-path) (Minchin 2001,

Strauss Clay 2007). Therefore, there is certainly an obvious relation between memory and vision – a fact that explains the reason why oral traditions all over the world are characterised by vivid and concrete imagery and attention to visual detail.

Based on these general observations, I shall now present more specific aspects of the interaction between hearing and memory in the two Homeric epics.

## II

1. In both the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* there is a significant number of verb forms, by which one may denote various visual acts. For instance, external objects ‘appear’ or ‘seem’ to the one who is both the subject and the object of the act of seeing, in other words to the focalizer, who may be either the narrator or some person or character in the epic poem (de Jong & Nünlist 2004). Examples of such verbs include the forms *noein*, *leussein*, *oran*, *athrein*, *theasthai*, *skeptesthai*, *ossesthai*, *thaumazein*, *dendillein*, *derkesthai*, *phainesthai*, *paptainein*, *sêmainein*, *dokeuein*, *phrazesthai*, *gignôskein*, and *idein*. The last form, *idein*, is paradigmatically used in the formulaic expression *thauma idesthai* “a wonder to behold” (Prier 1989), which is used with regard to mortals who gaze upon objects of divine provenance, such as the huge weapons of Achilles in the *Iliad* (Σ 83), or such places, i.e. the Cyclopean walls of the Phaeacians in the *Odyssey* (η 45).

The heterogeneous multitude of Homeric verb forms that signify vision does not mean that the ‘Homeric man’ “was not able to see” due to his lack of a coherent self-identity, as Bruno Snell once said (1975). What it does say is that the forms ‘see’ and ‘be seen’ have a privileged status in the Homeric epics, despite their dependence on voice and hearing. Let us remember that, in the Homeric texts, the verb *oida* means

'I have seen' and therefore 'I know', while the verbs 'see' and 'live' are often semantically equivalent (Vernant 1991).

2. War in the *Iliad* and *nostos* (the return journey to one's home) in the *Odyssey* are often conceptualized by the poet in terms of film techniques, in which the narrator's standpoint is also implied. The epic depiction of a scene generally begins with a panoramic view of the action, a technique based on what is called a bird's eye view, so that the image is adequately framed. Then comes the zooming of the poetic camera, which makes use of the big close up, when there are duels between heroic characters or when there are alternating descriptions of objects, places, and persons. Finally we have the spectacular summation of the whole scene (de Jong & Nünlist 2004).

Often the poet implies that the internal spectator of the epic actions is in a privileged position vis-à-vis the external member of the audience. In the fourth Book of the *Iliad*, while the poet discusses the aftermath of the first battle between the opposing armies, he says that only an eye-witness, had he been present in the valley of Troy, could have really understood the true nature of this war. Eustathius, one of Homer's commentators, makes the following remark regarding this hypothetical observer: "such a spectator could have been a member of the poet's audience enjoying, in his mind, the spectacle of war". In yet another instance in the *Iliad*, when Hector goes to embrace his son Astyanax and the little one, frightened by his father's helmet, turns back to his mother's (Andromache) hands, the ancient commentator notes that "he [Astyanax] is afraid by the way his father looks; epics are filled will

with *enargeia*, so that one can not only hear the action, but actually see it" (Meijering 1987).

The crucial word in this case is the noun *enargeia*. In the context of the Homeric epics this term, which, it must be noted, originally signified the unmediated appearance of gods to human beings, is related to the graphic vividness of the epic narration, its visual concreteness and immediacy, its emphasis on fine detail, and its self-evident power. All these are stylistic traits, thanks to which the epic actions of the past are presented, through oral discourse, before the rhapsode's audience (narratee's) very eyes (Manieri 1998, Bakker 2005).

3. In the Homeric epics, there is a great number of extremely vivid descriptions, all of which are alluded to by the technical term *ekphrasis*. *Ekphrasis* refers to the vivid description of persons, facts, objects, places, and historical periods and more specifically to the verbal description of a work of art. The most celebrated *ekphrasis* in Western literature is to be found in the eighteenth Book of the *Iliad*, where the poet momentarily suspends his narration in order to describe the construction of Achilles' shield by the god Hephaestus (Σ 478-608). This scene has been considered by traditional commentators as a metaphor for Homeric poetry in general, while narratologists consider it as a *mise en abyme* of its own frame narrative, the *Iliad* itself (Becker 1995). When, for example, god Hephaestus foresees, while addressing Thetis, Achilles' mother, that the indestructible shield of her 'short-lived' son 'will be admired by everyone among the people who lays eyes on it' (Σ 466-467) – the narrative voice, as the commentators of this particular description maintain, belongs

also to the poet himself, who, referring to his own work, addresses not only the visual listener in the present, but rather the reader/spectator of the future.

4. Voice, hearing, and sight are all implied by both the actual and the symbolic function of *sêmata* (signs), through which *telos* (the 'end') of an action is defined in the Homeric epics (Nagy 1990). *Kleos* (glory and fame) of the epic heroes is also preserved in time through graves or monuments. For instance, in the seventh Book of the *Iliad*, Hector, when he presages what is in fact his own burial – the act with which the epic poem ends – he announces with ironic arrogance that the memory of his next possible victim, who would dare challenge him in battle, will survive him in the epitaphic *sêma* (sign), which will be visible by the sailors far in the Hellespontus, thus attesting to the timeless glory of the man who had killed him (H 89-90). In the epilogue of the *Odyssey*, a tomb, which is described as *têlephanes* (visible from far away), was constructed in the wide Hellespontus by the Achaeans in order to preserve Achilles' *kleos* for posterity .

In the *Odyssey*, signs have the additional function of commonly accepted indications of mutual recognition and *homophrosyne* (likemindness). The most celebrated *sêma* (sign) of recognition in the *Odyssey* is Odysseus' scar, thanks to which he is recognised, in the nineteenth Book, by his old nurse Eurycleia (τ 317-507). Pseudo-Plutarch, who, in the second century AD, said of Homer that he was a 'teacher of painting', referred to the embedded micro-narrative of the nurse's recognition of Odysseus as a characteristic example, showing that the poet's work is to be enjoyed by 'spectators, rather than listeners' (217). He also quoted the passage where the old nurse recognises her master by touching his scar (τ 467-477) and

added that the poet, speaking about the scar though Eurycleia's character, presents the actions with such graphic vividness that reading the scene becomes, in fact, the equivalent of seeing it (Keeney & Lamberton 1996). Although, it is not yet proven, it is nevertheless possible that Erich Auerbach, the German critic of Jewish descent, wrote his classic work *Mimesis* (2003) which begins with the celebrated essay on Odysseus' scar, with full knowledge of pseudo-Plutarch's views on the subject.

5. Both the heroes and the heroines of the Homeric epics live in a society that is based on the politics of personal dignity, where the recognition of their *timê* (honour) is predicated on the public acceptance of their behaviour and so they act, taking into consideration not only the *dêmoio phêmin* (hearsay of the people) or the *phatin* (rumour) but also their perception by the public. It is in representative aretalogical principles and concepts like *kalos/kakos*, *aischros*, *aidôs/eleos* and *hybris* that the 'aesthetic' judgement of the people is often expressed for persons, behaviours, and situations with the use of the impersonal verb *eoike* (it is fitting, right, or seemly) when it is a positive one and with the phrase *ouk eoike* (it is not fitting, right, or seemly) when it is a negative one. Other expressions and concepts as, for instance, *kata moiran* and *dikê* (from *deiknumi*), reflect the good behaviour of a person in the spatial axis, while, at the same time, implying the correspondence that must exist between the *kosmos* (the visible and structured order of things) and the 'moral' stance of a person, who ought to conduct himself/herself properly in public (we could also say 'civilly') or, as in Homer, *kata kosmon* (putting things in order, or, more generally, be consistent with one's words).

6. What is left now is the obvious relationship between a simile and what we have already referred to as mental imagery. The obviousness of such a relationship, which made Aristotle identify the simile with *eikôn*, is valid only to the extent that the simile is a verbal comparison, in the context of which a narrative idea – we shall call it ‘target’ – i.e. the aggressiveness and ferocity of a warrior, is compared with another kindred idea, its ‘source’ or ‘vehicle’, i.e. a lion, which is a concrete one and therefore picturable (Minchin 2001). However, it must be noted that the way a narratee engages with a simile, as a listener/viewer of its content, cannot be reduced to a straightforward identification with what is perceived by all its internal viewers (the mortals, the poet, or the gods). This is so because each of these viewers often ‘sees’ the epic actions through his or her own point of view, thereby challenging the viewers/spectators to choose their own point of view through which they will see the events. Let me finish by offering you the following example:

Achilles’ ferocious chase of Hector, in the twenty-second Book of the *Iliad*, could be compared with a running match. However, the poet is quick to invalidate this aesthetic intuition by reminding his audience that what is at stake here is Hector’s own life. This correction by the poet is followed by another, also sporting simile, where the hunter Achilles and the hunted Hector are compared to race horses – a spectacle, which is enjoyed, this time, by the gods. If we accept the hypothesis of certain commentators that a plausible guess and a simile form a tiered unit, which assumes the form of a *priamel*, we can then say that two opposing focalisations are presented to the listener/reader. The first is the one that belongs to the eye-witness of the epic actions, in other words the poet, for whom the deadly hunt is a tragic ‘reality’ and the narratee is asked to identify precisely with that point of view. The

second is the one that belongs to the gods, for whom the tragic event is a parabolic spectacle, which they view from the safe distance of Olympus and which does not affect them in any direct manner. So, what we have is the juxtaposition, right before our eyes, of two different views of the world of the epics: the dark fate of mortals in earth and the unconcern of gods in Olympus. We make our own choices and we, in our turn, see as well.----

### References

Auerbach, E. 2003. *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*. Fiftieth Anniversary Ed. Trans. Willard Trask. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Bakker, E. J. 2005. *Pointing at the Past: From Formula to Performance in Homeric Poetics*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Becker, A. 1995. *The Shield of Achilles and the Poetics of Ekphrasis*. Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield.

de Jong, I., & R. Nünlist. 2004. From Bird's Eye View to Close-Up. In A. Bierl, A. Schmitt, & A. Willi (hrsg.), *Antike Literatur in neuer Deutung* (63-83). München-Leipzig: Saur.

Keeney, J. J. , & R. Lamberton (eds.). 1996. *[Plutarch] Essay on the Life and Poetry of Homer*. Atlanta: Scholars Press.

Manieri, A. 1998. *L'immagine poetica nella teoria degli antichi. Fantasia ed enargeia*. Pisa-Roma. Istituti Editoriali e Poligrafici Internazionali.

Meijering, Roos. 1987. *Literary and Rhetorical Theories in Greek Scholia*. Grönningen: Forsten.

Minchin, E. 2001. *Homer and the Resources of Memory*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Nagy, G. 1990. *Sêma and Nôēsis: The Hero's Tomb and the "Reading" of Symbols in Homer and Hesiod*. In *Greek Mythology and Poetics* (202-222). Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

Nagy, G. 1996. *Poetry as Performance: Homer and Beyond*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Prier, R. A. 1989. *Thauma idesthai. The Phenomenology of Sight and Appearance in Archaic Greek*. Tallahassee. The Florida State University Press.

Rubin, D. 1995. *Memory in Oral Traditions: The Cognitive Psychology of Epic, Ballads, and Counting-out Rhymes*. N.Y.: Oxford University Press.

Small, J. P. 1997. *Wax Tablets of the Mind. Cognitive Studies of Memory and Literacy in Classical Antiquity*. London-N.Y.: Routledge.

Snell, B. 1975. *Die Entdeckung des Geistes. Studien zur Entstehung des europäischen Denkens bei den Griechen*. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht.

Sprigath, G. K. 2004. Das Dictum des Simonides. Der Vergleich von Dichtung und Malerei. *Poetica*, 36 (3/4): 243-280.

Strauss Clay, J. 2007. Homer's Trojan Theater. *TAPA*, 137: 233-252.

Vernant, J.-P. 1991. The Birth of Images. In F. Zeitlin (ed.), *Mortals and Immortals* (164-185). Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.