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Poetic inspiration in Homer’s "Iliad" and "Odyssey"

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Abstract: The concept of poetic inspiration — fundamental to ancient poetics, was for centuries founded on the image of a poet as an unconscious vessel for the Muses. However, no evidence of an actual possession was to be found in works of archaic poets, such as Homer, Hesiod or Pindar. The text of *Iliad* and *Odyssey* show that the relation between an artist and the goddess is of an intellectual nature, and that these two interact on many different levels. The Muse, stirs the bard to sing, supplies him with 'divine' knowledge, assists him whenever a need arises. But, at the same time, leaves him enough freedom when it comes to the composition of the poem.

Key words: poetic inspiration, the Muses, Homer, *Iliad*, *Odyssey*

Plato writes in *Laws*: "There is… an ancient saying — constantly repeated by ourselves and endorsed by everyone else — that whenever the poet is seated on the Muse's tripod, he is, not in his senses, but resembles a fountain, which gives free course to the upward rush of water"[1]. This passage conveys a powerful image of the poet as a passive instrument of some supernatural force, deprived of any control over what he is actually saying, becoming, thus, incapable of explaining either the source, or the meaning of his poetry[2]. However, recent studies of the works of Homer, Hesiod and Pindar, to name only these three authors, have shown, that none of them described the poet as μαντίκός, or ἐκστατίκός (adjec-

[1] Plato: *Laws*, 719 C.

[2] The idea of a 'possessed' poet can be found throughout Plato's dialogues e.g. *Menon, Ion, Phaedrus*; and in contemporary studies on the subject: E.R. Dodds: *The Greek and the Irrational.* Berkeley 1951; D.A. Russell: *Criticism in Antiquity.* London 1981; E. Mueller: *Geschichte der Theorie der Kunst bei den Altens.* Breslau 1834; W. Kranz: „Das Verhältnis der Schöpfers zu seinem Werk in der altgriechischen Literatur". *Neue Jahrbücher fur das „Klasische Altertum"* 1924, 27; A. Sperduti: "The Divine Nature of Poetry in Antiquity". *TAPA* 1950, Vol. 81, pp. 209—240.

tives reserved for Pythia) — a seer, be it man or woman, who, put to a state of ecstasy, would freely communicate with the divinity, thus, was able to say or do things impossible to a human being in a normal state of mind[3].

Since, no evidence gathered from the ancient literature, from Homer onward seemed to validate the thesis of ecstatic possession, many scholars came to the conclusion that the notion of poetic inspiration, was in fact, a formulation of the 5th century philosophers[4]. The image of the "possessed" poet was, nevertheless, repeated with no, or hardly no scepticism up to the 20th century.

The concept of poetic inspiration is fundamental to Greek notions about poetry, and from Homer onward, was expressed through a mysterious bond between the poet and Muses. In an essay "Poetic Inspiration in Early Greece" Penelope Murray correctly observed that, in order to escape Platonic misunderstandings about ancient views on poetic creativity, one must make a clear distinction between the concept of poetic inspiration and poetic genius. She defines the first as "temporary impulse to poetic creation, relating primarily to the poetic process"[5], whereas the latter stands for "a permanent quality on which poetic creativity depends, and relates to the poetic personality"[6]. Thus, the relationship between the poet and his Muse is to be understood twofold. In the beginning the deity, Muse or god Apollo himself, bestows on him, the gift of permanent poetic ability, which becomes from now on the poet's inherent quality; and later, when a need arises supplies him with temporary aid as well.[7]

In the course of *Iliad* and *Odyssey* Homer addresses his Muse, seeking her assistance, in order to gather accurate information, as for example in the beginning of the Catalogue of Ships[8]:

> Ἔσπετε νῦν μοι Μουσαι Ὀλύμπια δώματ' ἔχουσαι
> ὑμεῖς γὰρ θεαί ἐστε ἐπάρεστέ τε ἴστε τε πάντα,
> ἡμεῖς δ κλέος ο ον ἀκούομεν οὐδέ τι ἴδμεν
> οἵ τινες ἡγεμόνες Δαναῶν καὶ κοίρανοι ἦσαν
>
> And now, o Muses dwellers in the mansions of Olympus, tell me —
> for you are goddesses, are in all places so that you see everything

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[3] G.M. Ledbetter: *Poetics before Plato.* Oxford 2003; P. Murray: "Poetic Inspiration in Early Greece". *JHS* 1981, Vol. 101, pp. 87—103; E.T. Tigerstedt: "*Furor Poeticus:* Inspiration in Greek Literature before Democritus and Plato". *JHI* 1970, Vol. 31, pp. 163—178.

[4] See: E.A. Havelock: *Preface to Plato*. Oxford 1963. Also, P. Murray and E.A. Tigerstedt; however, they reject Havelock's opinion, that the concept of poetic inspiration was altogether alien to Homer, Hesiod or Pindar.

[5] Murray, "Poetic Inspiration…", p. 89.

[6] Ibidem.

[7] For example of permanent poetic ability see *Od*. VIII 44—45; and temporary inspiration: *Od*. 8. 73.

[8] The list of invocations: *Il*. I 1—7, II 761—762; XI 218—220; XIV 508—510; XVI 112—113; *Od*. I 1—10.

while we know nothing but report
Who were the chiefs and princes of the Danaans.
(*Il.* II 484—47)[9]

The Muse is believed to be a source of reliable information, more specifically, a certain kind of knowledge, which in any other case, apart from poetry and oracles, would and should be inaccessible to a mere mortal. Homer's Muse, provides him with information, mostly knowledge of the past. Therefore, the need for accurate information, as opposed to a mere rumour, was interpreted as the author's desire to make — preservation, the key aspect of his poetry. Indeed, the archaic poets were considered "historians" of their culture, guarding and maintaining, in their poems, tradition of their societies.

Homer viewed his poetry as a source of divine knowledge but, foremost, a source of pleasure. We are told, in *Odyssey* that Demodocus' talent is his power to give delight through his song. The Muses, thus, help the poet to enchant and mesmerise his audience, in the moment of delivering his song to the listeners. With the assistance of the goddesses the bard is able to seduce his audience and evoke the atmosphere of tension and curiosity. The association of poetry and pleasure is brought up throughout *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, for example when Achilles finds delight in his lyre, singing epic poetry:

τὸν δ′ εὗρον φρένα τερπόμενον φόρμιγγι λιγείῃ
καλῇ δαιδαλέῃ, ἐπὶ δ′ ἀργύρεον ζυγὸν ἦεν,
τὴν ἄρετ′ ἐξ ἐνάρων πόλιν Ἠετίωνος ὀλέσσας·
τῇ ὅ γε θυμὸν ἔτερπεν, ἄειδε δ′ ἄρα κλέα ἀνδρῶν.

and they found Achilles playing on a lyre, of cunning workmanship,
and its cross-bar was of silver,
it was part of the spoils he had taken when he sacked the city of Eëtion.
And he now was diverting himself with it and singing the glory of heroes.
(*Il.* IX 186—189)

or the Sirens promise that their song will bring both pleasure and knowledge: ἀλλ′ ὅ γε τερψάμενος νεῖται καὶ ρλείονα εἰδώς[10].

Although the opening lines of *Iliad* (Μῆνιν ἄειδε θεὰ) seem to confirm the thesis of the poet as a passive instrument of the deity, the invocation before the Catalogue of Ships, and the poet's request for specific information imply his active part as a recipient of the divine knowledge. His role becomes more evident in the

[9] *The Iliad*. Ed. S. Butler. New York 1999.

[10] *Od.* XII 188. See also; *Il.* 472—474, IX 186, IX 189; *Od.* I 421—423, VIII 429, XVIII 304—306, XVII 605—606, XII 188.

description of the bard Demodocus. The audience is told that the Muse bestowed on him the gift of sweet song, as a compensation for his blindness:

> τὸν περὶ Μοῦσ᾽ ἐφίλησε, δίδου δ᾽ ἀγαθόν τε κακόν τε·
> ὀφθαλμῶν μ ν ἄμερσε, δίδου δ᾽ ἡδεῖαν ἀοιδήν.
>
> The Muse loved him above all men, and gave him both good and evil;
> of his sight deprived him, but gave him the gift of sweet song.
> (*Od.* VIII 62—64)

She stirs him to sing, but never physically "takes abode in him", nor is such a possession depicted when the bard enters the hall of Alcinous, the king of Phaeacians. It is his active part in the process of the composition, which becomes stressed in the following passage:

> τῷ γάρ ῥα θεὸς περὶ δῶκεν ἀοιδὴν
> τέρπεν, ὅππῃ θυμὸς ἐποτρύνῃσιν ἀείδειν
>
> For the god gave to him song beyond others —
> to give pleasure in whatever way his spirit urges him to sing
> (*Od.* VIII 44—45)

Although the gift of sweet song is attributed to god, it is Demodocus' θυμὸς — spirit that is in control of the song, affirming the bard's responsibility for its creation. He is given a tool, he must make a good use of, but Demodocus is never described as god's tool himself. Moreover, Phemius, Odysseus' court-poet states that:

> αὐτοδίδακτος δ᾽ εἰμί, θεὸς δέ μοι ἐν φρεσὶν οἴμας
> παντοίας ἐνέφυσεν·
>
> I am self-taught, and the god has planted in my heart all manners of lays.
> (*Od.* XXII 347—348)

He perceives himself simultaneously as self-taught and a recipient of the divine gift of poetry. Thus, he acknowledges the supernatural origin of his art, but, at the same time, emphasises his independence in the composition of his song. Neither Demodocus, nor Phemius are presented as unconscious vessels of the Muses. They are inspired, moved, compelled to sing, are taught by the deity, and, most of all, are able to freely communicate with her, but mantic ecstasy is absent from these contacts.

The lack of ecstatic possession does not exclude the possibility of another level of interaction between the Muse and her disciple. The mode of invocations in *Iliad* suggests that the poet may, at some moments, treat the Muse not only as a well-informed source dispensing him knowledge, but a part of his audience: a "knowing

recipient" among other listeners. At the outset of the Catalogue of Ships Homer acknowledges Muses' knowledge (τε ἴστέ τε πάντα), as well as their presence (πάρεστέ), which can be interpreted two ways. Either the poet implies divine presence at the site of the event he is about to narrate to his audience, or simply wishes to emphasise presence of the Muses as listeners during his performance. Such approach to the text *Iliad* disturbs the firm teacher — pupil division, by reversing the respectful roles of the poet and his Muse, since the deity is present not only to correct and assist, but also to enjoy the performance.

The relation poet — Muse goes even further and operates at yet another level. Readers of both epic poems, *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, are reminded that gods, and Muses in particular, are themselves accomplished artists, entertaining other celestials at heavenly feasts[11]. Thus, the outstanding affinity between the poet and Muses is founded on a common ground — their craft. The bard finds it easier to address god knowing he will find in him or her a fellow artist. However, the price for such kinship with immortals can be extremely high and Homer is well aware of that.

In the Book II of *Iliad* he relates the story of Thamyris, who engaged in a musical contest with the Muses, boasted he could excel their musical skills. Punished for his vanity and arrogance he was maimed, and deprived of the divine power of song. The Muses also took away his ability to play the lyre[12]. The story of Thamyris demonstrates that a poet must know his limits, and especially know the time to take a step back. Homer shows in the course of the epic that he is aware of the terrible consequences of uncontrolled pride and egotism, against which he warns the audience. The poet stresses his reverence and esteem to his patrons in a remark, he makes in the middle of a lengthy passage describing the Trojans storming the rampart in Book XII of the *Iliad*:

> Ἄλλοι δ′ ἀμφ′ ἄλλῃσι μάχην ἐμάχοντο πύλῃσιν·
> ἀργαλέον δέ με ταῦτα θεὸν ὣς πάντ′ ἀγορεῦσαι·
>
> Meanwhile the Trojans were fighting about the other gates.
> I, however, am no god to be able to tell all these things.
> (*Il.* XII 175)

This personal remark can be interpreted twofold: Homer declares the difficulty and complexity of the material he set out to narrate to the listeners — a task almost surpassing his poetic abilities, but at the same time he emphasises in a self-deprecatory manner his inferior status as an artist. The poet's awareness of his human limitations and his caution not to offend the gods is evident in this passage.

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[11] See: *Il.* I 604, 9. 186—189.

[12] *Il.* II 591—600. For other versions of Thamyris story see Pseudo-Apollodorus, *Myth.* I.3.3; Pausanias Perieg: *Graeciae descriptio* IV 33.3,7—11.

Throughout *Iliad* Homer maintains a strict observance of the rules while addressing a deity, having in mind the sad fate of Thamyris.

When it comes to the fundamental aspect of an ancient epic narrative — the performance — the invocations the poet makes serve few practical functions. First of all, they confirm the relationship between the poet and his Muse. The poet transcends human limitations, in order to communicate with the goddess. Secondly, by breaking the narrative, invocations alert the audience, and prepare the listeners for what will come next[13]. Moreover, they express the belief that the Muse is a source of inspiration for the epic — she is the teacher, and the one, who incites the bard to sing. Finally, each invocation confirms the story's extraordinary character and legitimises the cultural content of the poem.

The passages of *Iliad* and *Odyssey* emphasise a close link between inspiration and knowledge. Both epic poems are to preserve glory of old heroes (κλέα ἀνδρῶν), from accounts gathered with the aid of Muses. However, as the daughters of Μεμνοσυή, their relation to this particular goddess brings up another interesting aspect of their relationship with the poet, which lays in the specific nature of inspiration they grant him. The connection between Muses and memory, is to be found throughout ancient literature, for example in Hesiod and in Plato, but already Homer attributes the ability of memorising to the Muses in *Il.* 2. 492 εἰ μὴ Ὀλυμπιάδες Μοῦσαι Διὸς αἰγιόχοιο θυγατέρες μνησαίαθ᾽ ὅσοι ὑπὸ Ἴλιον ἦλθον. This commemorative function strengthens the primary task of epic poetry, which is conservation of κλέα ἀνδρῶν. Memory also constitutes the very mode in which oral poetry is created. Without this ability no oral composition could be even conceivable.

The poet addresses the Muse during the course of *Iliad* and in the outset of *Odyssey* asking for help in narrating to the audience accurate information, or when he seems to have problems with the composition of a particular passage, but he is never portrayed as a passive recipient or a mouthpiece. Their relationship is of an intellectual nature. Surely, she communicates with him, but never she sends him into the state of ecstasy — every time a contact is made, the poet maintains his active part in the composition of the poem. The invocations confirm that the source of his poetry is divine, but the poet remains, at the same time, conscious of his own contribution in the process of composition.

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[13] For a more detailed analysis of the performative aspects of Homer's invocations see: E. Minchin: "The Poet Appeals to His Muse: Homeric Invocations in the Context of Epic Performance". *CJ* 1995, Vol. 26, 91.1.