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THE POET AND THE MUSES IN HOMER

GEORGE M. CALHOUN

THE limpid flow of argument which makes Gilbert Murray's *Rise of the Greek Epic* so entrancing to the unsuspecting reader has its sources in all the bubbling fountains of the higher criticism, and the analytical studies which are not laid under contribution are few indeed. But the nucleus of Murray's theories, the idea of a "traditional book," handed down from father to son, by master to disciple, added to by each heritor, jealously guarded as a precious trade-secret, and conned over slyly in private before each public recitation, is peculiarly his own. So also, I believe, is the attempt to establish the use and existence of this traditional book from the poet's invocation of the Muse.[1] Such a line as ἔσπετε νῦν μοι Μοῦσαι Ὀλύμπια δώματ' ἔχουσαι, we are told, is an indication that the poet is about to consult his book on matters for which he cannot trust his memory, facts, lists of things, "such subjects as the Catalogue of the Greek army." Says Murray:

> One suspects that that consultation was often carried out by the bard retiring to some lonely place, or maybe barricading the door of his hut, bringing forth a precious roll, and laboriously spelling out the difficult letter-marks. Γράμματα, the Greeks called them, or 'scratches.'

This appealing picture of the bard looking in his book puts everything at once on a footing of pleasant intimacy, as if we were peering over the poet's shoulder and had a part in his painful efforts to decipher the mysterious "scratches" of his scroll. The friendly feeling engendered by this intimacy is tinged slightly with pity, with perhaps the touch of condescension reserved for those who have not our accomplishments, who read haltingly or speak our language imperfectly. Our poet, if we can trust Mr. Murray, is having rather a hard time "laboriously spelling out" his scratches, and we can read a whole volume of Edgar Wallace in an evening. Can we trust Mr. Murray? Is the scene that he has evoked, with its flavor of intimacy, a true

[1] Gilbert Murray, *The Rise of the Greek Epic* (4th ed.; Oxford, 1934), pp. 96 f.

re-creation of the past? Shall we allow it to invest the *Iliad*, for us, as it invests it for Mr. Murray, with "that touch of the infinite, that strictly incomparable quality which results when a beautiful object is confessedly imperfect and inevitably suggests a beauty beyond itself?"[2] Or must we subject it to pedantic analysis, and perhaps discard it, and with it the pleasurable emotions it evokes, as vain imagining?

Murray gives abundant instances of "traditional books," from *Whitaker's Almanack* and the *Statesman's Yearbook* back through *Hamlet* and the *Song of Roland* to the Hebrew scriptures (pp. 100–119). But analogies must be used with caution; if they are not to land us in a vicious circle, their pertinence must be established by valid evidence; without such evidence their multiplication does not avail. It may be granted at once that there have been books which have been handed down, altered, added to, consulted—consulted perhaps even in the furtive manner Murray so circumstantially depicts—and that his list could be considerably extended without much difficulty. All this is very interesting, but it does not prove that the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, in the formative stages, were written books, or that the bard pieced them together by cutting the hide with a knife and sewing in new strips, or that he conned them over secretly before his recitations, any more than the existence of long poems not committed to writing proves the contrary. The only portion of Murray's argument which can be admitted as evidence is his citation from the poems of invoca-

[2] *Ibid.*, p. 315. Murray's imaginative reconstruction induces a state of mind which finds expression, in chap. iv, in his tone of easy condescension toward the bard (pp. 96–99), and, in chap. xii, in the mild tolerance with which he views the imperfections of the *Iliad* (pp. 315 f.), as he yearns toward the "real poem" which is "somehow more perfect and beautiful than this version that we happen to have," and contrasts "the full thing that was meant" with the best that Cynaethus could do. Cynaethus, it should be kept in mind, is the authentic historical figure, known to us from a scholion on Pindar *Nem.* ii, who takes the place in Murray's theory of the unsubstantial, mythical Homer, of whom we know nothing, "except indeed that he did not, in any complete sense, write the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*" (p. 238). So the imaginings of chap. iv lead directly to the sentimental transcendentalism of the final conclusion, in which we cannot see the text that lies before us because our eyes are raised in mystic adoration to an ineffable *Iliad* of *Iliads*, accessible only to those nobler souls of the Phaedrus who soar above the phenomenal universe into the realm of the ideas. The general effect of Murray's theories is summed up, not unfairly, by Nilsson as follows: "He is very critical, and thinks that the *Iliad* has many characteristics of a bad poem and that its subject is second-rate, but that in spite of this it is a good poem, which he admires profoundly" (*Homer and Mycenae* [London, 1933], p. 24).

tions to the Muses, and the worth of this evidence can be tested only by critical examination of the passages and their contexts. We have to determine whether they do or do not suggest that the bard is about to consult his book on matters for which he cannot trust his memory. Here is a definite question relating to a text that lies before us, and we should be able to give a definite answer.

The evidence that Murray actually presents from the Homeric text is limited to the statement (p. 96) that Homer, like Hesiod, consults the Muses "for such subjects as the Catalogue of the Greek army (cf. α 7, B 486, 761, cf. M 176)." To ask what are the Homeric passages that prompt the use of the plural would perhaps be an impertinent quibble. So would it be to remark that on the basis of Murray's theory of the Catalogue (pp. 179 f.) we might connect the invocation with the poet's knife and his rhapsodic needle (p. 99); it may indicate that he is about to sew into his book a goodly chunk sliced from some other poem, say the Cypria. However, seriously, what Murray means is that we have here a long catalogue of diverse facts on which the poet consults the Muses and that the Muses represent his book. A priori, and for this particular passage, the explanation is tenable, though it is not the only tenable explanation. We may admit also that the absence of the invocation at the start of the Trojan catalogue is not inconsistent with Murray's theory, since the second catalogue is short, simple, and consequently easy to remember.

The invocation of B 761 comes at the end of the Catalogue, where the account of the last contingent and its leader is followed by the lines

> οὗτοι ἄρ' ἡγεμόνες Δαναῶν καὶ κοίρανοι ἦσαν·
> τίς τ' ἄρ τῶν ὄχ' ἄριστος ἔην, σύ μοι ἔννεπε Μοῦσα,
> αὐτῶν ἠδ' ἵππων, οἳ ἅμ' Ἀτρείδῃσιν ἕποντο.

What follows is so brief, so like material found everywhere in the poems, that it is hard to see why the poet should signal for a consultation at this point. We cannot give the passage much weight as evidence for Murray's theory, unless we regard it as virtually repeating the earlier invocation, so that the poet begins and ends the Catalogue with the Muses—perhaps 761 marks a last sly glance at his book as he puts it away.

The citation of M 176 seems to be included because Murray thinks that θεὸν ὥς implies the Muses. There is really nothing to distinguish this from other instances of aposiopesis except that it involves the contrast between human limitations and divine power elaborated in B 485 ff.[3]

There is left the reference to α 7, which I think must be a misprint for α 1.[4] If it has any bearing upon Murray's theory, this would be to indicate a preliminary look in the book each time the poem was begun anew, for obviously the opening lines are no more difficult to remember than are other parts.

Only these passages are cited, and no reference is made to three other instances of the formal invocation of the Muses (Λ 218, Ξ 508, Π 112). In Λ 218 the goddesses are called upon to say who first of the foemen faced Agamemnon's spear after the Trojans rallied at the call of Hector. The champion they are bidden name proves to be Iphidamas, and the passage which ensues is a typical account of his slaying and that of his brother Coön, who meanwhile has wounded Agamemnon in the forearm. Three formulary lines suffice to relate the subsequent feats of Agamemnon, who presently is forced by the pain of his stiffening wound to retire to the camp. Here is nothing which would impose a greater strain on the memory than any other passage of equal length from the scenes of battle. And when the entire context is read, the rout of the Trojans and the pursuit up to the Scaean gate, the hurried dispatch of Iris with instructions to Hector, the rallying of the Trojans, the final attack by Agamemnon, his wounding and retreat, it appears that the invocation may be intended to mark the introduction of a crucial moment, the last phase of the Achaean offensive and the retreat of Agamemnon, which is the first major turning-point of the battle. After this there are intervals when κατὰ ἶσα μάχην ἐτάνυσσε Κρονίων (Λ 336), or when the Achaeans for a time take the offensive, but on the whole they are being driven

[3] Instead of the familiar πάντα μὲν (πάσας δ', πάντας δ') οὐκ ἂν ἐγὼ μυθήσομαι (δ 240; λ 328, 517), we have ἀργαλέον δέ με ταῦτα θεὸν ὥς πάντ' ἀγορεῦσαι, an idea which is elaborated in B 485 ff. to emphasize the vast numbers of the Achaeans. It is impossible to say whether the poet is thinking primarily of the Muses in M 176 or only of the gods in general.

[4] L. 7 speaks only of the fate of Odysseus' comrades, destroyed by their own folly. Murray's reference to B 486 also seems to be an error for 484.

steadily back until finally the Trojans are at the ships and the fortunes of the Danaans at the lowest ebb.

In this fighting backward and forward, between Agamemnon's withdrawal and the final assault on the ships, there is once a notable turn in the tide of battle, when, for a moment, the Achaeans are on the point of turning defeat into victory. Zeus is slumbering in the arms of Hera. Poseidon is at the head of the Argive host, and Hector has been carried unconscious from the field; the grisly challenge of Penelaus as he brandishes the severed head of Ilioneus upon his spear strikes terror into the Trojans and they flee in panic rout. Precisely at this point, again the poet calls upon the Muses to say who first of the Achaeans won bloody spoils when the rout began (Ξ 508). Here are, to be sure, six lines made up mostly of names, the names of the slayers and the slain, but we can scarcely believe the bard had to look in his book for these when he so often negotiates similar passages, sometimes longer and with more unfamiliar names, by sheer force of memory.[5] And here again we are in very much the same situation as in Λ. This is the climax of the offensive led by Poseidon; Zeus is about to awake, the tide of battle is to turn, and the Achaeans will never dare to rally until the last desperate stand at the ships.

The third, and last, of these invocations is familiar to all. In Π 112 the poet calls upon the Muses to say how first the flame was flung into the ships of the Achaeans:

> ἔσπετε νῦν μοι Μοῦσαι Ὀλύμπια δώματ' ἔχουσαι
> ὅππως δὴ πρῶτον πῦρ ἔμπεσε νηυσὶν Ἀχαιῶν.

Here is nothing that even the liveliest imagination could construe as a tax upon the memory. But here again is a crucial point—the crucial point, on which the whole *Iliad* turns. This is the climax of the Trojan offensive. Ajax has reached the limit of his endurance, *πάντῃ δὲ κακὸν κακῷ ἐστήρικτο*, and the poet calls upon the Muses at the instant Hector's sword shears off the point of Ajax's spear. Ajax knows that the gods are against him, and he gives up the fight. The Achaeans are lost, save for the help of Achilles. That help is to be

[5] E.g., O 328–42, E 703–10, Θ 273–77, Λ 299–303, and Π 692–97. The poet does not call upon the Muses for the names of the Nereids (Σ 39–49) or for the rivers of the Troad (M 19–22).

given, through Patroclus, and once again the tide of battle is to turn —this time decisively.

To sum up, the invocation to the Muses, aside from the first lines of the *Iliad* and of the *Odyssey*, is found once at the start of the Catalogue and once at its close; in three instances, which Murray ignores, it coincides with three crucial moments in the long-drawn-out battle of Λ–Σ, the three most critical turns of fortune between the arming of Agamemnon and the death of Patroclus. Murray's method is now clear. He has merely set down a few instances which seem to him to support his a priori notion that the appeal to the Muses means a consultation of the "traditional book." In one of these only, B 484, does the matter which follows the invocation accord with his theory. Against this are three instances which cannot be explained on his theory, in which the apostrophe to the Muses seems to mark the appearance of crucial and intensely dramatic moments in the action.[6] On the basis of the actual Homeric usage, we must conclude that Murray has presented no valid proof of his theory, since there are other reasonable explanations for B 484,[7] and that the weight of evidence is decidedly against him.

[6] According to T. D. Seymour, *Life in the Homeric Age* (New York, 1907), p. 415, the poet appeals to the Muses "at times at the beginning of a new narrative." This, in my opinion, can be only formally true of the instances we are considering, and it leaves us still faced by the question why the poet should begin anew midway in scenes of intense action. The position of Π 112 is particularly striking; it comes just twelve lines after a natural division, the important change of scene from Patroclus and Achilles to the battle at the ships; it is put in the very midst of the brief passage which describes the final struggle of Ajax against Hector, at the critical moment when Hector's sword shears off the head of his opponent's spear. H. Fränkel has discussed Λ 218 apropos of pauses in epic recitation, in his review of Murray's third edition (*Gnomon*, III [1927], 8). Fränkel believes that the singer actually paused at this point; but he understands fully what a pause here would mean ("solche Pausen ohne Abschluss innerhalb eines zusammenhängenden Einzelvortrags"). If actually there was a pause, it was clearly intended, at least in part, to whet the appetites of the hearers; as Fränkel says, the poet "ja doch seinen Hörern den Stachel in der Seele lassen wollte." We have still to ask why, among the many pauses that must have intervened (Fränkel, *loc. cit.*), these few, and they only, are marked by the invocation of the Muses. Leaf (notes *ad locc.*) understands correctly the functions of the line but will not allow that the crisis is sufficiently important to justify its use in Ξ 508, where he regards the passage it introduces (ll. 508–22) as a "later addition."

[7] The view that the invocation is intended to arouse the interest of the listeners in a notable passage about to be sung is entirely tenable here, especially when we consider that the invocation is but one element in an elaborate preparation for the Catalogue (B 441–93). Like the similes, it hyperbolizes the vast numbers of the host.

Now it is clear that this formula was originally a genuine invocation. When the singer invoked the Muses, addressing to them an imperative, he desired them to do something. If we wish to know what that something was, it will be well to consider what the Muses actually do for bards in the poems. Since the bards apparently did not go to war, our material will be found mainly in the *Odyssey*.

The general answer to our question is given by Odysseus when he says (θ 479–81) that singers have their meed of honor with all men upon the earth for that the Muse teacheth them lays and loveth the race of singers. He goes on, addressing himself to the bard:

> Δημόδοκ', ἔξοχα δή σε βροτῶν αἰνίζομ' ἁπάντων·
> ἢ σέ γε Μοῦσ' ἐδίδαξε, Διὸς πάις, ἢ σέ γ' Ἀπόλλων [487 f.].

The evidence, and the result, of this divine teaching he finds in the fact that Demodocus sings λίην κατὰ κόσμον the fate of the Achaeans, all that they did and suffered and all their toils, even as if he had himself been present or had heard from another's lips, and will presumably be able to sing the lay of the Trojan horse. If he can in truth sing this tale, Odysseus will tell mankind that the god hath given him without stint the divine gift of song. Here we have the general notion of the bard's qualifications, their source and character. He not only knows the events that enter into his lays but he can sing them in such wise as to seem an eyewitness of their occurrence, and this surely implies the powers of spirited and graphic expression that we associate with the inspiration of genius. He is expected also to sing at a moment's notice any lay for which one of his hearers may ask. Mr. Murray may be able to reconcile all this with the notion of a bard dependent on an esoteric written text. I cannot.

Next we learn how the divine teaching revealed itself on a particular occasion. Odysseus spake, and the bard, starting up, θεοῦ ἄρχετο, φαῖνε δ' ἀοιδήν (499), taking up the tale at the point where the Achaeans had set fire to the camp and sailed away. In my opinion, θεοῦ ἄρχετο are to be taken together of an invocation addressed to a god, perhaps Apollo, but more likely the Muse, upon whom Demodocus calls for poetic inspiration adequate to his theme.[8]

[8] In a note on this line, on p. 205 of this issue, I have given my reasons for rejecting the alternative interpretation (ὁρμηθείς θεοῦ = ἐκ θεοῦ ἐμπνευσθείς) reported in the scholia and adopted in all the editions and special lexica. While Apollo, or some other

What is so fully and so dramatically expressed in this scene is implied in the briefer passage in which Demodocus first appears (θ 62 ff.). A herald brings in the revered singer, whom the Muse loveth above other men, and hath given him both good and ill—she hath blinded his eyes but hath given him the sweet gift of song. And when the time for song is come, the Muse then moves the singer to sing the glories of men, a lay whose present fame reacheth to the broad heaven, of the strife of Odysseus and Peleus' son Achilles. This scene accords perfectly with the other, and supplements it. But it is very hard to see how it can be explained on Murray's theory—a blind bard privily consulting his book as he sits amid the feasters puts something of a strain upon even the most fecund imagination.

We have learned what the Muses do for their faithful servitors—they inspire them in the fullest sense of the word,[9] not alone with memory of events in their proper sequence but with all those powers that our word "inspiration" connotes today; not alone with fitting words but with apposite epic formulas, with whole lines or groups of lines, with all the rich adornment of the grand epic style; not alone with sweet harmonies and gracious melodies[10] but with the power of spirited and moving narration and graphic description. What the Muses do to those who displease them, to their unfaithful servitors, we learn from B 594 ff. In Dorium the Muses met Thamyris the Thracian, as he came from Oechalia, from the home of Eurytus the Oechalian, and they made an end of his singing. For he had boasted that he would prove the better were it that the Muses themselves

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god, may be referred to, the simplest and most natural explanation is an invocation to the Muse such as is found in A 1, α 1, and often in the hymns. The orthodox interpretation usually takes $\theta\epsilon o\hat{\upsilon}$ here to mean the Muse; cf. H. Düntzer, *Die Homerischen Fragen* (Leipzig, 1874), p. 159. No difficulty is involved in the use of the masculine, since the feminine is metrically impossible; $\theta\epsilon\acute{o}\varsigma$ is epicene in such expressions as $\grave{\epsilon}\pi\epsilon\grave{\iota}$ $\theta\epsilon o\hat{\upsilon}$ $\check{\epsilon}\kappa\lambda\upsilon\epsilon\nu$ $\alpha\grave{\upsilon}\delta\acute{\eta}\nu$ (O 270, β 297); $o\mathring{\upsilon}$ $\tau o\iota$ $\check{\alpha}\nu\epsilon\upsilon$ $\theta\epsilon o\hat{\upsilon}$ (β 372, o 531), etc., and $\theta\epsilon o\hat{\upsilon}$ $\check{\alpha}\rho\chi\epsilon\tau o$ also may be a familiar formula that could not easily be accommodated to the use of the feminine noun.

[9] This idea of the relation in which the Muses stood to the poet continued to be the distinctive Hellenic concept, unparalleled in other religions or mythologies; cf. H. Kees (*Real. Encyc.* XVI. 1, 681, *s.v.* "Musai"): "Die M., die dem Dichter und Sänger inspirierend, belehrend und hilfreich zur Seite geht, wirklich Erlebtes, Überliefertes und Ersonnenes gestalten hilft, die mit ihm lacht und weint. . . . ."

[10] Simple as the music of the Homeric singer may have been, the effect upon the hearer must have been comparable to that of modern music upon modern audiences.

should sing, daughters of aegis-bearing Zeus. And they, anangered, wrought his undoing, and took from him the divine power of song and made him to forget the playing of the lyre. They may have taken away his book but the poet says nothing of it.

On earth, among mortal men, the Muses sing with the voices of their inspired servitors, the bards, but on Olympus the gods listen to their very selves, as they sing responsively, uttering their sweet voices while Apollo plays the lyre (A 603 f.). When they sing the dirge at the mourning for Achilles, all the nine of them,[11] and their piercing song of lamentation moves all to tears, it is heaven's ultimate tribute to the greatest of all heroes (ω 60–62).

When Mr. Murray makes the sweet goddesses of song into a patched and thumbworn roll covered with "strange scratches," he is asking them to sell their birthright for a mess of pothooks—for are not the Muses very daughters of Memory? Or, if this way of putting it smacks too much of levity, should not his recollection of the passages we have been recalling have withheld him from his pedestrian interpretation? Since he holds that both poems were finally "worked up," or "put together," in their present shape by the same individual, the rhapsode Cynaethus, at about the same time, he may not fairly reject the evidence of the *Odyssey*.[12] But even if we grant him this, for the sake of argument, and leave out of account the scenes in which the relations of the Muses with the bards are described, even so, his position is not much better. A consideration of all the evidence in the *Iliad* alone must have led him to doubt his interpretation of his chosen passages. And if this interpretation be discarded, the link is broken between his examples of "traditional books" and the *Iliad;* they be-

[11] The belief that this allusion to "nine" Muses exposes ω as late and "Hesiodic" rests on the assumption that the number 9 was assigned to the Muses after the genuine "early" or "Homeric" portions of the poems were composed and was an invention of the Hesiodic school. That, of course, is possible, but there is not a vestige of proof. It is equally possible that Homer thought of the Muses as nine but did not feel obliged to specify their number every time he spoke of them. If the presence of the number here proves ω to be Hesiodic, its absence in B 594–600 should prove that the Catalogue is Homeric. The formula ἐννέα πᾶσαι (πάντες H 161, θ 258) would have been awkward in B 594 and impossible in A 604, and there is no conceivable reason why the number should have been given in either place; in ω 60 the formula is metrically convenient and really adds to the effect. In general, what is essential in a theogony may be incidental in a heroic poem.

[12] *Op. cit.*, p. 308.

come merely potential analogies, valueless until some connection shall be established by other, better arguments. Evidence for his hypothesis that the *Iliad* is a "traditional book" of the sort he describes is still to be sought.

To habitual readers of Homer, who have unconsciously assimilated the Homeric conception of oral poetry and song, in all its parts the gift and inspiration of the Muses, the matter will seem quite obvious, unworthy to be labored at so great length. But I believe this review of the evidence is justified. The whole theory that underlies *The Rise of the Greek Epic* hinges on our understanding of the invocations to the Muses. And this is a book which has profoundly influenced many who cannot read Homer, to say nothing of those Hellenists who have accepted its speculations uncritically. What is perhaps most important is that the lively portrayal of the poor bard "laboriously spelling out the difficult letter-marks," "these strange scratches," in anxious privacy before his recitations, though it be only Mr. Murray's imagining, gives us a wrong approach. It engenders, even in him who can read no Greek, that sense of pitying condescension which is the most vicious of all points of view for the critic of literature, especially literature that has stood pre-eminent in its kind since the dawn of our civilization.

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