

# **The Emergence of Logical Thought: How to Interpret Contradiction and Consistency in Early Greek Culture Part 1. Homer**

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## **Introduction**

The role of writing in the development of rational thought has been frequently discussed in studies on orality and literacy. In them, many attempts have been made to shed light on the differences between the “oral” and “written” mode of thinking.<sup>(1)</sup> Concerning Greek culture, the “great divide” theory of Eric A. Havelock<sup>(2)</sup>—according to which there is a sizeable gap between the oral and written modes of thinking—has been criticized in comparative anthropological and psychological investigations. Sylvia Scribner and Michael Cole are among the most influential opponents of the “great divide” theory. The theory suggests that the use of a developed writing system furthers the ability to think logically and to detect contradictions in the tradition. The two scholars made a field study among the Vai in Liberia. Having compared the thought processes of the literate and the illiterate population, they concluded that neither the use of the Vai syllabic script nor Arabic literacy has an effect on the development of logical operations.<sup>(3)</sup> Although David R. Olson pointed out that the full implications of literacy cannot be grasped by simply comparing readers and non-readers because of the complex, culturally embedded nature of writing, the continual criticism of the “orality/literacy” theory seems to have rendered its original formulations obsolete and irrelevant.

Our present study attempts to refine these formulations about the mind-shaping nature of the practice of reading and writing through an analysis of the role and characteristics of contradiction and consistency in the Homeric poems; we discuss the various forms of contradiction and describe the nature and functions of “oral consistency.”

In a previous study ([“Orality and Literacy : The Development of Philosophy into Logical Thought,”](#) *Anthropoetics* 5,2) we examined one particular structure (if “p” then “q”) in the Homeric epic poems and in some of the works of the early Greek theorists. We demonstrated that the transition from an oral to a written mode of thought occurred along the same lines as those J. L. Austin intuitively suggested in the elaboration of his performative-constative distinction.(4) One of the most important characteristics of his *performative utterances* is that their meaning and usage are always determined by the *circumstances* in which they are uttered. By contrast, the “pure” *constative* utterance has to be explainable without consideration of the circumstances of its utterance. As he says: “We aim at the ideal of what would be right to say in all circumstances for any purpose, to any audience . . .”(5). Austin did not elaborate this insight any further. By examining the usage of the “logical” structure (if “p” then “q”) we demonstrated that the distinction Austin made between these categories of utterances is subject to historical development. The investigated structure is gradually transformed from a “situational” to a truly logical pattern of thought.

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In our present work, we continue to pursue the investigation suggested by Austin; however, our perspective is slightly different from that of our former study. Here, our first step is to examine the nature of contradiction and consistency in the epic poems. The characteristics we uncover are likely to determine the practice of any complex thought pattern in the most elementary way. In a following study we shall examine the changes the perception of contradiction and consistency brought about in Herodotus and the Presocratic philosophers.

In the terminology of Generative Anthropology, our study pursues the development of language from its originary form—which can be only interpreted in situations—to its metaphysical use. In Homeric language, “performative” speech acts are dominant—invocations, imperatives, ostensives, and so on—and depend on the place where they are uttered. Accordingly, the interpretation of consistency and contradiction has to take into account the particular situation the speech act is embedded in. If we move forward toward metaphysical discourse, declarative sentences or propositions gradually banish the original utterances, the elementary linguistic forms. As Eric Gans puts it in [“Plato and the Birth of Conceptual Thought”](#) (*Anthropoetics*, 2, 2): “Metaphysics, by denying the existence of an utterance-form more primitive than the declarative, incarnates the refusal to think of the origin of language as an event.” In the originary scene of language, the *ostensive* sign defers the violence caused by desires converging on a common object and offers an imaginary substitute in place of the thing. By contrast, this ostensive sign is replaced in Plato’s work by the *Idea* or *concept*, which is purportedly without origin

or history.

For our enterprise, it is important that the contents of the principal concepts emerging in Plato's philosophy be tested continually for their (textual) consistency with the relevant context. In fact, the contexts themselves are shaped in the course of metaphysical discourses. This endeavor to achieve textual consistency disrupts the old "situational" thinking and replaces it with "conceptual thought." In the present study we shed light on the main characteristics of oral *situational thinking* by examining the nature of contradiction and consistency in Homer's work. In a second part we will pursue the changes that "oral" thought underwent in the work of some of the early Greek theorists, which ushered in and ultimately made possible the conceptual thought of Plato.

### **Textual consistency and the role of speech situation in the Homeric epic poems**

Looking for textual inconsistencies in the Homeric poems is a very intriguing task. In the past, scholars tried to explain away the importance of this phenomenon. But Albert B. Lord suggests an explanation for our bewilderment regarding this question:

...the ordinary singer is not always critical, is not looking for that consistency which has become almost a fetish with literary scholars. Bowra, in his book *Tradition and Design in the Iliad*, has attributed some of the narrative inconsistencies to the fact that the poet was concentrating on one episode at a time. This is close to the truth but does not give the whole picture. It is not merely that the singer is concentrating on each episode as he sings it. Each episode has rather its own consistency. [\(6\)](#)

Lord doesn't elaborate on this remark. To come closer to the nature of "Homeric consistency" we have to take a closer look at a few epic scenes.

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### **Contradictions not fulfilling a role in the Homeric epic poems**

In the *Odyssey*, Helen appears differently in different speech situations that concern her role in the Trojan war. For example, when Telemachus is searching for his missing father, he visits Menelaus. Menelaus assures Telemachus of his friendship with Odysseus, praises the missing hero, and evokes a tearful reaction in the audience. At this point Helen casts a drug into their wine to "ease pain and strife," and recalls her adventure with Odysseus that took place during the siege of Troy:

after the hero had disguised himself as a beggar, he came to Troy to spy on and cause damage to the Trojan warriors. Helen recognized him and, after she swore not to denounce him to the Trojans, Odysseus disclosed the Achaeans' plans to her. Then the hero slaughtered some of the Trojans and went back to the Achaeans. Now Helen describes her own feelings at that time:

“Then the other Trojan women wailed aloud, but my soul was glad, for already my heart was turned to go back to my home, and I groaned for the blindness that Aphrodite gave me, when she led me there from my dear native land, forsaking my child and my bridal chamber, and my husband, a man who lacked nothing, whether in wisdom or in looks.”  
(Od.4.259-264)(7)

It is easy to read between the lines of this story. Helen was the cause of the Trojan war and, indirectly, was responsible for Odysseus' disappearance. It is no coincidence that the drug she cast into the wine not only soothed pain but also dissipated anger. The story Helen relates emphasizes her loyalty to the Achaeans. It suggests that she collaborated with them. So the story is a kind of *self-justification*.

Helen's story is accepted by the audience. Menelaus praises his wife for speaking properly (*kata moiran*) and then relates a story in which he praises Odysseus for his composure and confirms the excellence of his friend. The event he relates occurred at the end of the Trojan war. Some of the Achaeans were sitting in the wooden horse and waiting for their chance to come out unobserved. At this moment Helen came to examine the strange horse:

“You came there then, and it must be that you were bidden by some god who wished to grant glory to the Trojans; and godlike Deiphobus followed you on your way. Three times did you circle the hollow ambush, trying it with your touch, and you named aloud the chieftains of the Danaans by their names, likening your voice to the voices of wives of all the Argives. Now I and the son of Tydeus and noble Odysseus sat there in the midst and heard how you called, and we two were eager to rise up and come out, or else to answer at once from inside, but Odysseus held us back and stopped us, in spite of our eagerness. Then all the other sons of the Achaeans kept quiet, but Anticlus alone wished to speak and answer you; but Odysseus firmly closed his mouth with strong hands, and saved all the Achaeans, and held him thus until Pallas Athene led you away.”  
(Od.4.274-289)

If we put the two stories side by side, it is obvious that Helen is portrayed in different ways. In the first story, Helen is loyal to the Achaeans, in the second, she endangers the life of many of them. In the story of Menelaus, Odysseus doesn't trust Helen and he doesn't disclose any information about himself and his companions to her. This stands in contrast to his attitude in the story related earlier by Helen.

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The two portrayals are in textual *inconsistency* with each other. Did the original performer or audience recognize this discrepancy? This is doubtful. Such textual comparison and scrutiny are completely foreign to the character of the Homeric epic poems. In the course of a performance, many speech situations emerge that contain concatenations which serve to hold together the whole performance, the whole story. The internal glue of the two stories or speech situations examined above is *the purpose of praising Odysseus*. This purpose overshadows all other circumstances in the above scene and so hides the highlighted inconsistency. We call this characteristic of the Homeric poems *situational consistency*. This consistency arises from the nature of performance. The aim of Homeric oral performance is not to establish textual consistency but to delight the audience. The performance itself comes into being along with concrete, continuously changing speech situations. In the course of the performance, there is no unbiased meta-observer who can dissect the speech situations and constrain them to the requirements of textual consistency. The performer and the audience are parts of the performance. They merge into the story; they don't have the possibility of examining it objectively as we do. Textual consistency or inconsistency in the Homeric poems appears to the participants of a performance as an secondary corollary of situational consistency. The performer, the audience, and the story are permanently interacting with each other while the story is continually being reshaped to the purposes of the performer. David Herige grasps the substance of this problem in the same way:

. . . performers' most valuable assets have been a sensitivity to their listeners' wants and an ability to improvise, embellish, excel, and ultimately, please. Without these traits there would be no role for them to play. . . . Losing their listeners' interest is not the aim of most oral performers, who will learn quickly enough that fidelity to a particular text for the sake of consistency and accuracy is likely only to bore, frustrate, and antagonize an audience intent on new experiences. Embellishing a core of stock phrases, set formulas, and standard plots is forever necessary if the performer is to continue to capture and retain his

audience's friendly attention.(8)

A few examples will give us a feeling for the nature of this situational consistency.

After Hector's death Helen mourns him:

"Hector, far dearest to my heart of all my husband's brothers! In truth my husband is godlike Alexander, who brought me to the land of Troy—I wish I had died before then! For this is now the twentieth year from the time when I went from there and have been gone from my native land, but never yet have I heard an evil or spiteful word from you; but if any other spoke reproachfully of me in the halls, a brother of yours or a sister, or brother's fair-robed wife, or your mother—*but the father-in-law is always gentle as if he were the real father*(9) (*ekuros de pater hoos epios aiei*)—yet you would turn them with speech and restrain them by your gentleness and your gentle words. So I wail alike for you and for my unlucky self with grief at heart; for *no longer have I anyone else (allos) in broad Troy who is gentle (epios) to me or kind; but all men shudder at me.*" (Il.24.762-775)(10)

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The contradiction between the highlighted passages is apparent. The first general statement assumes that the father-in-law is *always (aiei)* gentle. The second statement suggests that no person who is gentle to Helen still exists. What is the explanation for this discrepancy? As Helen bewails Hector, she describes her miserable fortune and, what is more, she bewails herself rather than Hector. The deceased hero had defended her against the malicious attacks of the family. She adds that her father-in-law is always gentle. If we consider the particular purpose of this speech, we can realize that this general statement is an excellent device for avoiding an overt confrontation with the head of the family, her father-in-law, Priam. Helen uses a universal statement in order not to steal Hector's limelight. The second highlighted statement exaggerates, emphasizes, and dramatizes Helen's grief over her cruel fate. This expression of her hopeless fortune also overshadows the first universal statement. For this reason we cannot say that the two statements contradict each other from the audience's point of view. Here are two micro-situations in a dynamic interaction that fulfill different roles in the speech act, and so the contradiction detected by us is meaningless for the oral performer and audience.

In another scene, Achilles sends Patroclus to Nestor to inquire about the wounded soldier he rescued with his chariot. Before Patroclus arrived, Nestor had started to eat. The narrator meticulously describes the meal and mentions how easily Nestor lifted the heavy cup:

*“Another man could barely budge that cup from the table when it was full, but old Nestor would lift it easily.”* (Il.11.636-637)

A little later Patroclus arrives and recognizes that the wounded hero is Machaon. When Patroclus is about to leave, Nestor takes the opportunity to describe the difficult situation of their army to him:

*“Why now does Achilles have such pity for the sons of the Achaeans, all those who have been struck with missiles? He does not know at all what grief has arisen throughout the camp; for the best men lie among the ships struck by arrows or wounded with spear-thrust. . . . Yet Achilles, noble though he is, cares not for the Danaans, nor pities them. Does he wait indeed until the swift ships near the sea, in spite of the Argives, blaze with consuming fire, and we ourselves are slain one after the other? For my strength is not such as it once was in my supple limbs.”*  
(Il.11.656-669)

The two highlighted passages are obviously in contradiction. In the first, Nestor is described as strong and hardly surpassable; in the second he is weak and in need of help. However, the contradiction can be resolved by analyzing the speech situations. In the first section, the narrator *is praising* Nestor, who fought vehemently to rescue the wounded hero. In the second section, Nestor's purpose is to persuade Achilles to support the Achaean warriors. Nestor reproaches Achilles with being indifferent to the sufferings and death of the Achaeans, and then the hero contrasts his present weakness with his youthful strength so that he can emphasize his inability to ward off the enemy. It is clear that Nestor intends *to evoke the pity* of Achilles by stressing his weakness. The purposes and aims of the two speech situations are radically different. For this reason it is inappropriate to speak of textual inconsistency in this case because the relative incoherence of the two speech situations is determined by the *situational consistency* which we can best grasp by describing the inner purposes of the respective speakers. If a given momentary purpose changes—this can occur without a change in speakers, as we have seen in the case of Helen's lamentation—or one of the innumerable components of the given circumstance becomes different, then the attention will be

so heavily immersed in the new situation that potential references breaking the frames of the speech situations and detected by the literate mind will be irrelevant.

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Textual inconsistency can arise out of warm feelings between the characters. After the shipwrecked Odysseus and Nausicaa meet at the riverbank, Nausicaa invites the hero to the house of her family. But the beautiful girl doesn't let him accompany her in the city, fearing the slander of the people:

"It is their evil speech I shun, that hereafter some man may taunt me, for indeed there are insolent folk among the people,..." (Od.6.273-174)

This is an *excuse* for not personally showing the way to Odysseus. Odysseus has to follow Nausicaa at a distance. Odysseus finally arrives alone at the house of Alcinous with the help of a child. Then Arete, the wife of the king, recognizes that the hero is wearing clothes that she has formerly woven. She then inquires where he is coming from and asks about the clothes he wears. Odysseus tells her of his shipwreck and his encounter with Nausicaa, and that he obtained food and clothes from her. Then the king criticizes his daughter for her behavior:

"Stranger, truly my daughter did not judge rightly in this, that she did not bring you to our house with her maidens, when it was to her first that you made your prayer." (Od.7.299-301)

Odysseus, however, defends Nausicaa:

"Hero, do not rebuke for this your flawless daughter, I pray you. *She did indeed bid me follow with her maidens, but I refused* for fear and shame, thinking perchance your heart might darken with wrath when you saw it; for we are quick to anger, we tribes of men upon the earth."  
(Od.7.303-307)

Odysseus lies on behalf of Nausicaa. What he says is the direct opposite of what the girl stated. She had asked him not to accompany her because of her fear of public opinion. Odysseus takes over the responsibility for this. For this reason, the hero's speech act can be labeled as a *benign lie*. Interestingly, Odysseus' story is not doubted by the audience. This lie is placed so naturally within the speech situation



that an indication of its inaccuracy would only disturb the harmony of the situation, defined by the fact that Odysseus is doing everything to maintain the impeccability of his rescuer, Nausicaa. In this effort Odysseus is supported by the whole audience. This case makes clear that in the pursuit of situational consistency, a lack of textual consistency becomes irrelevant. More important are emerging purposes in the course of the given speech situation. In this case, we may say that the requirements of situational consistency trigger textual inconsistency. In the Homeric epics, the concepts that indicate truth or falsehood are not allocated according to the requirements of textual consistency. The speech situation, the trustworthiness and the interests and purposes of the actors are the factors that determine the usage of these concepts.

The performer of the Homeric stories has to entertain the audience. Odysseus' performance before Eumaeus gives an insight into the structure of an impressive story. When Odysseus arrives on his native island, he first disguises himself as a beggar and goes to his swineherd Eumaeus. He relates a fabricated story of his life and hides his real identity. According to this story, he is a rich pirate coming from Crete. In a foray into Egypt, he was captured and became a prisoner, then he was a supplicant for a while with the king of Egypt. After that, a tradesman persuaded him to come and live in Phoenicia. And so the story goes on:

“There I remained with him for a full year. But when at length the months and the days were being brought to fulfillment, as the year rolled round and the seasons came on, he set me on a seafaring ship bound for Libya, having given lying counsel (*pseudea bouleusas*) to the end that I should convey a cargo with him, but in truth so that, when there, he might sell me and get a vast price. I went with him on board the ship, suspecting his guile, yet perforce.” (Od. 14.292-298)

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Then a serious storm breaks out, the ship sinks, and everybody but Odysseus dies in the water. The hero rescues himself by grasping the mast. In the story a textual inconsistency reveals itself. How did Odysseus know that the tradesman wanted to sell him as a slave, that he had lied to him concerning his true intentions (*pseudea bouleusas*)? The *tradesman* hadn't had the opportunity to sell him and he *didn't treat him as if he were a slave*, in fact he had said that he needed him as an assistant. Later, when Odysseus was picked up by sailors, he was treated as a slave, he was stripped of his clothes, dressed in rags, and fettered, so it was clear from the circumstances that they wanted to sell him as a slave. We can understand this discrepancy by examining the speech situation in which this story is embedded.

As a beggar, Odysseus has to explain his situation to Eumaeus. If we consider the whole story, we can observe that the life of the hero up to the foray in Egypt gradually gets better. First he appears as a poor boy bereft of his bequest, then he marries a rich girl and gains a fortune through his numerous predatory raids, and he even comes back unscathed from the Trojan War. Then he enjoys his family and wealth for one month. From this time on, however, he gradually suffers greater and greater calamities. After his raid in Egypt, he will be a supplier, then he appears—as we have seen—almost as a slave, later he will be a real slave, then he flees from the sailors and will become a beggar. This story is designed with a wonderful symmetrical structure. With this structure, Odysseus wanted *to elicit the pity* of Eumaeus and, moreover, wanted to *entertain* him. The requirements of this symmetrical structure forced Odysseus to say that he was considered a slave by the Phoenician tradesman. And this explains the textual inconsistency we have examined. Our interpretation is corroborated by Eumaeus, who describes the skills of the hero to Penelope as follows:

“I would, queen, that the Achaeans would keep silence, for he speaks such words as would charm (*thelgioto*) your very soul. Three nights I had him by me, and three days I kept him in my hut, for to me first he came when he fled by stealth from a ship, but he had not yet ended the tale of his sufferings. Just as when a man gazes upon a minstrel who sings to mortals songs of longing (*epe' himeronta*) that the gods have taught him, and their desire to hear him has no end, whenever he sings, even so he charmed (*ethelge*) me when he sat in my hall.” (Od.17.513-521)

This performance by Odysseus reminds Eumaeus of the performance of a minstrel. The hero amazes his swineherd with his masterfully constructed performance and for this reason, Eumaeus does not cast doubt on the trustworthiness of Odysseus' story. The textual inconsistency above is an unnoticed part of the artistic presentation for it is an essential corollary of the symmetrical, progressive structure. The oral audience judges the performance by the artistic structure it is built upon alone and not by the requirements of textual coherence. Here also, the only criterion for the acceptance of the performance is its adjustment to the requirements of situational consistency. And situational consistency can best be described by the inherent purpose of the actual performance. The purpose of the minstrel's performance—in this case, Odysseus'—is to entertain the audience, and this purpose overshadows textual consistency and makes its pursuit unimportant and impossible. The performer has to adapt to the actual situation of the performance, to the expectations of the audience and, if he is successful, the audience will be willing to abandon themselves to the spell of the presentation. If

the situational harmony described above is attained, then there is no doubt about the truthfulness of the actual performance.

Textual inconsistency is also conspicuous when we examine the role of the beggar. After Eumaeus guided Odysseus to the suitors, one of them, Antinous, reproaches the swineherd for intentionally calling the beggar to their feast. Then Eumaeus retorts:

“Antinous, no fair words are these you speak, noble though you are. Who, pray, of himself ever seeks out and invites a stranger from abroad, unless it is one of those that are masters of some public craft (*demioergoi*), a prophet, or a healer of ills, or a builder, or perhaps a divine minstrel, who gives delight with his song? For these men are invited all over the boundless earth. Yeta *beggar would no man invite to be a burden to himself*. But you are always harsh above all the suitors to the slaves of Odysseus, and most of all to me . . .” (Od.17. 381-389)

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Eumaeus wants to defend himself against these malicious accusations. He suggests that only people who are useful (*demioergoi*) to the public are deliberately invited. We have seen that Eumaeus also compares Odysseus to a minstrel and the minstrel is included among the useful occupations here. Why doesn't the swineherd praise Odysseus for his artful performance at this juncture? Surely he would then elicit more mockery from the suitor. Instead, Eumaeus answers aphoristically, for this form of speech is very hard to discredit because of its impersonal character. Popular wisdom is not to be criticized. But this unchallenged popular wisdom shows itself to be an unnoticed *textual incongruency* when compared to Eumaeus' praise of Odysseus and with other speech acts.

Later, the suitors mock Telemachus and his guest Odysseus for his prophecy about their impending death and they suggest that Telemachus should sell the two beggars, Irus and Odysseus:

“. . . all the suitors, looking at one another, tried to provoke (*erethizon*) Telemachus by laughing at his guests. And thus would one of the proud youths speak:

“Telemachus, no man is more unlucky in his guests than you, seeing that you keep such a filthy vagabond as this man here, always wanting bread

and wine, and skilled neither in the works of peace nor those of war, but a mere burden on the earth. And then *this other fellow stood up to prophesy (manteuesthai)*. No, if you would listen to me it would be better far: let us throw these strangers on board a benched ship and send them to the Sicilians, something which would bring you a worthwhile gain.” (Od.20. 373-383)

According to the aphorism of Eumaeus, it is not a shame to invite a prophet, for his craft is useful. The content of this *mockery* is a latent textual contradiction to *the retort* of the swineherd, although the differences in the speech situations render the textual comparison of the two speeches irrelevant. But concerning the role of the beggars, there is another inconsistency in the Homeric text. The first beggar mentioned above is described as follows:

“Now there came up a public beggar who was accustomed to beg through the town of Ithaca, and was known for his greedy belly, eating and drinking without end. No strength had he nor might, but in bulk was big indeed to look upon. Arnaeus was his name, for this name his honored mother had given him at his birth; but Irus all the young men called him, because *he used to run on errands (epaggelleske kioon)* when anyone bade him.” (Od.18. 1-7)

Here Arnaeus, the beggar, is characterized as useless but he performs a useful activity: delivering messages. He is sometimes called on to provide services. And Penelope calls the messengers people who accomplish useful activities for the public (*demioergoi*) (Od.19.135). Eumaeus’ aphorism is not true for Arnaeus because, despite being a beggar, he provides useful services to the public. It is clear that the textual comparison of Eumaeus’ aphorism with other cases is arbitrary and unwarranted. The actual speech situation is not to be converted into a “textual situation” which can be dissected and compared with other texts belonging to other speech acts.

Contradictory aphorisms are not rare in the Homeric epics. Odysseus, who is led to his house by Eumaeus, notices his old dog lying in the dung, whereupon the swineherd explains:

“this is the dog of a man who has died in a far land. If he were but in form and action such as he was when Odysseus left him and went to Troy, you would soon be amazed at seeing his speed and his strength. No creature

that he started in the depths of the thick wood could escape him, and in tracking too he was keen of scent. But now he is in evil plight, and his master has perished far from his native land, and the heedless women give him no care. *Slaves, when their masters cease to direct them, no longer wish to do their work properly, for Zeus, whose voice is borne afar, takes away half his worth from a man, when the day of slavery comes upon him.*" (Od.17. 312-323)

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The highlighted aphorism is to be interpreted exclusively in this speech situation. Eumaeus, himself a slave, behaves contrarily to his aphorism, as Odysseus formerly observed. The swineherd doesn't sleep inside his house but near the boars:

"But the swineherd was not content with a bed there, that he should lie down away from the boars; instead he made ready to go outside. And Odysseus was glad that he took such care of his master's property while he was far off." (Od.14. 524-527)

This inconsistency is also hidden from the audience. In the first speech situation the swineherd emphasizes his *loyalty to and longing for his master, Odysseus*, by pointing out and reproaching the careless slaves. In the second speech situation, the narrator emphasizes Eumaeus' conscientiousness regarding Odysseus' property by describing his careful behavior. It is interesting that the two speech acts have, by and large, the same purpose although they are textually contradictory. The means of achieving this purpose are overshadowed by the purpose itself and thus the textual contradictions inherent in them are overshadowed as well.

Concerning Penelope's role in the poems, we find another contradictory aphorism. Athene comes to the house of Menelaus to urge Telemachus to return home by reminding him of an aphorism which emphasizes the unreliability of women who are without a spouse, hinting at Penelope:

"you know what sort of a spirit there is in a woman's breast; *she wishes to increase the house of the man who marries her, but of her former children and staunch spouse (kouridioio philoio) she takes no thought (ouketi memnetai), when once he is dead, and asks no longer concerning them.* No, go, and yourself put all your possessions in the charge of whoever of the handmaids seems to you the best, until the gods shall show you your

honored bride.” (Od.15.20-26)

This aphorism is used to back up Athene’s *persuasion, advice* that the fortune of Odysseus has to be entrusted to reliable persons. Later Penelope makes arrangements for a bow competition and encourages the suitors as follows:

“But come now, you suitors, since here is your prize plain before you. I will set as your contest the great bow of godlike Odysseus, and whoever shall most easily string the bow in his hands and shoot an arrow through all twelve axes, with him will I go, and *forsake the house of my wedded life (dooma kouridion)*, a house most beautiful and filled with wealth, which, I think, *I shall always remember (memnesestai oiomai)*, even in my dreams.” (Od.21.73-79)

Here Penelope, contrary to the opinion of Athene, states that she won’t forget about her old house, and this implies that she will remain faithful to the memory of Odysseus. This implication is very obvious for she attaches the same epithet to her house as Athene does, indirectly, to Odysseus: *kouridios* (faithful, wedded). The content of Athene’s *persuasion* and Penelope’s statement that *confirms her faithfulness* are in contradiction, but this contradiction only appears when we abstract the contents from the concrete speech situations, and this is impossible in a pure oral medium.

Much philosophical wisdom is to be found in the Homeric epics about human life and fate, among other things: death is unavoidable. Achilles formulates this thought as he *refuses* the delegation sent by Agamemnon:

“I will speak what seems to me to be best. Not me, I think, will Atreus’ son, Agamemnon, persuade, nor yet will the other Danaans, since it is clear there was to be no thanks for warring against the foe without respite. A like portion has he who stays back, and he who wars his best, and in honor are held both the coward and the brave; *death comes alike to the idle man and to him who works much*. Nor has it brought me any profit that I suffered woes at heart, constantly staking my life in fight.” (Il.9.314-322)

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Achilles is backing *his refusal* with an aphorism which denies the immortality of

human beings. When Hector *comforts* his anxious wife he is applying the same aphorism as Achilles although in a modified form:

“Dear wife, in no way, I beg you, grieve excessively at heart for me; no man beyond what is fated shall send me to Hades; but *this fate, say I, no man has ever escaped (moiran d’ ou tina phemi pephygmenon emmenai androon), whether he is base or noble, when once he has been born.*” (Il.6.486-489)

Hector obviously intends to soothe his wife by pointing out that his impending death is natural. But the idea of the inevitability of human death *is in contradiction* with Zeus’s opinion. Before Patroclus kills Sarpedon, the son of Zeus, Zeus ponders the possibility of rescuing his son from the death for *he pities him* very much:

“Ah, woe is me, since *it is fated that Sarpedon, dearest of men to me, be vanquished by Patroclus, son of Menoetius!* And my heart is divided in counsel as *I ponder in my thought whether I shall snatch him up while yet he lives and set him afar from the tearful war in the rich land of Lycia, or whether I shall let him be vanquished now at the hands of the son of Menoetius.*” (Il.16.433-438)

Zeus is confident that he is able to change this human fate. This has to be taken seriously because what Zeus says is always fulfilled, and his wife, Hera, does not doubt this possibility but only disagrees with it:

“Most dread son of Cronos, what a word have you said! Are you minded to free from dolorous death a mortal man, one doomed long since by fate? Do it; but you can be sure we other gods do not all assent to it.” (Il.16.440-443)

Zeus *in his sorrow* ponders the possibility of rescuing Hector from the fate of death as well:

“Well now! Truly a well-loved man do my eyes look on pursued around the wall; and my heart is grieved for Hector, who has burned for me many thighs of oxen on the crests of many-ridged Ida, and at other times on the topmost citadel; but now again is noble Achilles pursuing him with swift feet around the city of Priam. But come, you gods, consider and take

counsel whether we shall save him from death, or now at length shall vanquish him, good man though he is, at the hand of Achilles, son of Peleus. " (Il.22.168-176)

Athene replies to this proposal with the same words as Hera did before. The aphorisms concerning the inevitability of human death are in textual inconsistency with Zeus's ability to alter human fate. Of course, this inconsistency is also meaningless in the contexts of the given speech situations.

The aphorism concerning the psychic life of the gods at the end of the Iliad is also interesting. After Achilles bewails his father, he tries to comfort Priam who is in the same plight as his father at home:

"Ah, unhappy man, many indeed are the evils you have endured in your heart. How could you bring yourself to come alone to the ships of the Achaeans, to meet the eyes of me who have slain your sons many and noble? Of iron surely is your heart. But come, sit on a seat, and our woes let us allow to rest in our hearts, for all our sorrow; for no profit comes of chill lament. *For so have the gods spun the thread for wretched mortals, that they should live among sorrows; and they themselves are without care (akedees).*" (Il.24.518-526)

11

The highlighted section is intended to be a universal statement which is to alleviate Priam's pain by pointing out that human life is full of sorrow. Priam is not an exception, only the gods live without sorrow and pain. However this universal statement contradicts the sorrow and pain of the goddess, Thetis. When Zeus sends Iris for Thetis she answers to the call and alludes to the impending death of her son, Achilles, with the following words:

"Why does the great god summon me? I feel shame to mingle in the company of the immortals, *since I have measureless griefs at heart (echoo d' ache' akrita thumoo).* But I will go, and his word will not be vain, whatever he says." (Il.24.90-92)

When Thetis arrives at the seat of Zeus, the king of gods receives her with sympathy:



“You have come to Olympus, goddess Thetis, *for all your sorrow (kedomene per), though you have accursed grief (penthos) on your mind; I know of it myself . . .*” (Il.24.104-105)

The cause of Thetis' sorrow is similar to that of Priam's. The above aphorism is not valid in Thetis' case, for she although she is a goddess, she sorrows. Thetis' case is not alone in the epics. Among others, we hear about the wounded Ares that he “bellowed loud” (*ebrache*) in his pain (Il.5.859) and that he begged Zeus to alleviate his pain for he was “grieved at heart” (*thumon acheuoon*) (Il.5.869). Ares also felt pain (*pema*) (Il.15.110) when he heard of the death of his son, Ascalaphus and then he spoke before the gods “with wailing” (*olophuromenos*) (Il.15.114). So it is clear that the aphorism examined above is only valid in its original speech situation; it is not true in every concrete case or situation. In the epics it is not possible to use an aphorism, a general truth, as a universal premise.

Finally, it is interesting to examine the judgments about Hector's behavior. When Hecabe, Priam's wife, learns about her spouse's intention to go to Achilles and redeem their dead son, Hector, from him, *she desperately tries to dissuade* Priam from his dangerous enterprise:

“How are you minded to go to the ships of the Achaeans alone to meet the eyes of the man who has slain your sons, many and noble? Of iron surely is your heart. For if he gets you in his power and his eyes look on you, so savage and faithless is the man, he will neither pity you nor respect you. Let us now make our lament far from him we mourn, staying here in the hall. In this way for him did resistless Fate spin with her thread at his birth, when I myself bore him, that he should glut swift-footed dogs far from his parents, in the power of a violent man, in whose inmost heart I wish I could fix my teeth and feed on it; then might deeds of requital be done for my son, since *in no way while playing the coward was he slain by him, but while standing in defense of the men and deep-bosomed women of Troy, with no thought of shelter or flight.*” (24.203-216)

The sorrowful Hecabe is *praising* and, what is more, *glorifying* her deceased son, Hector. According to this description, Hector showed no sign of cowardice on his last day. However when we look at the narration of Hector's death scene, we find a description which contradicts that of Hecabe:

“But *trembling (tromos)* seized Hector when he caught sight of him, and

he dared no longer remain where he was, but left the gates behind him, *and fled in fear (phobetheis)*; and the son of Peleus rushed after him, trusting in his fleetness of foot." (Il.22.136-138)

12

The narrator intends here *to dramatize* the fatal meeting of the heroes, *to enhance and prolong the tension*. Athene is only able to stop Hector from fleeing with a trick: she pretends to be Deiphobus, Hector's brother, and assures him of her help in averting Achilles. Only after this encouragement is Hector willing to face overt combat with Achilles. The two speech acts are in textual inconsistency and serve only the purpose of the actual speech situation.

Priam's undertaking is successful. He redeems his dead son and conveys him on a carriage to the town. Cassandra is the first who sees them arriving in Troy and *she cries (kookusen) in her astonishment and joy*:

"Come, men and women of Troy, and look on Hector, if ever while he still lived you rejoiced at his coming back from battle; since *great joy (charma) was he to the city and to all the people*." (Il.24.704-706)

If we examine Hector's death scene again we will find that he didn't consider himself a "joy to the people."

"Ah, me, if I go inside the gates and the walls, Polydamas will be the first to put reproach on me, since he told me to lead the Trojans to the city during that fatal night when noble Achilles rose up. But I did not listen—surely it would have been far better! But now, since *I have brought the army to ruin through my blind folly, I feel shame before the Trojans, and the Trojans' wives with trailing robes, lest perhaps some other, baser than I, may say: 'Hector, trusting in his own might, brought ruin on the army.'*" (Il.22.99-107)

Here Hector appears as a man who caused damage to and, what is more, ruined the Trojans. Hector is afraid of the reproach and contempt of the Trojan people for he sees himself as the major cause of the defeat of his army. This fear was prompted by the actual situation and so Hector's speech cannot be detached from it. Textually, this speech act is in contradiction with Cassandra's joyful cry but, of course, the two speech acts are not to be compared textually because their

purposes and settings are different.

In this section, we examined speech acts whose textual inconsistencies were either apparent or—as was mostly the case—not apparent to the narrator and the audience. In most cases, the given inconsistency was imperceptible to the narrator and the audience because the compared speech acts had a distinctive function only in their respective speech situations and so were not valid outside this frame of reference. The contradictions that were possibly apparent—as in the story of Odysseus and Nausicaa—were perceivable because the speech situations containing the compared statements were, in a way, overlapping as a result of a common purpose that overrode the chain of consecutive speech situations. But, also in the latter case, the disclosure of the textual differences had no function and so never occurred. To sum up, the apparent or unapparent textual contradictions examined above did not fulfill a specific role in the epics and were therefore left undisclosed.

### **Contradictions that fulfill a role in the Homeric poems**

Some speech situations occur in the Homeric epic poems in which a contradiction performs some kind of a role. One frequent form this kind of contradiction takes occurs when an actor reproaches another actor for not fulfilling his/her promise, that is, the act or behavior of the person who is being reproached is not in harmony with his his/her own prior pledge or behavior. This occurs when Apollo refuses to fight with Poseidon and, for this reason, Artemis reproaches Apollo:

“Fleeing are you, god who works from afar, and to Poseidon have you utterly yielded the victory, and given him glory for nothing? Fool, why are you holding a bow as worthless as wind? After this *let me not hear you in the halls of our father boasting as you did earlier among the immortal gods that you would fight in open combat with Poseidon.*” (Il.21.472-477)

13

This contradiction is prompted by a *reproach*, *scolding*, and *urging*, and because of this it is not to be detached from the actual speech situation which determines its frame of reference.

The next type of contradiction which fulfills a specific role can be named as the *criticism of public opinion*. It is a widely accepted view that public opinion is not to be questioned in the Homeric poems. However, this view cannot be accepted without qualification. There are speech situations that manifest a contradiction between public opinion and an individual view. One example of contradiction occurs

when Tlepolemus, the grandson of Zeus, fights with Sarpedon, the son of Zeus:

And when they had come near as they advanced against each other, the one the son, the other the grandson of Zeus the cloud-gatherer, then Tlepolemus was first to speak, saying: "Sarpedon, counselor of the Lycians, why must you be skulking here, you who are a man unskilled in battle? *They lie when they say (pseudomenos de se phasi) you are sprung from Zeus who bears the aegis, since (epei) you are inferior far to those warriors who were sprung from Zeus in the days of men of old.*" (Il.5.630-637)

Because the narrator previously mentioned the ancestry of the fighters, the contradiction is very striking. Tlepolemus' purpose is obviously *to challenge, abuse, and disparage* his adversary. This is the sole purpose of the contradiction and so it cannot be interpreted outside of this speech situation.

A similar case appears when Patroclus returns from his visit to Nestor and informs Achilles—who is refraining from combat because of his resentment of Agamemnon—about the desolate condition of the Greek army, about the many wounded and dead warriors; he then *reproaches* Achilles:

"Never on me let such wrath lay hold, as the wrath you cherish, you whose valor causes harm! How will any other yet to be born have profit of you, if you do not ward off loathsome destruction from the Argives? *Pitiless one, your father, it appears was not the horseman Peleus, nor was Thetis your mother, but the gray sea bore you, and the sheer cliffs, since your mind is unbending.*" (Il.16.30-35)

Patroclus *reproaches* Achilles with harsh words. He calls his parents into question, thus creating a contradiction between the commonly accepted view and his own allegation. His statement concerning Achilles' progenitors seems to be absurd and should be seen in the light of the whole speech situation. With his reproach Patroclus wants *to shake up* Achilles, to *urge* him to change his attitude towards the combat. Patroclus intends to emphasize his personal consternation about the dismal battle situation with the created contradiction and so it is undetachable from the actual setting.

On one occasion, Odysseus criticizes public opinion as well. After Thersites scolded Agamemnon and accused him of being cowardly and greedy, Odysseus rises to the

defense of the chief by *threatening* Thersites with “harsh words” (*chalepoo enipape muthoo*) (Il.2.245):

“. . . you now continually revile Atreus’ son, Agamemnon, shepherd of men, because the Danaan warriors give him very many gifts; and you hold forth with mockery. But I will speak out to you, and this will surely come to pass: if I find you again playing the fool, as you are doing now, then may the head of Odysseus rest no more on his shoulders, and *may I no more be called the father of Telemachus, if I do not take you and strip off your clothes, your cloak and tunic, that cover your nakedness, and send you yourself wailing to the swift ships, driven out of the place of assembly with shameful blows.*” (Il.2.254-264)

14

Odysseus is threatening Thersites and he is emphasizing his words with a pledge. If he does not fulfill his promise of beating Thersites when and if he misbehaves, he will deny the public knowledge that he is the father of Telemachus. In this case it is particularly clear that the contradiction between public opinion and Odysseus’ pledge is virtual. The purpose of this absurd contradiction is to *frighten* Thersites by emphasizing the earnestness of Odysseus’ intention.

In the epics, criticism of public opinion serves multifarious purposes but is never underpinned by logical, deductive evidence. The criticism is always embedded in the actual speech situation and so it is not restricted to one special kind of statement. It can be, for example, a pledge, a wish, or a promise, as in the case of Alcinous, who promises Achilles that he will guide him home safely and quickly:

“as for your conveyance, that you may know it surely, *I appoint (tekmaïromai) a time for it*, namely, tomorrow. Then shall you lie down, overcome by sleep, and they shall row you over the calm sea until you come to your country and your house, or to whatever place you will, *even if it is much farther off than Euboea, which those of our people who saw it when they carried fair-haired Rhadamanthus to visit Tityus, the son of Earth, say (phas) is the farthest of lands.*” (Od.7.317-324)

Alcinous’ *promise* contains an *exaggeration*, according to which his sailors can carry him to the farthest places on earth. Some of the sailors consider Euboea the farthest spot on earth, but Alcinous assures Odysseus that his sailors are able to

carry Odysseus “much farther” than Euboea. This exaggeration or boasting embedded in a supposition implicitly criticizes the opinion of those who consider Euboea as the farthest spot on earth. However, this supposition is not to be construed as a logical constraint which refutes certain views about the position of Euboea, because it is undetachable from the actual speech situation where this expresses a promise, boast or exaggeration. The exclusive role of the supposition is to enhance the effect and to stress the earnestness of the promise.

We can find in the epics that different nations may have contradictory opinions about the same matter. In the empire of the dead, Teiresias gives advice to Odysseus regarding his future behavior so that Odysseus will be able to appease the wrath of Poseidon, which he incurred by blinding his son:

“But when you have slain the suitors in your halls, whether by guile or openly with the sharp sword, then *go abroad, taking a shapely oar, until you come to men that know nothing of the sea* and eat their food unmixed with salt, who in fact know nothing of ships with ruddy cheeks, or of shapely oars which are a vessel’s wings. And I will tell you a most certain sign, which will not escape you: *when another wayfarer, on meeting you, shall say that you have a winnowing fan on your stout shoulder*, then fix in the earth your shapely oar and make handsome offerings to the lord Poseidon.” (Od.11.119-130)

There is a contradiction between the opinion of people living far from the seashore and the view of the seafaring people regarding the oar in the *advice* of Teiresias. The purpose of this contradiction is, however, not to criticize one of the views and to construct a textually consistent narration but to instruct the protagonist about his proper behavior in the future, under circumstances when he has to “fix the oar in the earth.” Consequently, this contradiction is not to be isolated from the speech situation, from the advice and divination of Teiresias. It is interesting that Herodotus later will use the same kind of contradiction to emphasize the relativity of ideas among different nations concerning the same matter. It is a widely accepted view that this was due to his extensive travels; however, as we can see, the preconditions of this approach are given in Homeric thought. The differences between Homeric and the Herodotean thinking—as we shall see—have to be seen in terms of the different media in which they were formulated.

15

It often happens that a universal statement is opposed to a special contradicting case in the Homeric poems. In these cases, the universal statement can be

considered a crystallized, publicly accepted opinion. After Menelaus killed an Achaean hero, he boasts about his victim and then *he scolds* the Trojan people:

*"Of all things is there satiety, of sleep, and love, and sweet song, and the incomparable dance; of these things surely a man hopes to have his fill rather than of war; but the Trojans are insatiate of battle."* (Il.13.636-639)

In this scolding, a universal statement—"of all things is there satiety"—is in contradiction with the special case of the Trojans: "but the Trojans are insatiate of battle." The purpose of this contradiction is to emphasize the monstrous behavior of the Trojans. The special example of the Trojans is not meant to invalidate universal wisdom, but to stress their abnormal behavior, and so the contradiction is not to be seen independently of the speech situation. The contradiction is constructed to enhance the effect of the scolding of Menelaus.

Utterances that carry universal validity are not restricted to so called dispassionate statements that are either true or false. In the Homeric poems the same universality may be attributed to wishful thinking as to a universal "dispassionate" statement. After Thetis reminded her son Achilles of the proximity of his death, the hero answers her "in great agitation":

*"Immediately let me die, since I was not to protect my comrade at his slaying. Far, far from his own land has he fallen, and had need of me to be a warder off of ruin. Now therefore, since I will not return to my dear native land, nor proved in any way a light of deliverance to Patroclus or to my other comrades, those many who have been slain by noble Hector, but sit here by the ships, a profitless burden on the earth—I who in war am such as is no other of the bronze-clad Achaeans, though in council there are others better—may strife perish from among gods and men, and anger that sets a man on to rage, though he be very wise, and that, sweeter far than trickling honey, increases like smoke in the breasts of men; just as but now the lord of men, Agamemnon, moved me to rage."* (Il.18.98-111)

Achilles first laments the death of Patroclus and feels himself responsible for it, then he constructs a world that he wishes for in which there isn't any strife or discord "among gods and men." This ideal, desired world *contradicts* his particular case, because Agamemnon incited anger in him, a feeling that the ideal world is devoid of. Achilles wants to erase his own negative case, of course without success, with this positive desire. But this unsuccessful attempt is designed to elucidate Achilles'

great remorse for his former behavior, for his rage against Agamemnon that held him back from helping the Achaeans. This rage ultimately caused the death of his friend, Patroclus. The role of the contradiction between the universal request and the particular example is to alleviate Achilles' pain; he is trying to free himself for one moment from the consequences of his behavior in the realm of desire. The frame of reference of this contradiction is strictly determined by the purpose of Achilles' speech. This example shows clearly that in the Homeric poems the wish is at the same level as, for example, an "objective statement"; the frame of reference of the various speech acts is not detachable from the actual speech situation. In the Homeric poems the various speech acts—wishes, exclamations, oaths, descriptions, warnings, threats, promises, and so on—are mutually compatible, given that they participate with each other in the same speech situation. A particular speech act, according to its purpose, can relate very different kinds of assertions, as we have seen above. A writer who intends to eliminate textual inconsistencies has to break up the borderlines of the various speech situations that serve various purposes and relate the statements to each other without their original settings. This procedure, however, involves the selection of assertions which do not have the vestiges of the originary scene and so it leaves aside utterances that have an openly emotional, personal character—for example, wishes or curses. For the Homeric mentality this procedure is impossible, for it cannot detach itself from the speech acts that is actually performed.

16

The actual purpose of the actors determines the form, the content and the frame of reference of the contradiction. Achilles, after he kills Hector, remembers his dead friend, Patroclus, with the following words:

*"There lies by the ships a dead man unwept, unburied—Patroclus; him will I not forget so long as I am among the living, and my knees are quick. And even if in the house of Hades men forget their dead, yet will I even there remember my dear comrade."* (Il.22.386-390)

In the highlighted section Achilles opposes a universal statement to a particular case. This contradiction is to be interpreted in the frame of the speech situation. Achilles *pledges* that he will always remember his friend, even after his death. This statement obviously contradicts the universal popular wisdom, according to which mortals forget about the things that happened in their lifetime after they die. Achilles' special case is not to deny the validity of the universal wisdom—this would be the case in a text, where the validity of the argument is detached from the actual speech situation—but to confess the hero's deep sorrow over his deceased



friend. The contradiction between the universal and the special statements is designed to emphasize Achilles' affection towards Patroclus and not to deprive one of the statements of its validity by means of textual analysis.

Homeric contradictory statements can refer to different times without infringing upon their contradictory character. Before Athene asks Zeus to release Odysseus from the captivity imposed on him by Calypso, she characterizes Odysseus and the behavior of the people in Ithaca toward Zeus with the following words:

“Father Zeus, and you other blessed gods that are forever, *never henceforward let a sceptered king with a ready heart be kind and gentle*, no, let him heed righteousness in his mind; but let him ever be harsh, and deal unjustly, seeing that no one remembers divine Odysseus of the people whose lord he was, *although gentle was he as a father.*”  
(Od.5.7-12)

Athene creates a contradiction between her *wish*—that there would never be gentle kings in the future—and the “real” case of Odysseus—he was a gentle king. The goddess created the contradiction to emphasize her indignation about the people in Ithaca who do not consider and value the gentleness of their absent king. Normally the two assertions, the universal and the specific, do not influence each other's validity, for one of them is pertaining to the past and the other to the present, and what is more, one of them is not a “factual” statement, but a mere desire. In the above speech situation, however, they are related in a manner that stresses their contradictory character. The contradiction between the two assertions is not meant to deny the validity of an assertion but to fulfill a personal purpose of the speaker: *to reproach* the people in Ithaca, to curse them for their wrong conduct. They should experience the reign of a rough king so that they may appreciate the gentleness of Odysseus.[\(11\)](#) This is the second case in which we find that, according to the norms of formal logical thinking, there are two independent assertions that are in *some way* related to each other as if they were contradictory. Therefore, “oral contradiction” can exist between a reference to the past and a wish pertaining to the future. Egbert Bakker tries to grasp this problem in terms of oral performance:

Outside memory, in fact, the past does not even exist in oral societies, and without the “mind act” of remembering, the speech act of poetry would be impossible. With regard to this experience of the past as something-to-be-performed, our usual notion of past tense, geared as it is to reference, the correspondence between language and facts in the past,

is particularly inappropriate. If the past is something that is remembered, it does not exist in recorded form but owes its existence to the verbalizing, introverted consciousness of the performer that draws it into the present. The past in fact becomes “present,” both in a temporal and in a spatial sense it is turned from “then” into “now” and “here” within the context of a special social event and through the actions of a special, authoritative speaker. (15) What is located in time is not so much the event referred to as *the act of verbalization here and now*, whereas the epic event itself is not referred to but instantiated, commemorated. (27) The epic singer is not concerned with *excluding* an event from the present, but with *including* the present statement in the accumulated mass of tradition. The singer does not deal with what is distant for its own sake, referring “objectively” to it, but insofar it can be made “near.” Epic discourse, then, as the language of myth and ritual, is to a certain degree *tenseless* . . . (28)

17

Our interpretation is corroborated by Bakker’s insights: an assertion that pertains to the past and a wish that points to the future are to be interpreted in the present, in the actual speech situation, in the actual performance, because the *raison d’être* of the assertions in question is ultimately the *reproach*, the *curse* of Athene. *In the course of the performance, tenses and different modes of assertion (curses, wishes, threats, promises) are melted into the intention of the actual speech act.*

The above paradox sheds light on the fact that oral structures are incompatible with “written” logical structures that are designed for argumentation. Consequently, the concept of the “oral contradiction” is fundamentally different from the concept of “logical contradiction,” which appears only later in the age of writing in support of the construction of textually consistent stories and argumentations. The oral narrator is not, however, conscious of the requirements of the textual consistency; he is conscious only of the requirements of the actual speech situation.

In the Homeric epics, the frame of reference of universal statements is strictly confined by the actual purpose of the speaker and in some cases such statements paradoxically support the validity of a contradicting and related particular example. Odysseus describes his meeting with Nausicaa to Alcinous as follows:

“Then I saw the handmaids of your daughter upon the shore at play, and amid them was she, looking like a goddess. To her I made my prayer; and *she in no way fell short of excellent understanding*, such as you would not

expect a young person meeting you to act upon; *for younger people are always (aiei) thoughtless.*" (Od.7.290-29)

Odysseus is praising the daughter of Alcinous. His praise is accentuated by a contradiction: he says that the girl has an "excellent understanding" but, shortly afterwards, he mentions that generally "younger people are always (*aiei*) thoughtless." This is a contradiction from a modern point of view as well. However, this fact can be neglected in our case—as in the cases of Homeric contradictions generally—because it is only a coincidence. This is in no way a more perfect instance of an oral contradiction than those previously mentioned where the contradiction does *not* fulfill the requirement of a formally logical contradiction. In an oral performance, contradictions are defined only by the actual speech act, by the aims and purposes of the actors. In this speech, Odysseus intends to exaggerate his praise by contrasting the particular statement with the universal assertion. This contradiction is not designed to eliminate—in accordance with the requirements of the textual consistency—one of the conflicting statements but to stress a particular statement in the background of a contradictory universal statement. "Oral contradictions" exist only virtually from the point of view of formal logic, the laws of which are incompatible with the rules of oral thinking.

We can find a similar contradiction designed by Circe. After Odysseus and his companions return from Hades, the goddess cannot hide her shock:

"Stubborn men, who have gone down alive to the house of Hades to meet death twice, while other (*hote t' alloi*) men die but once." (Od.12.21-22)

Here Circe expresses her *surprise and consternation*. Her astonishment is emphasized by a contradiction: while "all other men die only once," Odysseus and his companions can die twice. This contradiction doesn't fulfill the requirements of formal logical thinking, because the general statement doesn't include the particular case of the visitors of Hades. However, the function of this "contradiction" is similar to that of the ones examined earlier: to exaggerate, to support a feeling, a purpose of the speaker by contrasting a general and a particular assertion. The oral audience couldn't differentiate a formal logical contradiction from other types of oppositions, for the practice of formal logical thinking did not exist.

18

Here it is instructive to perform a thought experiment. If a historian such as Herodotus examined this "contradiction" and removed it from the speech situation

it is embedded in, he would probably compare the general and the particular statement and arrive at the conclusion that the general statement should be widened—with the help of a minor linguistic change—to a truly universal assertion, so that all men would be included in that statement, Odysseus and his companions as well. Then the history writer could resort to the now truly universal assertion and put forward that Odysseus and his companions could not die twice because this would be a contradiction to the accepted general statement, the truth of which is acknowledged by common sense, and assertions that contradict universal statements supported by common sense are too implausible to be true. This practice was by and large employed by Herodotus. This thought experiment also sheds light on the incompatibility of “oral” and “written” contradictions.

We examined above under what circumstances certain sayings of universal wisdom occur as part of an oral contradiction. Lastly, we shall look at a common type of oral contradiction that is supposed to be “objective.”

As Nestor hears the approaching horses of Odysseus and Diomedes, who have been sent to the enemy to spy out their plans about the future, he tells his companions:

*“My friends, leaders and rulers of the Argives, will I be mistaken, or be speaking truly (pseusomai e etumon ereoo)? My heart tells me to speak. The sound of swift-footed horses strikes my ears. I hope that so speedily Odysseus and the mighty Diomedes have driven (ai gar elasaiato) here singlehoofed horses out from among the Trojans; but dreadfully do I fear in my heart that those best of the Argives have suffered some harm through the battle din of the Trojans.” (Il.10.533-539)*

At first glance it seems that Nestor is expressing the abstract rule of contradiction: he will say either the truth or the non-truth—which are mutually exclusive—regarding the same thing, and there are no other options besides these two alternatives. But if we examine the purpose of this “contradiction,” we arrive at a different result. Nestor uses the above contradiction to express his doubt so that he may defend his authority in case his suggestion will appear to be wrong. The ambience of hesitation and misgiving is enhanced by the fact that the doubt, that is, the contradiction, is pertaining to a wish, a desire. Consequently, the meaning of the contradiction cannot be grasped without consideration of the circumstances it is embedded in: the authoritative personality of Nestor, and the anxiety-filled situation of concern. Without these conditions, the contradiction cannot be interpreted.

### Reasoning based on “consistency of situation”

Up to now we have investigated the role of contradictions in the Homeric epics. In this section we will examine the forms of reasoning that under “normal” circumstances are based on textual consistency and on the exclusion of contradictions. An oral society is not deprived of the forms of logical thinking, that is, deductions, inductions, syllogisms; however, they follow different rules than in a culture where the manipulation of written materials is routine.

Several times in the epics an actor underpins, validates a general statement by a particular example or examples. I call this procedure *induction*.

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Patroclus, after Achilles allowed him to help the Achaean warriors, injures, among others, one of the sons of Priam, the charioteer of Hector, who falls out of the chariot lifeless. Then, Patroclus *mocks* him:

“Well now! *Nimble is the man for sure; how easily he dives!* I think if he were in the teeming deep, this man would satisfy many by seeking for oysters, leaping from his ship even if the sea were stormy, since now on the plain he dives easily from his chariot. *Surely among the Trojans too there are men who dive.*” (Il.16.745-750)

Patroclus speaks *disdainfully* to the dead Cebriones. The formal frame of his scorning speech is an induction. He reasons from the particular case that Cebriones fell easily out of the chariot that “there are divers among the Trojans as well.” It can be easily realized that the aim of this “induction” is *to mock*, not only the dead Cebriones, but the Trojan people as a whole. The validity and so the frame of reference of the *induction* cannot be detached from this purpose of the speech act.

After Patroclus is killed by Hector, his spirit appears to Achilles and asks him to burn and bury his dead body. Achilles springs up *in astonishment* (*taphoon*; Il.23.101) and *speaks sadly* (*epos d’ olophudnon eeipen*; Il.23.102):

“Well now! *Even in the house of Hades there is something-spirit and phantom-though there is no mind at all; for (gar) the whole night long has the spirit of unlucky Patroclus stood over me, weeping and wailing, and charged me concerning each thing, and was marvelously like his very self.*” (Il. 23.103-107)

Achilles induces (*gar*) a general statement from the apparition of the dead Patroclus: there are spirits and phantoms in Hades. This induction is valid however only in the actual setting. Achilles *wonders* at the strange incident, he articulates his *astonishment*. The particular case and the induced universal statement are embedded in this amazement, this situation is their frame of reference.

When Priam is on his way to Achilles to redeem his son, he meets Hermes, who is disguising himself as a Myrmidon warrior. Priam asks him about his dead son and the god answers that the body of Hector is unscathed, the injuries have disappeared and the worms are not damaging the body despite the long time since Hector's death. Then Priam induces the following wisdom:

"My child, a good thing truly (*e r'*) is to give to the immortals such gifts as are due them; for (*epei*) never did my son-if ever in fact he was-forget in our halls the gods who hold Olympus; so they have remembered this for him, even he is in the doom of death." (24.425-428)

Hector revered the gods during his lifetime and, according to Priam, this prompted the benevolence of the gods after his death. Hector's behavior supported the general wisdom that "a good thing is to give to the immortals such gifts as are due them." The purpose, the aim of the speech act, however, is not to substantiate a universal truth with a particular case, but, for one thing, to express Priam's *pleasure* about the unscathed body of his son, and, for another, to *praise* the generosity of the gods and to *articulate his thanks* for this generosity. This is the sole purpose of the induction embedded in the speech situation.

There are occasions where not only one but more particular cases support a universal statement. When in the *Odyssey* Hermes acquaints Calypso with the order of Zeus, according to which she has to release Odysseus, Calypso answers *disappointedly*:

"Cruel (*schetlioi*) are you, you gods, and quick to envy above all others, seeing that you begrudge goddesses that they should mate with men openly, if any takes a mortal as her own bedfellow. Thus, when (*hoos men ot'*) rosy-fingered Dawn took to herself Orion, you gods that live at ease begrudged her, till in Ortygia chaste Artemis of the golden throne assailed him with her gentle shafts and slew him. Thus too (*hoos d' opot'*), when fair-dressed Demeter, yielding to her passion, lay in love with Iasion in the thrice-plowed fallow land, Zeus was not long without knowledge of it, but smote him with his bright thunderbolt and slew him. And in this way again

*do you now begrudge me (hoos d' au nun moi agasthe), you gods, that a mortal man should be my companion. Him I saved when he was bestriding the keel and all alone, for Zeus had struck his swift ship with his bright thunderbolt and had shattered it in the midst of the wine-dark sea. There all the rest of his noble comrades perished, but as for him, the wind and the waves, as they bore him, brought him here. Him I welcomed kindly and gave him food, and said that I would make him immortal and ageless all his days.” (Od.5.118-136)*

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Calypso overtly *reproaches* the gods for their envy. Her reproach is couched in a complex induction. According to her view, the Olympian gods are made jealous by the goddesses who are looking for a male human partner. She supports this general statement with three concrete cases. The evidence Calypso resorts to might seem “objective” and compelling, but the goddess might have easily found cases in the epic tradition that would refute the general truth she supports. For instance, Thetis’ case in the Iliad is an interesting denial of the promoted wisdom. She was not envied by the gods for marrying a mortal man, Peleus, and, what is more, her son Achilles alleged that she was thrown against her will (*embalon*; II.18.85) on the bed of her husband by the gods, which caused his mother, Thetis, deep, long lasting sorrow, for she will have to bewail her mortal son. Achilles wishes his mother a better fate:

“I wish you had remained where you were among the immortal maidens of the sea, and that Peleus had taken to his home a mortal bride. But now—it was so that you too might have measureless grief at heart for your dead son, whom you will never again welcome back to his home”  
(18.86-90)

It is obvious that Calypso is very biased in her selection of the supporting cases. She intends to corroborate her reproach and not to establish a general truth valid outside the actual speech situation. The validity of the general statement is confined by the reproach and indignation of Calypso. The general statements or aphorisms are only focused on the actual speech situation they are embedded in and would lose their meaning and role in other locations and settings.

Demodocus chants the love story of Aphrodite and Ares in the house of Antinous, according to which they had been betrayed by Helios to Hephaestus, the husband of Aphrodite, who forged a chain and fastened the two lovers together in the bed

and called the gods to behold the “*laughable matter*” (*erga gelasta*) (Od.8.307). The assembled gods burst into “*unquenchable laughter*” and one of them summarized what happened:

*“Ill deeds do not win out (ouk aretai kaka erga). The slow catches the swift; just as now (hoos kai nun) Hephaestus, slow as he is, has caught Ares even though he is swiftest of the gods who hold Olympus. Lame, he has caught him by craft. Ares must pay for his adultery.”* (Od.329-332)

The god who spoke maintained the view that “ill deeds do not win out.” This general statement is supported by and induced from the particular case of Hermes and Aphrodite. The speech act expresses the *mockery* and the *joy* of seeing the two gods in an uncomfortable situation. The validity of the induction is not detachable from the actual aim of the speech act. This is obvious from the *joke* of Apollo, who enquired of Hermes if he wanted to be in the place of Ares. Hermes, who is eager to sleep with Aphrodite, responds with a wish:

*“Would that this might happen, lord Apollo, far-shooter—that thrice as many ineluctable bonds might clasp me about and you gods, yes, and all the goddesses too might be looking on, but that I might sleep by the side of golden Aphrodite.”* (Od.8.339-342)

It is apparent that Hermes’ *desire* contradicts the idea behind the above induction. Hermes’ case is not compatible with that of Ares. For Hermes the supposed “ill deed,” despite the subsequent inconvenience, is the best thing he can think of. Consequently, the aphorism, “ill deeds do not win out” does not fit the supposed case of Hermes. The induction works only in its original speech situation; its role in which does not fit Hermes’ case

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When Eumaeus, the swineherd, is guiding Odysseus, who disguised himself as a beggar, to the town, they meet Melantheus, another herdsman, who *scorns* and *insults* (*neikessen*) them (Od.17.215) with “terrible and unseemly” (*ekpaglon kai aeikes*)(Od.17.216) words:

*“Here now in very truth comes the vile leading the vile. As ever, (hoos aiei) the god is bringing like and like together. Whither, pray, are you leading this filthy glutton, you miserable swineherd, this nuisance of a*



beggar to spoil our feasts?" (Od.17.217-220)

Melantheus induces from the particular case of Odysseus and Eumaeus the general wisdom that "the god always brings like and like together." The frame of reference of the induction is determined by the intention of Melantheus to *scorn, revile, and disdain* the swineherd and the "beggar." Melantheus' scornful description of them makes his purpose unambiguous.

As Odysseus is slaughtering the suitors, Leiodes the seer tries to save his life by a *supplication (lissomenos)* (Od.22.311):

"By your knees I beseech you, Odysseus; respect me and have pity. For I declare to you that never yet have I wronged one of the women in your halls by wanton word or deed; no, I tried to check the other suitors, when any would do such things. But they would not listen to me to withhold their hands from evil, and so through their wanton folly they have met a cruel doom. *Yet I, their soothsayer, that have done no wrong, shall be laid low (keisomai) along with them; so true is it (hoos) that there is no gratitude afterwards for good deeds done.*" (Od.22.312-319)

Leiodes is *begging* for his life. Speaking of his own possible death, he describes a case which supports an absurd aphorism: "there is no gratitude afterwards for good deeds done." The aim of the induction is to influence Odysseus with its bizarre consequence. Leiodes wants Odysseus to refute the general statement by not presenting a particular example that supports it. This case illuminates yet more the point that the validity of Homeric "reasoning" is always dependent on the actual speech situation. The induction in question is a struggle against its validation by Odysseus. In the end Odysseus does not yield to the supplication, he does not believe in the guiltless of Leiodes and kills him. From Odysseus' point of view, this does not mean that the induction is validated but—on the contrary—the hero called the honesty of Leiodes' allegations into question and thus the truthfulness of the whole speech act, the whole induction. After Leiodes' death the *raison d'être* of the speech act ceased to exist, because the purpose of it was to prevent his death.

Somewhat later, Telemachus himself is trying to save the life of Medon, the herald, and tells Odysseus not to kill him, for he has behaved loyally. After that, Medon comes out of his refuge and beseeches Telemachus to protect him against Odysseus' rage. Odysseus hears Medon's speech and then he *smiles* and *encourages* him:

“Be of good cheer, for he has delivered you and saved you, that you may know in your heart and tell also to another, how *far better is the doing of good deeds than of evil.*” (Od.22.372-374)

In his speech Odysseus acknowledges Medon’s innocence and thus validates his entreaty. From the particular case of Medon, that he is rewarded for his loyalty with his life, Odysseus induces the aphorism that “far better is the doing of good deeds than of evil.” Odysseus *enjoins* Medon to accept the aphorism and to promulgate it. The purpose of this induction is to *give* Medon *confidence* that he won’t be slaughtered as were the suitors. Odysseus smiles in order to strengthen this confidence in Medon. The frame of reference of the induction is thus confined by the purpose it fulfills. It is interesting to note that the last two aphorisms discussed are in open contradiction, but because they belong to two different speech situations, their contradictory character is hidden from the oral observers since their respective frame of references do not overlap.

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In our following investigation we shed light on the cases in the epic poems that could be characterized as oral deductions, which occur when a particular example is derived from a general statement or aphorism.

When Eurycleia realizes how many people Odysseus slaughtered, she wants to cry out in her infinite happiness, but Odysseus *admonishes* her for her inappropriate behavior:

“In your own heart rejoice, old woman, but refrain yourself and do not cry aloud: an unholy thing is to boast over slain men.” (Od.22.411-412)

Odysseus enjoins his servant to be silent, because the popular wisdom “an unholy thing is to boast over slain men” forbids delight at the sight of the dead suitors. Odysseus derives the proper conduct in a particular case from a general wisdom. The deduction could easily be cast in the form of a syllogism, where the conclusion would be Odysseus’ *injunction*, for it seems to be obvious to the oral audience that “unholy things” are to be avoided. Without the authority of Odysseus and the compelling force of the dreadful situation, however, the “syllogism” would not work. For this reason, the deduction is not to be interpreted without the speech situation.

We can find even more explicit *syllogisms* in the epic poems. As Odysseus and Diomedes are on the way to spy on the Trojans in the darkness, Athene sends them

a bird “on their right” which implicates a good omen. The spies hear the cry of the bird and Odysseus happily realizes the meaning of the auspicious omen and prays to Athene:

*“Hear me, child of Zeus, who bears the aegis, you who always stand by my side in all manner of toils, nor am I unseen by you wherever I move; now again show your love, Athene, as never you did before, and grant that with noble renown we come back to the ships, having performed a great deed that will be a sorrow to the Trojans.” (Il.10.278-282)*

The *supplication* of Odysseus can be seen as a *syllogism*. It follows from the general statement that Athene always stands by the side of Odysseus in “all manner of toils” that now, as the hero is in a very hard “toil”—this “proposition” can be added by reference to the actual situation: Athene has to help Odysseus. The conclusion is a *request*. From the fact that the conclusion is not a statement, derived exclusively from the propositions, but a request, it is clear that the “propositions” are not enough to provide support for a conclusion. The general statement that Athene helps Odysseus in every hard situation is only there to *remind* Athene of the past and *urge* her to help the hero, so it does not accomplish the role of a logical proposition. This is the reason why Odysseus has to pray and make supplications to the goddess and request her help. The help of the goddess does not follow from the compelling propositions, but from the personal relationship of Odysseus and Athene and, for this reason, Odysseus is appealing to the goddess personally. The validity of the deduction is undetachable from the actual speech situation; it is valid only in the frame of reference of Odysseus’ personal ambition or immediate purpose.

A similar *prayer* is employed by Odysseus when his raft is destroyed by a storm and he is swimming to a river flowing out of an unknown island. Odysseus is *praying* (*euxato*) (Od.5.444) to the river-god:

*“Hear me, king, whoever you are. As to one greatly longed for do I come to you seeking to escape out of the sea from the threats of Poseidon. Reverend even in the eyes of the immortal gods is that man who comes as a wanderer, as I have come to your stream and to your knees, after many toils. Pity me, king; I declare myself your suppliant.” (Od.5.445-450)*

First Odysseus declares the general truth that “reverend even in the eyes of the

immortal gods is that man who comes as a wanderer," then he refers to his particular case, which fits the general statement: "I am coming as a wanderer." Odysseus does not draw the normal conclusion that he is now accordingly "reverend in the eyes of the immortal gods" and so in the eyes of the actual river-god, but he *requests* that the god pity him in what is equivalent to a request for reverence and for rescue. It is obvious that the convincing force of the propositions is not sufficient for a formal conclusion that would guarantee Odysseus' rescue. The propositions are only to remind the god of his natural duty, to strengthen the effect of the request. The propositions work interpersonally and not textually. Accordingly, the "conclusion" does not follow from the propositions, but it is a request directed to the river-god who has formerly been "persuaded" by these propositions to fulfill this request. For this reason, the elements of the syllogisms are not to be construed independently of the actual speech situation, of the *prayer*.

Odysseus employs oral deductions in multifarious situations, using widely differing speech acts. After the Phaeacian sailors bring the sleeping Odysseus to his native land, he awakens and does not recognize Ithaca. He thinks that the sailors deceived him and brought him to another place. In his first anger he *curse*s the Phaeacians:

"May Zeus, the suppliant's god, requite (*tisaito*) them, he who watches over all men, and punishes him (*allous anthropous*) who transgresses."  
(Od.13.213-214)

According to the general statement, "Zeus punishes wrongdoers." Odysseus, however, does not conclude from this that the Phaeacians, who are wrongdoers, shall be punished by Zeus, but he curses them, he wishes that they should be punished by the father of the gods. The "conclusion" does not follow from the propositions, but from the actual speech situation, the rage and distress of Odysseus, for it is not an emotionless statement, detached from the circumstances. The general wisdom here is also a concealed plea that should motivate Zeus. The propositions—the general statement and the allegation that the Phaeacians are criminals—have no logical relationship to the curse but, notwithstanding, they are organically part of the curse, of the whole speech act. Consequently, this "oral syllogism"—like all other syllogisms already discussed—is only to be construed in the frame of reference of the underlying speech situation.

Generally, we may conclude that all the assertions, contradictions, and inferences in the Homeric epics are to be construed in their actual speech situations. A conscious endeavor to build a textually consistent system uninfluenced by the *underlying circumstances* cannot be found in the epics. One cannot manipulate statements and inferences in accordance with formal logical rules until one has acquired the means

to transcend perhaps the most important limitation of oral language, its dependency on the speech situation.

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### Notes

1. For a detailed overview see: Goody, J. *The interface between the oral and the written*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 1987. Olson, D. R. *The World on Paper*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 1994. [\(back\)](#)
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11. "Storytelling in the Future: Truth, Time, and Tense in Homeric Epic." In: *Written Voices, Spoken Signs*, Ed. Egbert Bakker, Ahuria Kahane, Harvard University Press: Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1997.[\(back\)](#)