Reading Bakhtin Reading the Classics: An Epic Fate for Conveyors of the Heroic Past

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Accessibility
Reading Bakhtin Reading the Classics: An Epic Fate for Conveyors of the Heroic Past

Gregory Nagy

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In the title of my essay, there is no punctuation between reading Bakhtin and reading the Classics because there is meant to be no break in the syntax. In the essay itself, there is no break between reading Bakhtin and reading the way he reads the Classics. The only break is between the Classical and the non-Classical, as seen by Bakhtin. In this essay, even that break will in the end disappear. The actual distinction, however, between the Classical and the non-Classical will remain. My thesis is that this distinction is part of a larger system that highlights the fact of distinctness in some contexts and shades it over in others.

My thesis, in other words, is that the system of distinguishing the non-Classical from the Classical is itself Classical. In differing with Bakhtin on this one point, it is possible to build arguments on the basis of his own arguments, as deployed in his seminal and irreplaceable essay, "Epic and Novel" ([1975]).1 That essay of Bakhtin will help highlight a feature of ancient Greek epic that is central to my essay: this genre of epic, I will argue, conveys the heroic past to the present in two different ways, one of them seemingly closed off from our present and the other, manifestly open to it. The closure or the opening depend on whether or not the epic highlights a break between the fate of its heroes in the past and the life of its audience in the present.

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1 Bakhtin [1975]/1981, ch.1, pp. 3-40. Hereafter abbreviated as EN.
For my essay, the case in point is the fate of the Phaeacians in the Homeric *Odyssey*, which the epic narrative connects inextricably with the fate of the hero Odysseus. By conveying Odysseus back to his homeland Ithaca on one of their magical ships, the Phaeacians are fated to lose their status as conveyors from - or even of - one kind of "reality" to another. Their fate prophesies the possible fate of epic itself in the conveying of the Classical past to the non-Classical present. The subtitle of my essay conjures this fate.

Let us begin with an overview of Bakhtin's understanding of the Classical and the non-Classical as articulated in another work of his, *Rabelais and his World* ([1965]). I cite a key formulation in this book: "The object that has been destroyed remains in the world but in a new form of being in time and space; it becomes the 'other side' of the new object that has taken its place." Here we see the essence of Bakhtin's distinction between the Classical and the non-Classical.

The context of Bakhtin's formulation is this: he is arguing that the principle of negation in "popular-festive imagery" is never abstract but always concrete. The social forces that Bakhtin subsumes under the single hermeneutic term *carnival* embody this negation: "carnival celebrates the destruction of the old and the birth of the new world." In Bakhtin's essay "Epic and Novel," we see a prime example of the "new form," that is, the novel, while the older "other side" is embodied in the "genre" that he calls "epic."

In my work on the social forces of canon-formation as culminating in the ancient Greek Classics, I link Bakhtin's distinction between the "new form" and the older "other side" with

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2 Bakhtin [1965]/1984a. Hereafter abbreviated as RW.
3 RW 410.
4 RW 410.
5 RW 410.
6 Nagy, *Pindar's Homer* (1990), hereafter abbreviated as PH.
an axiom known in linguistic theory as "Kuryłowicz's fourth law of analogy," which I paraphrase as follows: "when two forms come into competition for one function, the newer form may take over that function while the older form may become relegated to a subcategory of its earlier function."\(^7\)

This axiom is pertinent to what Prague School linguists describe as the distinction between "marked" and "unmarked" members of a given opposition:

The unmarked category is the general category, which can include the marked category, whereas the reverse situation cannot hold. For example, in an opposition of the English words *long* and *short*, the unmarked member of the opposition is *long* because it can be used not only as the opposite of *short* ("I am reading a long book, not a short one") but also as the general category ("how long is the book?").

... The unmarked member is inclusive, in that the marked member can be an aspect of the unmarked. It can be exclusive, however, if it negates the marked member, as when we say "that is not *short*, it is *long*." The negation of the marked by the unmarked has been called the *minus interpretation* of the unmarked (for example, "*long*, not *short*") as distinct from the *zero interpretation* (for example, "*long*"); the assertion of the marked member is the *plus interpretation* (for example, "*short,* or "*short*, not *long*"). The term *plus interpretation* designates not "positive" but "marked, either negatively or positively."

\(^7\) *PH* 5-6; see Kuryłowicz 1945-1949.
The zero interpretation of the unmarked member includes, as an overarching principle, both the minus interpretation of the unmarked member and the plus interpretation of the marked member. The opposition of long and short is a matter of length. Further, the opposition of unmarked order and marked disorder is a matter of overall order.\footnote{PH 5-6, following Waugh 1982. In PH 6, I offer an illustration of the opposition unmarked/"order" vs. marked "disorder" by examining the mechanics and esthetics of the choriambic dimeter.}

Applying this distinction between unmarked and marked categories to "Kuryłowicz's fourth law of analogy," we can say that the newer form, in replacing the older form, acquires the unmarked function of the older form, which in turn develops a marked function. By "older form" I mean the form that is already assigned to a given function, whereas by "newer form" I mean the form that is about to be assigned to that function. For example, English 'quick', cognate of Latin vīvus 'alive', lost the meaning 'alive, living' and became semantically specialized in the sense of 'lively' and, eventually, 'quick'; the older meaning survives residually in such expressions as the quick and the dead or bite the nails to the quick.\footnote{PH 6n18.} If we contrast "newer" 'alive' with "older" 'quick', we can say that the newer form has an older meaning, which is undifferentiated or unmarked, while the older form has a newer meaning, which is differentiated or marked.

If we extend this linguistic analogy to Bakhtin's hermeneutics in contrasting the "newer" form of the novel with the "older" form of the epic, we can say that the newer form has an older function, which is undifferentiated or unmarked, while the older form has a newer function, which is differentiated or marked. This formulation, however, does not match Bakhtin's overall model: for him, the newer form, novel, has the newer function, while the older form, epic, has the older function, showing the older "other side."
This aspect of Bakhtin’s description of the novel leads to an overly narrow formulation of epic as genre.\textsuperscript{10} A case in point is the ancient Greek evidence. Bakhtin’s typologies of epic, as juxtaposed with his typologies of the novel, may indeed suit in some ways the Homeric \textit{Iliad}, but they cannot be reconciled with the \textit{Odyssey}, an epic that features characteristics that Bakhtin associates explicitly with characteristics of the novel, most prominently "heteroglossia" and "centrifugal" narrative. As John Peradotto notes, "I would venture to say that close readers of Homer are far more likely to recognize the \textit{Odyssey} in Bakhtin’s characterization of the novel than in his account of epic."\textsuperscript{11}

To be sure, Bakhtin’s own formulations of the contrast between epic and novel are hardly monolithic - or, let us say, monological. Whereas his essay "Epic and Novel" features these two forms "in a relation of opposition," another essay (no. 22 in Todorov’s list of Bakhtin’s papers: dated at 1936-38) treats the novel as a "species" of "the great epic form"; later, in the 1963 version of his work on Dostoevsky, Bakhtin seems to reverse himself: now epic is one of three aspects of the "novelistic."\textsuperscript{12}

These three different formulations may yet be reconciled if we apply diachronic as well as synchronic perspectives. In using the terms \textit{synchronic} and \textit{diachronic}, I am following a linguistic distinction made by Ferdinand de Saussure.\textsuperscript{13} For Saussure, synchrony and diachrony designate respectively a current state of a language and a phase in its evolution.\textsuperscript{14} These terms \textit{diachronic} and \textit{synchronic} are not to be used as synonyms for \textit{historical} and \textit{current} \{73\|74\}
respectively: "Diachrony refers to the potential for evolution in a structure. History is not restricted to phenomena that are structurally predictable."\(^{15}\)

It is easiest to start with Bakhtin's middle formulation: that the novel is a "species" of the epic. Before the emergence of the novel as a distinct form that was set apart from epic, we can say that the earlier form, epic, had already contained "novelistic" as well as "non-novelistic" functions. In terms of marked and unmarked categories, the "novelistic" was a marked function within epic. The novelistic function could be an aspect of epic and still be opposed to epic in special contexts. The novelistic *Odyssey* could be an aspect of the epic tradition of Homer even if it opposed in some ways that same tradition as defined by the *Iliad*.\(^{16}\) It is only when the novelistic became the novel, that is, when it became a new genre that rivaled or even replaced the old genre of epic, that the function of the novel was no longer marked but unmarked.

It is not enough, though, to say that epic is marked while the novel is unmarked. Rather, epic becomes marked when it is set in opposition to the novel as a new form that has taken over the old unmarked function of the epic.

Also, it would be misleading to infer that the Classical is marked while the non-Classical is unmarked. My thesis is that "Classical" is the real unmarked category. It is opposed not to the "non-Classical" but to the "anti-Classical," which is marked. The problem is, Bakhtin concentrates on a minus-interpretation of the Classical. In terms of minus-interpretation, the only way that unmarked "Classical" can become marked is by opposing it to the already marked anti-Classical. Here, then, is a corollary to my thesis: Bakhtin's models for the anti-

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\(^{15}\) *PH* p. 21n18, following Jacopin 1988:35-36, who adds: "Both synchrony and diachrony are abstractions extrapolated from a model of reality."

\(^{16}\) On the complementarity of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, see paragraphs 15-18 in the new Preface of Nagy 1999.
Classical, as embodied in his hermeneutic terms "novel" and "carnival," are really plus-interpretations of marked categories.

[[I schematize as follows:]]

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>unmarked</th>
<th>marked</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>non-Classical</td>
<td>vs. Classical</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Classical</td>
<td>vs. anti-Classical, e.g. &quot;novel,&quot; &quot;carnival&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>epic</td>
<td>vs. &quot;novelistic&quot; function within epic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>novel as genre</td>
<td>vs. epic as genre</td>
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Bakhtin's own academic career re-enacts the interaction of the non-Classical and the Classical. His formation as a student at St. Petersburg owes much to the influence of a leading professor at the university, Faddej F. Želinskij - that is the way this Classics scholar is known to experts in Russian intellectual history. Classicists in America and Western Europe know him by the polonized form of his name, Tadeusz Zieliński. Among Classicists, Zieliński is highly regarded for his research in the classicized forms of Comedy; his student, Bakhtin, is associated with what at first seems to be a quintessentially non-classicized form or non-form, the "novel" as realized in the Gargantua and Pantagruel of François Rabelais. {74|75}

Whereas the teacher defines a genre, comedy, the student explores the apparent defiance of generic categories in the case of whatever it was that Rabelais created in the historical context of the sixteenth century. In the "preclassical" period of the seventeenth century, preceding the reign of Louis XIV, "Rabelais did not yet appear exceptional." Soon thereafter,

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17 Holquist 1981:xxii
18 Gavrilov 1995:61
19 For an analysis of some of the reasons for Bakhtin's avoidance of Athenian Old Comedy (especially as exemplified by Aristophanes) as a focus of interest, see Edwards 1993, with important refinements on the earlier work of Carrière 1979, Rösler 1986, and Reckford 1987.
20 RW 107.
however, "the atmosphere in which Rabelais was understood disappeared almost entirely, and he became a strange and solitary author who needed special interpretation and commentary."\(^{21}\) Not only did the literary form of Rabelais recede, with the passage of time, from self-definition as a genre: it was also progressively demoted from higher to lower art. To put it in extreme terms: Rabelais slipped from canonical to anti-canonical status.\(^{22}\) As Bakhtin argues, a parallel slippage is evident in the early reception-history of the *Don Quixote* of Cervantes.\(^{23}\)

In my work, I re-apply Bakhtin's model by comparing the genre-amorphousness of Rabelais with that of the archaic Greek figure Archilochus, who is represented in relatively later archaic Greek traditions as a proto-poet of not only blame (invective) but also praise (encomium): in Pindar's *Olympian* 9, for example, Archilochus is credited with the invention of a "spontaneous" kind of victory song or ode, pictured as some kind of primordial praise poem.\(^{24}\) The prototypical victory ode of Archilochus is pictured by the Classical victory ode of Pindar as something non-Classical or even anti-Classical.

Bakhtin himself applies a similar model of genre-amorphousness to what he reconstructs as the prototypical phases of Greek tragedy: "In antique culture tragedy did not exclude the laughing aspect of life and coexisted with it. The tragic trilogy was followed by the satyric drama which complemented it on the comic level."\(^{25}\) Citing Albrecht Dieterich's *Pulcinella*,\(^{26}\)

\(^{21}\) *RW* 107; cf. *PH* 398n91.
\(^{22}\) *RW* 65.
\(^{23}\) *RW* 65.
\(^{24}\) *PH* 394, 397-401.
\(^{25}\) *RW* 121.
\(^{26}\) Dieterich 1897.
Bakhtin continues: "antique tragedy did not fear laughter and parody and even demanded it as a corrective and a complement."\textsuperscript{27}

In my work I have counterargued that pre-Classical "literary" forms like those represented by Archilochus and by early drama (as it was evolving before the Classical phases of the City Dionysia at Athens) can be explained in terms of earlier phases of the "Classical," and that the evolving differentiations remain part of a "Classical" system.\textsuperscript{28}

In this regard, it is essential to distinguish between historical and hermeneutic usages of the term "Classical." Historically, we may say that "Classical" represents the second half of the fifth century BCE, coming after what we may call the "pre-Classical" period. Hermeneutically, however, "Classical" represents whatever system is current, which is opposed by what we may call not so much the "non-Classical" or pre-Classical but the "anti-Classical." My point remains that the "anti-Classical," as embodied in the hermeneutic terms "novel" and "carnival," is part of the overarching system that is the "Classical." The terms "non-Classical" and even "pre-Classical" mask the markedness of "novel," of "carnival." The Classical is dynamic, ever-evolving, and inclusive of an anti-Classical element.

This formulation puts into perspective Bakhtin's observations about "narrow \{75|76\} genrism."\textsuperscript{29} He uses this term to describe various failed attempts to categorize what I now call the anti-Classical. My formulation also reinforces Bakhtin's arguments against the "historic allegorical method" in approaching the phenomenon of allusion: "The image is always deeper and wider, it is linked to tradition, it has its own aesthetic logic independent of the allusion."\textsuperscript{30} Using the term "image," Bakhtin is here coming to terms with the underlying system that is

\textsuperscript{27} RW 121.
\textsuperscript{28} PH 389-401.
\textsuperscript{29} RW 52.
\textsuperscript{30} RW 114.
the Classical, this time in an unmarked sense. The return to the Age of Saturn, the return to an Aesopic vision of verbal communication among gods and men and animals, and even the return to a world view where death is a part of life - all these things can be seen as explorations, through time, of the Classical by the Classical.

The collapsing of distinctions in the retrospective self-references of the Classical to the imagined proto-Classical is not just a matter of reverting to the "novelistic" form in the "carnivalesque" sense that Bakhtin gives it. There are also other forms that accentuate in other ways the undifferentiated aspects of the Classical. A case in point is the word ainos, which applies not only to the carnivalesque and "low art" form of the fables of Aesop but also to the serious and "high art" form of the victory odes of Pindar: ainos means 'fable' in the world of Aesop but 'praise poem' in the world of Pindar's victory odes.

As a genre, the victory ode conventionally calls itself ainos (as in Pindar Olympian 2.95), and such self-references make it distinct from epic, which does not call itself ainos but which contains, within its own narrative frame, explicit references to ainos as a genre of its own (as in Odyssey xiv 508).

The victory ode also calls itself kleos 'glory' (as in Pindar Nemean 7.63), and so too does epic (as in Iliad II 486). In this respect, the difference between the two genres is this: whereas the kleos of epic centers on the glorification of heroes in the remote past, the kleos of the victory ode extends from the heroes of the remote past to the humans of the immediate present.

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31 RW 48.
33 RW 50.
34 PH ch.7.
36 PH p. 150.
case in point is the following juxtaposition of the honorand in the present with the hero in the past, who is also an honorand in his own right:

\[\text{λέγεται μὰν Ἕκτορι μὲν κλέος ἀνθῆσαι Σκαμάνδρου χεύμασιν | ἄγχοι, βαθυκρήμνοισι δ᾿ ἀμφ᾿ ἀκταῖς Ἑλώρου, | ... δέδορκεν | παιδὶ τοῦθ᾿ Ἀγησιδάμου φέγγος ἐν ἁλικαὶ πρώτα.}\]

It is said that *kleos* bloomed\(^{37}\) for Hektor near the streams of Skamandros. And near the steep cliffs that rise above [the stream] Heloros, [...] this light shone upon the coming of age of [Chromios] the son of Hagesidamos.

*Pindar Nemean 9.39-42*

In the victory ode, we see the collapsing of distinctions between the glorification of idealized men in the past as heroes and the glorification of idealized men in the present as participants in the world of heroes. In this way, both hero and latter-day man participate in both past and present, in both epic and victory ode. \(^{76}\)\(^{77}\) Other distinctions too are collapsed: the ordeals of heroes as warriors of the past are expressed in the same language as the ordeals of men as warriors of the present. Moreover, the ordeals of latter-day men as warriors who fight for their native land are expressed in the same language as the stylized ordeals of these same men as athletes competing for victory at Panhellenic or local athletic contests. Martial and athletic ordeals were considered parallel rituals.\(^{38}\) Finally and most importantly for the victory ode, the

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\(^{37}\) With reference to *kleos*, the metaphor of *anth-*, in the sense "blooming" or "blossoming" like a flower (cf. also *Pindar Pythian* 1.66) seems to be the antithesis of "wilting," as conveyed by *phthi-*: cf. *PH* p. 225 (also Nagy 1999:175-189; *pace* Braswell 1998:122).

\(^{38}\) Brelich 1961; cf. *PH* pp. 137, 139, 141, 152.
hero's mythical ordeal in the past is expressed in the same language as the athlete's ritual ordeal in the present, leading to victory in athletic competitions.\textsuperscript{39}

I disagree, then, with the comment of Bruce Braswell on the pertinence of lines 39-42 in Pindar's \textit{Nemean} 9, as just quoted, to the contemporary honorand Chromios, who is being praised by the words of the victory ode: "Chromios' kleos here like Hektor's came from martial, not athletic prowess."\textsuperscript{40} I counterargue that Pindar's victory odes programmatically shade over rather than highlight the distinction between martial and athletic ordeals. In the case of \textit{Nemean} 9, the defining occasion that is being celebrated is the victory of Chromios at an athletic event, a chariot race.\textsuperscript{41} The reference at lines 39-42 to another victory of Chromios, this one martial rather than athletic, complements the overriding reference to the athletic victory at hand, which defines the occasion for the whole song. In the victory odes of Pindar, the kleos of martial achievements cannot be separated from the overall kleos of athletic victory.\textsuperscript{42}

I argue further that the parallelism of hero and athlete in the genre of the victory ode emphasizes the ordeals of the hero, not his victories per se.\textsuperscript{43} There is a religious motivation for this emphasis: the ritual activity of athletic competition was predicated on the central mythological fact of a hero's ultimate ordeal, death.\textsuperscript{44} This mythical ordeal of the hero is

\textsuperscript{39} See \textit{PH} p. 152, with special reference to the poetic usage of words like ponos, kamatos, and athlos - all denoting the idea of "ordeal" in contexts of both war and athletics.

\textsuperscript{40} Braswell 1998:122.

\textsuperscript{41} Braswell p. 51.

\textsuperscript{42} On the kleos of athletic victory, see Pindar \textit{Nemean} 7.63, \textit{Isthmian} 5.8, etc. As for kleos at line 29 of Pindar \textit{Isthmian} 7, lines 31-36 go on to celebrate the martial achievements of the victorious athlete's maternal uncle (who is compared to Hektor as well as Meleagros and Amphiarao). Both here and at \textit{Nemean} 9.39-42, the kleos of martial victory complements what I contend is an implicit overriding kleos of athletic victory. I do not think that it is "misleading" (pace Braswell p. 122) to use \textit{Nemean} 9.39-42 as an example of Pindar’s equation of the kleos of victorious athletes of the present with that of heroes of the past.

\textsuperscript{43} \textit{PH} pp. 150-152.

\textsuperscript{44} Brelich 1958:94-95; cf. \textit{PH} pp. 118-120 and ch.4 in general; also Thalmann 1998:165-166.
notionally re-enacted in the ritual ordeals of the latter-day athlete or warrior as he struggles to achieve victory. Whenever the athlete or warrior wins, his victory is conceived as emerging from the merged ordeals of both the heroes of the past and the athletes or warriors of the present.

I also disagree with the following comment of Braswell on Chromios the honorand: "Pindar, by comparing him to Hektor, seems to suggest that the victory [of Chromios in war] was in no small part due to him [Chromios]." Yes, the victory ode is making a reference here to a martial exploit of Chromios in the historical "present" - more precisely, in the glory days of the honorand's youth. Still, the well-known fate of Hektor in the distant epic past—his gruesome death at the hands of Achilles—makes it unlikely that this comparison with Hektor was intended merely to give credit to the latter-day honorand for a victory in battle. The focus, rather, is on the ordeal of the hero, which is likened to an ordeal in a formative stage of the honorand's career. It is against this backdrop of ordeals that the ultimate success of Chromios can be appreciated.

In short, the genre of the victory ode, by calling itself kleos, blurs the distinctness of the genre of epic as kleos precisely because it collapses distinctions that are maintained in epic (as we shall see) between the heroes of the past who are inside the heroic narrative and the men of the present who are the outside audience of that narrative. If epic and praise poetry are respectively the unmarked and marked members of an opposition, then kleos conveys a zero interpretation of the marked member, praise poetry.

By contrast, the genre of the victory ode accentuates its distinctness from epic by calling itself ainos in the sense of 'praise poetry'. In this way, ainos conveys a plus interpretation of the

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marked member, praise poetry. Praise poetry, as a marked member in opposition to unmarked
epic, signals something that the epic is not. Epic is not ainos. As we have seen, epic can refer to
instances of ainos, but it does not call itself ainos as praise poetry calls itself ainos.

In the poetics of Pindar, praise poetry presents itself as older than epic and even as the
prototype of epic. Such an ontogeny of epic, as proclaimed by the praise poetry of Pindar, is
recapitulated by the phylogeny posited by Aristotle, who in his Poetics actually derives epic
from a prototypical form of praise poetry (1448b32-34).

The implications of Aristotle's insight are enormous. My own attempts to follow through
on this insight culminated in a book that exceeds 400 printed pages in length, Pindar's Homer,
which deals with the formal (including metrical) parallelisms between epic and the praise
poetry of Pindar's victory odes. Even a work of this size, however, is a mere beginning. For
purposes of the present argumentation, I simply quote the final paragraph that sums up my
whole book, paraphrasing Pindar's poetic program in terms of his own traditional poetics:

From the lofty vantage point of Pindaric song, Homer is Pindar's Homer.
Pindaric song is both staying in the present and reaching back into the past
within itself. It does not have to go outside for the purpose of bringing the epic
inside. Epic is within it, and from it epic shall forever flow.

As an undifferentiated older alternative to epic, the praise poetry of the victory ode is
analogous to the epic as an undifferentiated older alternative to the novel. In contrasting the
"newer" form of epic with the "older" form of praise poetry as retrojected by Aristotle, we can

47 PH pp. 192-193, especially with reference to Pindar Nemean 8.50-51. See also the formulation in PH ch.14,
especially p. 437, quoted below.
49 See n6 above.
50 PH p. 437.
say that the newer form, epic, has appropriated the older function of praise poetry as an undifferentiated or unmarked medium of expression, while the older form, praise poetry, now has a newer function as a differentiated or marked medium.

As a differentiated medium, the new marked function of praise poetry as opposed to epic is to privilege the present with reference to the heroic past, which remains an absolute point of reference. As we have seen, Pindar's victory odes consistently emphasize the victories stemming from the ordeals of athletes in the present, with reference to the archetypal and definitive ordeals of heroes in the past.

By contrast with praise poetry, the unmarked function of epic is simply to privilege the heroic past with reference to the non-heroic present. The present, which is ever-shifting, is needed only as a foil for the privileging of the permanent and absolute heroic past: to claim, as epic does, that the heroes of the past were larger than life is to look at this past from the shifting and all-too-human perspectives of life in the present. The present is needed merely as a contrast, a background, for the past. As a background, the present needs to be shaded over in order to highlight the foreground of the past.

In the specific case of Homeric poetry as epic, however, the shading over of the present becomes disproportionate to the highlighting of the past. It is almost as if there existed only a foreground in the past and no background at all in the present. As I have argued at length elsewhere, there are special historical reasons for this near-absolute detachment of epic, in the form of Homeric poetry, from the occasionality of the present. These reasons have to do with a strong trend of Panhellenism in the Homeric tradition, which promotes a near-blackout of local cultural and political concerns that traditionally link the world of the present to the world of the heroes in the past:
In the epic poetry of Homer the gap that separates the heroes of the past and the men of the present could not and would not be bridged. Little wonder, then, that heroes could lift stones that not even two of us "today" could even manage to budge (Iliad XII 445-449).\(^51\)

Epic is a problematic genre in the history of Greek literature. Diachronically, epic as a form is newer than praise poetry; historically, however, the form of epic as attested in Homeric poetry is far older than the form of praise poetry as attested in the victory odes of Pindar.\(^52\)

The complications increase with the two-way opposition of epic: it is the unmarked member in its opposition with praise poetry but it is the marked member in its opposition with the novel. Moreover, the unmarked function of epic, to privilege the past with reference to the present, is symmetrical with the marked function of praise poetry, to privilege the present with reference to the past. This symmetry helps further shape the opposition of epic and novel. In terms of this new opposition, the privileging of the past can become a marked function for epic as set apart from the novel, which privileges the present without having to depend on any absolute point of reference in the past. Now the privileging of the past can become an absolute for epic, by way of excluding the present altogether. In its restriction to the past, the newer function of epic seems older (but is not), while the older function of praise poetry seems newer (but is not) in its free access to the present.

[[I schematize as follows:]]

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>unmarked genre</th>
<th>marked genre</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>epic, with unspecific reference</td>
<td>vs. praise poetry, with specific reference</td>
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\(^{51}\) PH pp. 191-192.  
\(^{52}\) On the distinction between diachronic and historical perspectives, see above.
Here, finally, we return to Bakhtin's essay on Epic and Novel. I submit the following list of ten of his formulations (the numbers in square brackets indicate the pages of the 1981 printing), supplemented with recapitulations of my earlier comments. Each of Bakhtin's formulations about "epic" can be reinterpreted as complementary insights into the "Classical" - as an unmarked and inclusive concept.

1. On the "absolute past" of epic: "The epic was never a poem about the present, about its own time (one that became a poem about the past only for those who came later)." [13]

As a point of reference, the world of heroes in ancient Greek traditions is absolutized not only for epic but also for praise poetry. The praise poem refers specifically to the absolute heroic past as well as the present. Epic concerns this same past - but with unspecific reference to the shifting non-heroic present. The elimination - or, more accurately, the tendency toward near-elimination - of references to the present in Homeric poetry is a special case, as we will see later on, and it cannot be generalized for epic writ large. There are other kinds of epic where references to the agenda of the present are clearly in evidence. A locus classicus is the reference to Marcellus in Virgil Aeneid 6.883 (cf. Horace Odes 1.12.46).\(^{53}\)

\(^{53}\) On the possibility that Horace had in mind the passage of Pindar Nemean 9.39-42 as quoted above, see Braswell 1998:122.
2. "... epic discourse is infinitely far removed from discourse of a contemporary about a contemporary addressed to contemporaries." [13-14]

This formulation applies, at least on the surface, in the case of Homeric poetry. In other kinds of epic, however, it does not necessarily apply (as in the case of Virgil, cited above). In oral traditions, moreover, we find cases of epic where the given discourse of the contemporary performer is about his contemporaries as well as about heroes - and is addressed to the heroes as well as to the contemporaries.⁵⁴

3. "[The epic past] is walled off absolutely from all subsequent times, and above all from those times in which the singer and his listeners are located." [15f]

Even the explicit instances of "walling off" in Homeric poetry can signal that something needs to be "walled off" - that there is indeed an implicit break, a breach of the barrier between past and present, and that this breach needs to be mended or emended. In Iliad XII 17-33, for example, the "Achaean Wall" is leveled by the direct intervention of the gods precisely because the epic needs to obliterate features of a landscape that must no longer be there in the "present" time of its narration.⁵⁵ In this retrospective context, where the vantage point becomes exceptionally the "present" time of epic narration, Homeric poetry refers exceptionally to heroes as hêmitheoi (XII 23); this exceptionally non-epic usage of "post-epic" or "present-day" terminology stands in sharp contrast with the conventional epic terminology, hêrôes.⁵⁶ In speaking here about the "present"

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⁵⁴ Reynolds 1995, with reference to Arab epic traditions. See especially his p. 207, quoting Martin 1989:xiv: "My central conclusion is that the Iliad takes shape as a poetic composition in precisely the same 'speaking culture' that we see foregrounded in the stylized words of the poem's heroic speakers, especially those speeches designated as muthos, a word I redefine as 'authoritative speech act.'"


⁵⁶ Nagy 1999:160: "Whereas hêrôes is the appropriate word in epic, hêmitheoi is more appropriate to a style of expression that looks beyond epic."
time of epic, I must stress a central \{80|81\} point in my cumulative work on Homeric poetry: the "present" time of Homeric narration is an ever-shifting one. To the extent that the epic of Homeric poetry is an evolving medium,\(^57\) its "present" time is relative, not absolute.\(^58\) I will return to this point in my extended comments on the tenth in this list of ten selected formulations of Bakhtin.

4. "... the epic past is absolute and complete. ... There are no loopholes in it through which we glimpse the future." [16]

Even in the Homeric *Iliad*, prophecies of a hero's future can allow glimpses of alternative traditions that make contact between the hero of the past and the political or cultural realities of the epic's "present." A case in point is the prophecy uttered by Poseidon to Aeneas in *Iliad* XX 306-308.\(^59\) In general, explicit Homeric references to details about heroes in the past may indicate, implicitly, details about the political and cultural agenda connected with the cults of these heroes in the epic's "present." A case in point is the description of the territory ruled by the hero Ajax in the *Catalogue of Ships, Iliad* II 557-570: this version "is politically advantageous to Athens under the Peisistratidai and, secondarily, to Argos in the era of Pheidon, as also to Corinth and even to Sparta, while it is disadvantageous primarily to Megara" (as opposed to Hesiod F 204.44-51, which is relatively more advantageous to Megara).\(^60\)

5. "Everything incorporated into this past [of epic] was simultaneously incorporated into a condition of authentic essence and significance, but therefore also took on conclusiveness


\(^{58}\) *PH* pp. 53, 60, 70.

\(^{59}\) Nagy 1999 ch.15, especially pp. 267-269. The name of Aeneas, derived from ainos, is pertinent: see pp. 274-275.

\(^{60}\) *PH* 73n106, following Finkelberg 1988.39-40.
and finality, depriving itself, so to speak, of all rights and potential for a real continuation."

Such finality is merely implicit in epic as an unmarked category, while the continuation of the heroic world into the present is explicit in praise poetry as a marked category in opposition to epic.

6. "... the epic past is ... isolated ... from that eternal present of children and descendants in which the epic singer and his listeners are located, which figures as an event in their lives and becomes the epic performance." [17]

Bakhtin implies that the genealogies of the audience of epic in the present, reaching backward in time, are cut off from the genealogies of the heroes of epic in the past, which do not reach forward in time. Homeric poetry seems to be this kind of epic, where any access from the present to the heroic past is only implicit. Such access, however, becomes explicit in the praise poetry of Pindar's victory odes. This medium conventionally establishes contact between heroes or ancestors at one extreme and latter-day men as their proud descendants on the other extreme. Praise poetry blurs the distinction between immediate ancestors and remote ancestors or even heroes: when a victorious athlete is said to have done his ancestors proud, mention of his immediate ancestors is conventionally linked to a followup mention, in {81|82} elaborate narrative, of remote heroes of the past who may or may not be ancestors of the honored athlete. A case in point is Pindar Pythian 8.35-60: the glorification of the athletic victor, Aristomenes, is linked with the glorification of his patriliny, which in turn is immediately linked with the glorification of the hero Alkmaon who had done his
father Amphiaraos proud in the sequel to the heroic narrative of the Seven against Thebes.\textsuperscript{61}

7. "But the events, victors and heroes of 'high' contemporary reality are, as it were, appropriated by the past as they enter into these high genres (for example, Pindar's odes or the works of Simonides)." [18; highlighting mine]

It can also be said that the heroes of the past and their world are appropriated and even possessed by the present occasions of praise poetry composed by poets like Pindar and Simonides, commemorating contemporary events and victories. Besides the examples already cited from Pindar, I draw attention to a remarkable elegiac composition of Simonides, F 11 [West], commemorating the contemporary Hellenic victory at Plataea by linking the \textit{kleos} of the victorious warriors (line 28) with the \textit{kleos} (line 15), conferred by Homer himself (lines 15-17), of the heroes who destroyed the city of Troy.

8. "It is impossible to achieve greatness in one's own time." [18]

Praise poetry makes such an achievement possible. It connects contemporary reality with the distant world of heroes.

9. "Contemporaneity was reality of a 'lower' order in comparison with the epic past." [19]

The contemporaneity of praise poetry, as distinct from the contemporaneity of the novel, was reality of a 'higher' order.\textsuperscript{62}

10. "The present ... by its very nature ... demands continuation, it moves into the future. ... Therefore, when the present becomes the center of human orientation in time and in the world, time and world lose their completedness as a whole as well as in each of their parts.

\textsuperscript{61} PH pp. 194-195, 203-204.

\textsuperscript{62} For a modification of Bakhtin's formulation of the novel, with reference to the ancient Greek novel, see Branham 1995, especially pp. 84-86.
The temporal model of the world changes radically; it becomes a world where there is no first word (no ideal word), and the final word has not yet been spoken." [30]

My response to this last formulation of Bakhtin is meant to drive home the central point of my essay. It is also an extended coda, since it will ultimately bring my argumentation to a close. What I am about to offer is a final example of epic reference to the present, where epic reveals the "other side" [71|72] of the Classical by presenting an ambiguity about the finality of the final word.

The passage in question is *Odyssey* xiii 146-184. As we join the narrative, we find that the god Poseidon is very angry at the Phaeacians for providing Odysseus [82|83] with one of their ships to convey the hero back to his home in Ithaca. The god now plans to take revenge, and he asks Zeus to approve his plan, which has two parts: (1) to smash the ship as it sails back home to the Phaeacians and (2) to make a huge mountain "envelop" their city:

νῦν αὖ Φαιήκων ἐθέλω περικαλλέα νῆα
ἐκ πομπῆς ἀνιοῦσαν ἐν ἡεροηδέι πόντῳ
ῥαῖσαι, ἵν' ἡδη σχῶνται, ἀπολλήξωσι δὲ πομπῆς
ἀνθρώπων, μέγα δὲ σφιν ὀρος πόλει ἀμφικαλύψαι

So now I want to smash the very beautiful ship of the Phaeacians

when it comes back, in a misty crossing of the sea, from its conveying mission,

so that these people [= the Phaeacians] will hold off, at long last, and stop their practice of conveying
humans. And I want to make a huge mountain envelop\textsuperscript{63} their city.

\textit{Odyssey} xiii 149-152

Before Zeus gives his approval, he modifies the terms of Poseidon's two-part plan for vengeance. In the case of the first part, as we are about to see, the Will of Zeus is not that the ship be smashed but only that it be turned into a rock at the very moment that it sails into the entrance to the harbor - a rock destined to be a famous landmark for all time to come. In the case of the second part of the sea god's plan, it seems that Zeus will indeed allow Poseidon to make a huge mountain "envelop" the city. Here is the precise wording of these two parts of the Will of Zeus, addressed as commands to Poseidon:

\begin{center}
\begin{verbatim}
ὅππότε κεν δὴ πάντες ἐλαυνομένην προίδωνται
λαιοὶ ἀπὸ πτόλιος, θείναι λίθον ἐγγύθι γαῖς
νῆι θοὴ ἰκελον, ἵνα θαυμάζωσιν ἀπαντες
ἀνθρωποι, μέγα δὲ σφιν ὀρος πόλει ἄμφικαλυψαι
\end{verbatim}
\end{center}

When all the people of the city look out and see the ship sailing in,

turn it into a rock, just as it is about to reach land.

Make it look like a swift ship, so that people will look at it with wonder

- all of humanity will do so; and make the huge mountain envelop their city.

\textit{Odyssey} xiii 155-158

\textsuperscript{63} I choose this translation of ἄμφικαλυψαι in light of the observations of Merry 1878 on xiii 152: "Poseidon does not propose to bury the city, but to shut it off from the use of its two harbours by some great mountain mass." See also Peradotto 1990:78n18.
I print the last verse here, xiii 158, as it is printed in most modern editions of Homer. In this verse, the god Poseidon is commanded to seal off the Phaeacians forever within the confines of the epic past.

There is another version of this verse, however, adduced by the Alexandrian editor Aristophanes of Byzantium, which reads: {83|84}

\[ \text{ἄνθρωποι, μηδέ σφιν ὄρος πόλει ἀμφικαλύψαι} \]

- all of humanity will do so; but do not make the mountain envelop their city.

*Odyssey* xiii 158 (variant)\(^6\)

This different version was disputed by the later Alexandrian editor Aristarchus of Samothrace: he preferred the version of xiii 158 that I printed earlier above, which is the one that survives in the medieval manuscript tradition.\(^6\)

According to the version that survives only by way of Aristophanes, the future of the Phaeacians is not at all closed off. It remains open-ended, extending into the "present" when the epic is being narrated.

Two questions immediately come to mind. First, how could this different version fit the overall narrative of the Homeric *Odyssey*? Second, is the textual basis of this version

\[^{64}\text{For example: van Thiel 1991.}\]

\[^{65}\text{This variant, adduced by Aristophanes of Byzantium, is reported by the scholia (Ἀριστοφάνης δὲ γράφει, μη δὲ σφιν: H at xiii 152, evidently with reference to xiii 158). The scholia go on to say that Aristarchus opposed (ἀντιλέγει) this reading in his *hupomnēmata* or commentaries (evidently preferring μέγα δὲ σφιν over μηδέ σφιν). See Dindorf 1855:566; cf. Hoekstra 1989:174 and Friedrich 1989:396n2. Conceivably, Aristophanes adduced πόλιν ἀμφικαλύψαι instead of πόλει ἀμφικαλύψαι. At xiii 158 and 177 there is variation in the medieval manuscripts: either πόλιν ἀμφικαλύψ- or πόλει ἀμφικαλύψ-}.\]

\[^{66}\text{See the previous note.}\]
"legitimate"? Addressing the first question first, I start by taking a close look at how the immediate narrative proceeds from here.

Complying with the reaction of Zeus to the original two-part plan of revenge, Poseidon proceeds to turn the returning ship into a rock (xiii 160-164). The first part of Poseidon’s two-part plan has now been accomplished, although in modified form, in compliance with the Will of Zeus.\(^6^7\) The ship has been petrified at the approach to the harbor, instead of being "smashed" at midsea.\(^6^8\)

At this midpoint in the ongoing narrative about the fate of the Phaeacians, we hear their reaction to the petrifaction of their ship. They are in shock: they cannot understand how this disaster could have happened to them (xiii 165-169). But Alkinoos, their king, has comprehended what is still in the process of happening. He explains to the Phaeacians that he now understands a prophecy that his father Nausithoos had once told him: it must have been this present disaster, Alkinoos says, that his father had prophesied to him - along with that other disaster still waiting to be narrated in the *Odyssey*. Here is the precise wording of the explanation given by King Alkinoos:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{φῆ ποτε Φαιήκων ἀνδρῶν περικαλλέα νῆα} \\
\text{ἐκ πομπῆς ἀνιοῦσαν ἐν ἠεροηδέι πόντῳ} \\
\text{ρασέμεναι, μέγα δ’ ἦμιν ὁρος πόλει ἀμφικαλύψειν}\end{align*}
\]

\(^6^7\) On the systematic subordination of the Will of Poseidon to the Will of Zeus in the *Odyssey*, see Segal 1994:210; see also his analysis, p. 219, of Zeus as “the most detached of all the gods.” For important further elaboration on these themes, see Cook 1995:123-127.

\(^6^8\) The formulaic language of epic is quite precise here in making a distinction between a ‘smashing’ of the ship at midsea and a petrifaction of the ship at the approach to the harbor; see Cook 1995:124.

\(^6^9\) There is variation in the medieval manuscripts: either ἀμφικαλύψαι or ἀμφικαλύψειν.
He [my father] once said that he [Poseidon] will smash the very beautiful ship of the Phaeacian men when it comes back, in a misty crossing of the sea, from its conveying mission, and that he will make a huge mountain envelop our city.

*Odyssey* xiii 175-177

The audience of the *Odyssey* already knows this prophecy as recapitulated in xiii 173-177, because Alkinoos had already "quoted" it to Odysseus {84|85} at viii 565-569. At that earlier point in the narrative, however, Alkinoos had said something in addition, which he does not say now:

\[\omega\varsigma\\alpha\gamma\omicron\rho\omicron\epsilon\upsilon\ '\omicron\\gamma\epsilon\rho\omega\nu.\ '\omicron\ '\delta\ epsilon\ '\theta\epsilon\delta\ 'h\ '\tau\epsilon\lambda\epsilon\sigma\epsilon\iota\epsilon\nu\nu,\]

\[\eta\ 'k'\ '\alpha\tau\epsilon\lambda\epsilon\sigma\tau'\ '\epsilon\iota,\ '\omega\varsigma\ 'o'\ '\phi\upsilon\lambda\omicron\ '\epsilon\pi\lambda\epsilon\tau\omicron\ '\theta\upsilon\mu\omega\]

That is what the old man said. And the god [Poseidon] could either bring these things to fulfillment or they could be left unfulfilled, however it was pleasing to his heart.

*Odyssey* viii 570-571

Now, instead of "repeating" this part of the old man's prophecy, Alkinoos commands the Phaeacians to take immediate action:

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70 The textual transmission of viii 565-569 and xiii 173-177 leaves the two passages matching almost exactly, word for word. There is some degree of non-matching, though: thus the ship is εὐεργέα ‘well-built’ in most manuscripts at viii 567 vs. περικαλλέα ‘very beautiful’ in most manuscripts at xiii 175, while the mutually alternative forms are attested in a minority of manuscripts at both places. In terms of oral poetics, such variation may be justified even where the “quoting” of a character's words happens to be a narrative requirement of the composition, as it is here.
When Alkinoos had first “quoted” the prophecy of his father at viii 570-571, the “quotation” had left a loophole: Poseidon may or may not bring ‘these things’ to fulfillment, as he wishes. But now at xiii 178-179 there is the greatest urgency, and Alkinoos exclaims hyperbolically that ‘all these things are being brought to fulfillment’. The rhetorical point of this hyperbole is to motivate the Phaeacians to take immediate action. Even though the half-hopeful words of Alkinoos at viii 570-571 are not repeated but are replaced by the increasingly desperate words of xiii 178-179, there is still a trace of hope - provided that the Phaeacians take immediate action by following the emergency orders of Alkinoos, which are formulated in the verses that immediately follow, xiii 180-182.

King Alkinoos orders the Phaeacians to do two things without delay: to resolve never again to engage in the otherworldly pompē ‘conveying’ (xiii 180) of mortals back to their real world and to offer a sacrifice of twelve bulls to Poseidon (xiii 180-182). The Phaeacians must do

71 On the “evidentiary” function of δή, see Bakker 1997:75-76, 78-79. This particle δή is used by a speaker when he or she “assumes that the listeners are willing to see the evidence produced, so that conducting the discourse becomes an activity aimed at shared seeing, a being together in the situation created by the speaker's phrasing” (Bakker p. 76). In the present context, I translate this “evidentiary” function of δή by adding ‘And now you and I see that’ to ‘all these things are being brought to fulfillment’.

72 For an incisive analysis of the otherworldly aspects of the Phaeacians' activity of pompē 'conveying' (xiii 180) by way of their supernatural ships, see Cook 1992, especially pp. 240-241, 245. See also in general the valuable
these two things before the second of the two disasters should happen. The hope, Alkinoos says, is that Poseidon may still take pity and stop his plan:

\[ \text{αἱ κ’ ἐλεήσῃ} \]
\[ \text{μηδ’ ἕμιν περίμηκες ὄρος πόλει ἀμφικαλύψῃ} \]

... in hopes that he [Poseidon] will take pity and will not make the tall mountain envelop our city.

\[ \text{Odyssey xiii 182-183} \]

The Phaeacians immediately proceed to make sacrifice to the sea god, supplicating him (xiii 184-187). At this sacrifice, we may presume that they do indeed resolve never again to engage in the otherworldly "conveying" of mortals back to their "real" world.\(^73\) Such a resolution by the Phaeacians would of course cancel their own otherworldly status as mediators between the inner world of the narrative and the outer world of "reality" as implicit in the "present" time when the narration of epic is actually happening.

In terms of the mythological hermeneutics developed by J. Gordon Howie, the Phaeacians are hereby being shifted from the "Spatium Mythicum" to the "Spatium Historicum."\(^74\) But questions remain. Are they being shifted merely in the sense that they have been removed, as of now, from the narrative? If the price of their survival is the loss of their status in the interpretations of Segal 1994:12-64.

\(^73\) Cf. Cook 1995:124n36, who comments: “Poseidon’s essential aim has been achieved with his transformation of the ship: the Phaiakes cease to offer escort to mortals.” On the hermeneutics of the “reality” of Ithaca as opposed to the “world apart” that is Phaeacia, see Segal 1994:12-25.

\(^74\) Howie 1989:25 and 28. His model of the “Spatium Mythicum” is comparable to Peradotto’s model of “Märchen” (1990:82-83), on which I have more to say presently.
"Spatium Mythicum," will we ever get to see them again in the so-called "Spatium Historicum"?

But the most basic of all remaining questions is really this: what will happen to the Phaeacians according to the narrative? We cannot be completely certain. The Homeric narrative about the Phaeacians breaks off at Odyssey xiii 187, at the very moment when they are offering sacrifice and praying to Poseidon to take pity on them. As Peradotto points out, the narrative break takes place most abruptly, dramatically, and even exceptionally—at mid-verse. In the first part of the verse at xiii 187, the Phaeacians are last seen standing around the sacrificial altar; in the second part of the verse, Odysseus has just woken up in Ithaca. A new phase of the hero's experiences has just begun in the "real" world of Ithaca.

The narrative, then, ultimately leaves it open whether the Phaeacians will or will not be enveloped by the huge mountain. Peradotto describes this uncertainty as a way for Homeric poetry "to avoid saying 'yes' to one system and 'no' to another, in a higher and more complicated system, the poem, that only precariously maintains them both." For Peradotto, the two competing systems that are subsumed "precariously" by the overriding Homeric system are, on the one hand, the element of fairy-tale or "Märchen" and, on the other, the element of "tragically oriented myth."

In what follows, I offer a different explanation for whatever competing "systems" may be at work in this narrative. To anticipate my conclusions: Homeric poetry has left here an

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75 Peradotto 1990:81.
76 On the return of Odysseus to Ithaca as the notional end of the heroic age and the notional beginning of the "present" time of Homeric composition, see Martin 1993.
77 Peradotto pp. 80-81.
78 Peradotto p. 83.
79 Peradotto p. 83.
opening not only for two different outcomes but also for two different ways of thinking of an outcome.

I start my explanation by stressing again the importance of the loophole of viii 570-571, as formulated by Alkinoos: the god Poseidon may or may not bring his threat to fulfillment: he may do as he pleases. Moreover, we have already seen that even the first disaster did not quite happen in the way that the father of Alkinoos had prophesied - or the way that the god Poseidon had originally wanted it to happen before Zeus went ahead and modified the original terms in the process of formulating the eventual Will of Zeus.

Still, despite such tentatively hopeful signs, the plot of the Odyssey {86|87} accumulated many other signs that point toward the inevitability of disaster for the Phaeacians. Can we really be sure, then, that there is still a way out? It all depends ultimately on whether Zeus had modified the terms for the second part of Poseidon's plan, not just for the first part. And that depends on whether we read the version featuring the variant μηδέ = μēde as adduced by Aristophanes instead of the variant μέγα δέ = mega de as preferred by Aristarchus and as transmitted by the medieval manuscripts.

Here I return to the second of my two initial questions about Odyssey xiii 155-158: is the textual basis of this different version featuring μēde really "legitimate"? We can now add a related question: if it is legitimate, then does that delegitimize the version featuring mega de?

For Erwin Cook, the outcome of the epic narrative depends on our making an actual choice between two variants, mega de vs. μēde at xiii 158, and he proceeds to choose μηδέ = μēde in line with his interpretation of the epic narrative's treatment of Poseidon's interactions with Zeus. I agree with Cook's interpretation, but it leaves unanswered the question of legitimacy.

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80 Howie 1989:31 speaks of "the inevitability of the second phase of the prophecy."
How can we justify the textual transmission of the form mêde in this context?\footnote{Cf. Friedrich pp. 398-399: "Aristophanes' reading has against it the whole weight of the [medieval] manuscript tradition, and Aristarchus' authority to boot." He leaves it open whether Aristophanes conjectured mêde or whether he found it attested in the ancient manuscript tradition (p. 396). Still, he argues strongly for the upgrading of mêde "from the apparatus to the text" (p. 399).} Further, how can we justify the meaning of this variant in terms of Homeric poetry?

The actual need to choose one or the other variant depends on the way we look at Homeric poetry. If this poetry is merely a static text, then we are indeed forced to make a choice. If, however, we view Homeric poetry as a living system - an oral tradition that evolves ultimately into the textual tradition inherited by the Alexandrian editors - then we do not have to choose whenever we see a variation. Rather, as I will now go on to argue, the choices were already being made by Homeric poetry itself, which could opt for different variants in different phases of its own evolution.

My reasoning here derives from an overall "evolutionary model" that I have worked out as a general way to account for the making of Homeric poetry.\footnote{Nagy 1996a:109-114 and 1996b:29-112; cf. Seaford 1994:144-154. For an incisive overview, see Thalmann 1998:300-301.} In terms of this model, as I now plan to argue, the living and evolving oral tradition of Homeric poetry itself allowed for a choice either to seal off its own past from the present time of narration or to reach into this present time and thereby make its presence fully manifest.

According to the narrative option linked with the first of our two variants from Odyssey xiii 158, mêge de, the outlook is hopeless for the Phaeacians, since Poseidon's plan to seal off the city of the Phaeacians has been restated by Zeus and is therefore tantamount to the Will of Zeus, which the Homeric tradition conventionally equates with the way things ultimately turn out in epic narrative, as in Iliad 15.\footnote{PH p. 238, with further bibliography.} At the beginning of the Odyssey, however, Zeus himself
undercuts the equation of epic plot with the Will of Zeus (i 32-34). That is, there are differences in shades of meaning between the Iliadic and the Odyssean perspectives on the Will of Zeus as the plot of epic.

According to the narrative option linked with the second variant ἡμεδ, the outlook is still hopeful. After all, at an earlier point in the narrative, xiii 144-145, we can see a way out when Zeus tells Poseidon to exact any punishment he pleases "if any human dishonors you not at all" (ἀνδρῶν δ᾿ εἴ περ τίς σε . . . | οὔ τι τίει xiii 143-144). The context is this: Poseidon has been angrily questioning Zeus, calling on him to explain the Will of Zeus (Διὸς δ᾿ ἔξειρετο βουλήν xiii 127) - that is, to explain the overall plot of the narrative - now that the Phaeacians have conveyed Odysseus back home to Ithaca. How can I be honored among the gods, Poseidon plaintively asks Zeus, "when the Phaeacians do not honor me at all?" (ὅτε με βροτοὶ οὔ τι τίουι | Φαίηκες xiii 129-130). But then, as we have already seen, the story goes on to say that the Phaeacians will indeed initiate a remedy after the first disaster by proceeding to honor Poseidon with sacrifice in order to avert the second disaster.

The narrative option that I link with the variant ἡμεδ, according to which the Phaeacians are to be spared the second disaster of an all-enveloping mountain, depends on whether this variant as adduced by Aristophanes of Byzantium in place of mega de at xiii 183 is a genuine formulaic variant or only a textual variant. If it is the latter, then ἡμεδ may be just an editorial conjecture. That possibility would severely reduce the chances for arguing that ἡμεδ is a

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85 Extensive commentary, with bibliography, in PH 241-242.
86 PH 241-242.
87 Peradotto 1990:79 argues that ἡμεδ at xiii 183 is just that, an editorial conjecture: "Aristophanes, scandalized by a pusillanimous Zeus who would make himself accessory to the destruction of the Phaeacians, alters μέγα δὲ in line 158 to μηδὲ." As Peradotto points out (ibid.), "With few exceptions modern critics generally tend to reflect Aristophanes's tender-mindedness." At pp. 79-80, he quotes some interesting examples.
genuine alternative to mega de. In what follows, however, I will argue against that possibility on several levels.

From an analysis of the formulaic system in which mēde is embedded, this form can be justified as a functioning element in that system, just as the form mega de is a functioning element: in other words, mēde and mega de can be considered compositional alternatives in the formulaic system of Homeric diction.\(^{88}\)

Moreover, there is immediate contextual as well as formulaic evidence to support the argument that mēde is a functioning compositional variant in the formulaic system. Let us consider the wording of Zeus in his answer to Poseidon's angry questioning:

\[
\text{ἔρξον ὅπως ἐθέλεις καὶ τοι φίλον ἐπλετο θυμῷ}
\]

Do as you wish and as was pleasing to your heart.

\textit{Odyssey xiii 145}

This open-ended wording of Zeus matches formulaically the wording of Alkinoos, when he had originally "quoted" the prophecy of his father:

\[
\text{ὡς ἄγόρευ’ ὦ γέρων. τὰ δὲ κεν θεός \(\ê\) τελέσειεν,}
\text{ἡ \(\ê\) \(\kappa’\) \(\alpha\tauέλεστ’\) \(\ê\)ι, \(\ô\)ς οἱ φίλον \(\ê\)πλετο \(\ê\)υμῷ} \(\{88\}89\)
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\(^{88}\) As Leonard Muellner points out in a message written 3/10/1998 to me and to Chad E. Turner, the variant μηδέ at xiii 177 is syntactically and formulaically parallel to the μηδέ of xiii 183. In a message written 2/3/1998, Turner had pointed out to me that the metrical placement of the variant μηδέ at xiii 198 is singular (although there are cases where this word straddles the last syllable of a spondee and the first syllable of a dactyl in the third and fourth feet, he finds no other cases in the second and third feet). But the formulaic system is capable of generating rare forms and combinations. For a striking example, we may compare the singular attestation of μηδὲν at Iliad XVIII 500: here is a word that is found this one and only time in the Iliad and the Odyssey put together, and yet it can be shown to be formulaic. See Muellner 1976:101-102, 106.
That is what the old man said. And the god [Poseidon] could either bring these things to fulfillment
or they could be left unfulfilled, however it was pleasing to his heart.

_Odyssey_ viii 570-571

The formulation of Zeus, then, in leaving it still undecided whether or not the Phaeacians are to be ‘enveloped’, can be used as evidence to argue that _mēde_ is indeed a genuine compositional alternative to _mega de_.

As for the possibility that _mēde_ is an emendation based on an editorial conjecture, my own cumulative work on Homeric variants as adduced by the three great Alexandrian editors of Homer (Zenodotus, Aristophanes, and Aristarchus) leaves me skeptical, since I find that these editors normally do not make emendations without manuscript evidence.89

In making the specific argument that both variants _mega de_ and _mēde_ are genuine compositional alternatives, I return to my general argument that Homeric poetry is not a static text but a slowly evolving system.90 In terms of this general argument, the variant _mega de_ produces a narrative closure for the Phaeacians: their fate is sealed. The variant _mēde_, however, produces an outcome that is open-ended.91

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89 Nagy 1996a:107-152. This finding is a source of ongoing debate, some of which I survey in Nagy 1998.
90 Nagy 1996b:29-112, where I stress that the pace of evolution in Homeric poetry as a system slows down markedly after the eighth century BCE.
91 We may compare the open-endedness conveyed by the word _μηδὲν = mēden_ in _Iliad_ XVIII 500, centering on the moral dilemma of an aggrieved man in a litigation that is pictured on the Shield of Achilles. The unnamed man in the picture is locked into a stance of eternal refusal, extending indefinitely into the future: see again Muellner 1976:101-102, 106. With reference to this picture, see also Nagy 1997:195: "the _Iliad_ need not end where the linear narrative ends, to the extent that the pictures on the Shield of Achilles leave an opening into a virtual present, thus making the intent of the _Iliad_ open-ended."
These two variants, I contend, reflect different phases in the evolution of Homeric poetry. Let us begin with the variant *mega de*, the context of which can be linked with a relatively more Panhellenic phase of epic.\(^ {92}\) I have defined this phase elsewhere as one that "concentrates on traditions that tend to be common to most locales and peculiar to none."\(^ {93}\) The Panhellenic phases of epic make contact with the "present" time of narration by shading over any "local color" that might distract from the widest possible range of ways to visualize this "present."\(^ {94}\) A Panhellenic version, then, will tend to universalize the concerns of the present.

But there are also other, less Panhellenic, ways for epic to make contact with the "present" time in which narration happens: the "local color" can be highlighted, though only at the cost of narrowing the range of ways to visualize this "present." The context of the variant *mēde* can be linked with such a relatively less Panhellenic phase of epic. This variant makes contact with the epic "present" in a less universalized and more localized way. One focus of localization is historical Corcyra, modern-day Corfu.

The fact is, the Corcyraeans of the Classical period claimed to be residents of the land of the Phaeacians, as we know from a remark of Thucydides (1.25.4); from another remark of his, we know also that they worshipped King Alkinoos as their local cult hero (3.70.4).\(^ {95}\) As Howie surmises, "the value of the Phaeacians for the Corcyraeans was that they gave them a stake in the mythical past independent of their mother-city [Corinth], which was famous as a centre of

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\(^{92}\) On the relativity of Panhellenism (despite the absolutist implications of the term) as a cultural impulse, see *PH* p. 53.

\(^{93}\) *PH* p. 54, with further discussion of Panhellenic models.

\(^{94}\) Further discussion in *PH* p. 57, where I describe Panhellenism as "a hermeneutic model for explaining how the myth-making mind can become critical of variants in myth."

\(^{95}\) Hornblower 1991:70 and 469; see also Howie 1989:28.
the worship of the sea-god [Poseidon] and as site of the panhellenic Isthmian Games in the god's honour."\(^{96}\)

In *Odyssey* xiii 155-158, we hear how the Phaeacians will one day look out at \{89|90\} their harbor and see their returning ship suddenly turn into a rock, and we hear also how that fabulous petrified ship will continue to be a most wondrous sight for future generations of humanity to see and to keep on seeing for all time to come. These epic verses of Homeric poetry, one commentator surmises, may be providing an aetiology "for the fact that the rock which rises from the sea just outside the harbour of Corfu was taken to be 'Odysseus' ship.'\(^{97}\)

There are references to this "real-life" rock in Pliny (*Natural History*) 4.53 and Eustathius (Commentary on *Odyssey* vol. II p. 44 line 27), and to this day the "petrified ship" remains a most celebrated tourist attraction for visitors to Corfu.\(^{98}\) But the essential point is, the reference to this rock is already there in the *Odyssey* - that is, in a version of the *Odyssey* that says \(mēde\) instead of \(mega\) \(de\) at xiii 158.

The identity of the Corcyraeans as descendants of the Phaeacians depends on the Will of Zeus as he formulates it in *Odyssey* xiii 155-158, and it depends especially on the variant \(mēde\) of xiii 158, which yields an open-ended narrative that reaches directly into the "present" of the Classical period and beyond.

As a political and cultural fact of life, the self-identification of the Corcyraeans with the Phaeacians has been dated as early as the third quarter of the eighth century BCE.\(^{99}\) The variant represented by \(mēde\) at xiii 158 may be just as early, and in fact it may be the vehicle

\(^{96}\) Howie 1989:27.
\(^{99}\) Hoekstra p. 174: *"A possible terminus post quem is the third quarter of the eighth century when Eretrians, soon followed by Corinthians, settled there."* For a critical survey of testimonia, see Howie p. 29.
for expressing just such a political and cultural fact of life. This is not to say that the other
variant represented bymega de at xiii 158 may not be just as early. It is only to say that both
variants were still available to the Homeric tradition of epic as it evolved during the pre-
Classical period. In such an early period, the affirming - or the denying - of a claim of descent
from the Phaeacians was essential not just poetically but also politically and culturally.100 It
really mattered then, and it continued to matter well into the Classical period of the fifth
century and beyond, as we have seen from the remark of Thucydides (1.25.4, 3.70.4) about the
Corcyraeans' claim that they inhabited the land of the Phaeacians, whose king, Alkinoos, they
worshipped as their local hero.101

In the Hellenistic period of the Alexandrian editors of Homer, by contrast, the question of
choosingmega de or mēde would have mattered purely from a poetical rather than a political or
cultural point of view. The Corcyraeans' claims to the land of the Phaeacians would not be a
major concern any more, at least not politically. But it would still really matter in another way:
was the petrified ship of the Phaeacians a figment of the poetic imagination, walled off in the
"Spatium Mythicum" of the epic past, or is it the same thing as the real-life rock at the
entrance to the harbor of Corcyra, accessible to all humanity in the "Spatium Historicum" of
the contemporary Hellenic world? The disagreement between Aristarchus and Aristophanes
over the choice ofmega de or mēde respectively must have centered on such questions. One
way, we see a beautiful snapshot from the enchanted imaginary world of the epic past. The
other way, we see a comparably beautiful vista in the enchanting touristic world of the non-

100 On the impact of prevailing political and cultural forces on the evolution of Homeric poetry before the
Classical period, see again my comments on the fifth of Bakhtin's ten selected formulations.
101 For parallel claims in the pre-Classical period, see PH pp. 153-155, especially with reference to (1) the
Peisistratidai of Athens, who claimed descent from Peisistratos, son of Homeric Nestor; (2) the Penthilidai of
Mytilene in Lesbos, claiming descent from Penthilos, son of Orestes; (3) the Neleidai of Miletus, claiming descent
from Neleus, father of Nestor.
epic present, still anchored in the permanence of the epic past. Either way, petrified ship or scenic rock, what we see is a beloved cultural landmark of Hellenism.

All this is not to say that we must ultimately choose between these two versions of seeing things Homeric. It is only to say that both variants were still available to the Homeric tradition of epic as it evolved into the Classical period and beyond. And it is to ponder the power of epic either to close down or to open up its pathways to the present. The fate of the Phaeacians in conveying the heroic past to the present depends on that power of Homeric dimensions.

**Bibliography**


