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# BETWEEN ECSTASY AND TRUTH

INTERPRETATIONS OF GREEK POETICS  
FROM HOMER TO LONGINUS



STEPHEN HALLIWELL

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STEPHEN HALLIWELL

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## Preface

What is poetry for? What difference can it make to the lives of those who hear or read it? Are its effects confined principally to the duration of the experience itself, forming special moments of resistance to the flow of quotidian life, moments in which hearers or readers are moved to intense states of absorption and enthrallment? Was Auden, whose views on poetry were demonstrably coloured in part by his familiarity with ancient Greek ideas, right to say (but in a *poem*) that 'poetry makes nothing happen' but is only 'A way of happening' (though one which 'survives' for perpetual re-enactment)?<sup>1</sup> Or can poetry's impact go further than that? Can it leave a lasting mark on people's beliefs, attitudes, and emotional dispositions, helping to change their lives rather than simply afford them a temporary means of psychological escape? And if poetry can command a more far-reaching influence of this kind, is that necessarily and always a positive thing (a sort of beneficial enlightenment) or might it sometimes be harmful, perhaps inducing false, sentimental, or unrealistic convictions which make the demands of life as a whole harder not easier to come to terms with? Can poetry tell or show us the truth? Then again, should we *want* it to—or was Nietzsche right that 'the reason we have art is so as not to be destroyed by truth' ('wir haben die Kunst, damit wir nicht an der Wahrheit zu Grunde gehn')?<sup>2</sup>

Such questions (extendable to literature and art in general) were first posed, in the Western tradition, by ancient Greeks. They are still, even now, of cultural interest and importance, and they continue to elicit divided responses from critics, theorists, and individual readers. By studying how Greeks formulated and attempted to answer these questions we can hope to reach a better, richer understanding of the problems of poetics they broach. This book is not a monograph which systematically investigates a tightly circumscribed domain. It is a thematically linked set of essays which offer fresh, incisive readings of a series of major texts in the evolution of Greek poetics. My main

<sup>1</sup> 'In Memory of W. B. Yeats', part II: Auden (1991: 248).

<sup>2</sup> Nietzsche (1988: xiii 500), notebook entry of 1888; the first four words in Nietzsche's German are given emphasis.

aim is to explore how the texts in question conceive of poetic value, the value(s) of poetry as located and realized in the experience of its audiences. (Most Greeks, if they had heard of it, would not have believed in ‘the affective fallacy’, any more than we should.) My project does not amount—and not only because of its selectiveness—to a history of Greek poetics or ‘literary criticism’; in certain respects, it may emphasize why constructing such a history is so difficult. What emerges from my readings is not a narrative of clear-cut positions following one another in progressive sequence, but more like a series of circling though gradually shifting debates about fundamental issues—issues, furthermore, which can be traced both inside and outside poetry: hence the inclusion of some poetic texts themselves in the enquiry.

At the heart of my enterprise is a recurrent dialectic of Greek ideas between, on the one hand, a concern with poetry as a powerfully transformative agency which carries hearers or readers outside themselves (the root meaning of ‘ecstasy’) and ‘draws out their souls’ (the root meaning of another pertinent Greek term, *psuchagôgia*), and, on the other hand, a tendency to judge poetry as a medium of truths ‘to live by’, a means of expressing thoughts and feelings which can help shape its audiences’ views of the world. There are many variations in ancient treatments of this contrast of values, a contrast whose implications make a radical difference, moreover, to suppositions about what it means (or whether it is even possible) to interpret and evaluate poetry. The resulting dialectic runs through the core of Greek poetics. It also forms a vital part of the longer-term trajectory of theories of poetry and literature.

In pursuing my own priorities, I have made a point of citing a wide range of modern scholarship in several languages, including much material which has appeared in just the last few years. Even when I disagree with those whose work I cite, I think it appropriate to acknowledge the existence of a strong culture of international scholarship in this area and to give readers information with which to consider alternatives to my own sometimes heterodox arguments. Those arguments are presented at times with deliberately vigorous advocacy. Productive academic debate calls for reasoning that is passionate as well as carefully weighed.

Earlier drafts of several chapters were presented as invited papers at various institutions. This fact is no incidental detail: without the charge of energy generated by receiving and fulfilling these invitations

the book might never have been written. The Gerald Else Lecture in the Humanities at the University of Michigan (October 2007) prompted the first version of parts of Chapter 2; further work on this chapter was undertaken for an international conference, 'Pathos: the Poetics of the Emotions', in Rio de Janeiro (October 2008), and for papers at McMaster University (November 2009, during my tenure as H. L. Hooker Distinguished Visiting Professor) and to the Classical Association of Scotland (Glasgow, June 2010). Chapter 3 was first written for the European College of Liberal Arts in Berlin (December 2005); later versions were presented at the Centre for the Ancient Mediterranean, Columbia University (April 2007), to the Classics Department of Toronto University (November 2009), and at the conference 'Comic Interactions' at University College London (July 2009). An early sketch of some of the ideas in Chapter 4 was given at the Princeton Classical Philosophy Colloquium (December 2002) in reply to a paper by John Ferrari; an Italian version later became the 7th Carchia Memorial Lecture in Rome (March 2007), the second half of the chapter formed the S. V. Keeling Memorial Lecture at University College London (March 2009), and other drafts were presented as research seminars at Columbia and Durham universities (both April 2007) and as a lecture to the triennial conference of the Gesellschaft für antike Philosophie in Würzburg (September 2010). Part of Chapter 5 was written as a contribution to a conference on the *Poetics* at the Université catholique de Louvain (November 2002). An Italian version of Chapter 7 was read at a conference on the sublime at the Istituto Svizzero in Rome (September 2006). For their interest in my work and for their generous hospitality I am sincerely indebted to my hosts on all those occasions: Paolo D'Angelo, Pierre Destrée, Michael Erler, Helene Foley, William Harris, Elisabetta Matelli, Daniel McLean, Thomas Norgaard, Fernando Santoro, Ruth Scodel, Bob Sharples (to whose memory I pay tribute), Victoria Wohl, and Nancy Worman.

Among those who have commented on drafts, or otherwise reacted to my ideas, I would like to single out Myles Burnyeat (for a series of exchanges about Plato), Richard Rutherford (for using his subtle understanding of Homeric poetry to help me improve Chapter 2), Ralph Rosen (for several probing discussions of *Frogs*), Glenn Most and Robert Doran (for separately helping me to sharpen my thoughts on Longinus), and Malcolm Heath (for the stimulus of his disagreement about so many things). I am grateful, finally, to the Arts and



Humanities Research Council for a Research Leave Award in 2008 which enabled me to break the back of the project.

I dedicate this book with sadness to the memory of Sir Kenneth Dover, who died in March 2010 when I was at an advanced stage of revising my typescript. In addition to having benefited, like so many other Hellenists, from his exemplary scholarship, I am fortunate to have been able to count him as the most important of my teachers and, in later years, a dear friend. I was greatly influenced by his commitment to both intellectual and imaginative openness in interpreting the phenomena of Greek culture: I only wish the present work were a worthier way of recording my appreciation of what I owe him.

SH

*St Andrews*

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## *Note to the Reader*

Abbreviations of the names of ancient authors and the titles of their works generally conform to the conventions of the *Oxford Classical Dictionary*, 3rd edn. revised, ed. S. Hornblower and A. Spawforth (Oxford, 2003). Occasional divergences (such as English titles for the plays of Aristophanes) should be self-evident.

Abbreviations for standard reference works, collections of fragments, etc., mostly follow the *Oxford Classical Dictionary*. Note, however, the following:

CA	<i>Collectanea Alexandrina</i> , ed. J. U. Powell (Oxford, 1925)
CHO	A. Heubeck <i>et al.</i> , <i>A Commentary on Homer's Odyssey</i> , Eng. tr., 3 vols. (Oxford, 1988–92)
EGF	<i>Epicorum Graecorum Fragmenta</i> , ed. M. Davies (Göttingen, 1988)
G-P	<i>The Greek Anthology: Hellenistic Epigrams</i> , ed. A. S. F. Gow and D. L. Page, 2 vols. (Cambridge, 1965)
IC	G. S. Kirk <i>et al.</i> , <i>The Iliad: A Commentary</i> , 6 vols. (Cambridge, 1985–93)
IEG	<i>Iambi et Elegi Graeci</i> , ed. M. L. West, 2nd edn., 2 vols. (Oxford, 1989–92)
LfgrE	<i>Lexikon des frühgriechischen Epos</i> , ed. H. J. Mette <i>et al.</i> (Göttingen, 1955–)
PGL	<i>A Patristic Greek Lexicon</i> , ed. G. W. H. Lampe (Oxford, 1971)
PLF	<i>Poetarum Lesbiorum Fragmenta</i> , ed. E. Lobel and D. Page (Oxford, 1955)
PMG	<i>Poetae Melici Graeci</i> , ed. D. L. Page (Oxford, 1962)
Σ	scholia
SSR	<i>Socratis et Socraticorum Reliquiae</i> , ed. G. Giannantoni, 4 vols (Naples, 1990)

Fragments of tragedy are cited from B. Snell *et al.* (eds.), *Tragicorum Graecorum Fragmenta* (Göttingen, 1971–2004), those of comedy from R. Kassel and C. Austin (eds.), *Poetarum Graecorum Fragmenta* (Berlin, 1983– ), in both cases usually without the abbreviated title of the edition.

In the Bibliography abbreviations of journal titles are those, wherever possible, of *L'Année philologique*. Note the following additions:

*JAAC*         *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*

*Mnem.*        *Mnemosyne*

*TLS*          *Times Literary Supplement*

All dates, unless marked otherwise, are BC.

All translations from sources both ancient and modern are my own unless otherwise stated.

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# 1

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## Setting the Scene: Questions of Poetic Value in Greek Culture

Trouvons nous pourtant quelque fin au besoin d'interpreter?  
(Montaigne)

An artist's work cannot be interpreted.  
(Tolstoy)<sup>1</sup>

In a famous passage from the first book of the *Odyssey*, the epic poem turns the mirror of its own narrative, obliquely yet unmistakably, on itself—and at the same time, by implication, on its own audience, whoever and wherever it might be. Telemachus' conversation with 'Mentes', the disguised Athena, has just ended; the goddess has departed like a bird flying out of the hall, and Telemachus realizes that the person who has been encouraging him to believe that his father is still alive, as well as urging him to stand up to the overweening suitors, was no human after all. At this point, Telemachus, newly endowed by Athena with 'strength and courage', is reabsorbed, as it were, into the larger scene in the hall, where throughout the intimate conversation between Odysseus' son and the disguised goddess the bard Phemius has been singing to the suitors. The song had started at 1.155; only now, at 1.325 ff., do we, the *Odyssey's* own audience, discover the subject of that song, 'the grievous return-journey which Pallas Athena had inflicted on the Achaeans after they left Troy'.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Montaigne, *Essays* iii. 13, 'On Experience': Montaigne 1962: 1068. Tolstoy, 'What is Art?', ch. 12: Tolstoy 1930: 194; cf. Ch. 4 n. 22.

<sup>2</sup> ὁ δ' Ἀχαιῶν νόστον ἄειδε | λυγρόν, ὃν ἐκ Τροίης ἐπετείλατο Πάλλας Ἀθήνη; *Od.* 1.326–7. See West, *CHO* i. 116–17, de Jong 2001: 34–5, for the mythical reference and related points.

Phemius' song, while not identical to the *Odyssey* itself, is a mythological counterpart to it and a microcosm of the epic's complex relationship to its own audience(s).<sup>3</sup> The ironic circumstance that the song is being performed at the very point where Athena is working to bring about the return of Odysseus and his triumph over the suitors is layered with significance in regard to the various audiences present within the scene. The suitors are the primary audience in the sense that they force Phemius to sing for them (see 1.154); in an exception to their general disorderliness, they listen to him in silence (1.325–6). In their case the dramatic irony is pointed: they are blind to the fact that, whatever the song may be narrating, their own doom still awaits them at Odysseus' hands and with Athena's direct help. Telemachus, who was initially pessimistic enough to tell his visitor that Odysseus' 'white bones' were either rotting in the rain or being swept along by the waves of the sea,<sup>4</sup> is only in a position to become fully aware of Phemius' song when his private conversation has finished: in his case, the paradox is that the psychological strength he has received from that conversation has consequences for what he might make of the song, since his hopes have been boosted that Odysseus may yet return home and therefore avoid the fate of the other Greeks of whom Phemius sings. Finally, and most poignantly, there is Penelope, who hears the song from her chamber upstairs and is moved to such a pitch of distress that she descends into the hall and, in a flood of tears, interrupts the song (1.328–44).

If the suitors' interest in Phemius' song is visible only from the outside (in their unusually concentrated silence) and therefore represents, in part, an enigma to the *Odyssey's* own audience, and if Telemachus moves from being initially detached from the song into a new relationship (concealed from those around him) to the emotional charge of its theme, in Penelope's case we can see her response as that of an active, troubled, but uncertain interpreter. We are told that on hearing the song being performed in the hall below she 'understood it' (or perhaps 'focused on it') 'in her mind' (*φρεσὶ σύνθετο θέσπιν ἀοιδῆν*, 1.328). It is clear, in one respect, why this should be so: since she does not know whether Odysseus is alive or not, it is possible that he himself is another of those destroyed on the 'grievous return-journey'

<sup>3</sup> See my further discussion of the shifting positions of epic audiences in Ch. 2; on the present passage, cf. 44, 78, 80–1.

<sup>4</sup> *Od.* 1.161–2; cf. the even more vivid imagination of Eumaeus at 14.133–6 (but with Ch. 2, 50–3, for his ambivalent and confused beliefs).

from Troy. If that were so, the song would be confronting Penelope with an unbearable truth. Some critics, both ancient and modern, have gone further, reading Phemius' song as actually *containing* the death of Odysseus and therefore amounting to a kind of inverted (or 'false') *Odyssey*. Whether or not that inference is found persuasive, Penelope's reaction is not simply an aberration; it attests to the song's emotional effect on a mind highly sensitive to its resonances. For Penelope, all (good) songs are, or should be, 'entrancements' (*θελκτήρια*, 1.337), a term which implies intensity and fullness of psychological absorption in the world of the song.<sup>5</sup> Such entrancement is a form of imaginative and emotional power. In Penelope's case, however, that power spills over, as it were, from the song into her life, reinforcing her grief and making the life itself harder to endure. But that is not the same as saying that she is not responding to the song itself.<sup>6</sup>

Penelope's request prompts an intervention from Telemachus (another 'interpreter' of song) rather than a reply from the singer Phemius. But her son makes a series of points which are not easy to harmonize into a stable conception of song. He tells her, first, that bards should be allowed to give pleasure in accordance with their own inclinations, an observation hardly calculated to soften his mother's grief; secondly, that it is not bards themselves but Zeus who is responsible for human suffering, the subject of the song; thirdly, that audiences are always drawn to the 'newest' song (even though Penelope implied that she has heard this same one before: 'this song which always oppresses my spirits', 1.340–1); and, finally, that Penelope should steel her heart and mind to listen to the song. Telemachus appears to accept that the song tells a fundamental truth about the world (that the will of Zeus determines everyone's destiny), though he does not attempt to explain why stories of human suffering and death should be a source of pleasure—a puzzle latent in the *Odyssey* itself from its prologue onwards. At the same time, he suggests that the truth in question is more a matter of the 'human condition' than of any individual life ('it isn't only Odysseus', he says, 'who lost his day of return at Troy', 1.354–5).<sup>7</sup> That last remark, however, is our clue to

<sup>5</sup> See Ch. 2, esp. 47–53.

<sup>6</sup> For further discussion of Penelope's reaction, including its differences from the experience of Odysseus in book 8, see Ch. 2, 80–1.

<sup>7</sup> See de Jong (2001: 37–8) for a trenchant interpretation of Telemachus' remarks (largely) in terms of his relationship with his mother. Lloyd (1987: 86) argues that in his own way Telemachus is consoling Penelope for her distress; that is hard to see.



an element of dissimulation on Telemachus' part. We have heard already of his own habits of grief for Odysseus (1.242–3) but we have also seen how Athena has given him both new hope and the basis of a strategy towards the suitors. Telemachus' mind is now on other things: he has cogent, pragmatic reasons not to express himself too explicitly on the theme of Phemius' song.

This wonderful scene from the *Odyssey*—as poetically artful as it is dramatically compelling—puts before us three different (potential) audiences of song, all of whom are restricted or partial in some way (just like ourselves) *vis-à-vis* Phemius' performance. The complexity of the divergent responses represented by the suitors, Penelope, and Telemachus does not yield a decodable message about the nature of poetry. Instead, it displays (and enacts) something of the power of song while simultaneously blocking a transparent understanding of that power: it thereby implicitly poses questions about the *Odyssey* itself and its own audiences. In this respect the scene is emblematic of the kinds of problems of poetics, as they can be called retrospectively at least, with which I shall be engaging throughout this book. It is a remarkable fact about ancient Greece's rich traditions of poetry (or, in the earliest terminology, 'song'<sup>8</sup>) that there developed alongside, and partly within, those traditions a domain of self-conscious poetics: a domain of reflection on, and debate about, the nature and functions of poetry. It is a symptom of some of the deepest commitments of Greek culture that a strong impulse to voice evaluative responses to poetry is manifest long before the phenomenon of formalized poetics

<sup>8</sup> Contrary to a common claim (e.g. Ford 2002: 131: 'sudden appearance of this vocabulary'; cf. Lanata 1963: 229–30), Greek usage of *ποιεῖν*, *ποίησις*, *ποιητής* etc. for 'poetry' probably developed (orally) well before its 5th cent. attestations: Solon 20.3 *IEG* (*μεταποίησον*) presupposes such usage; cf. e.g. Dover (1997: 185; reference misprinted), West (2007: 35), with Durante (1976: 170–3) for older Indo-European ideas of poetry as 'making'. The category of 'poetry' was overlaid on and included that of 'song': e.g. Pl. *Phdr.* 245a, Isoc. 10.64; for 'song' = 'poetry' even in a classical prose text, note Xen. *Cyr.* 2.2.13; Arist. *Poet.* 4.1448b23–4 speaks of *poiēsis* even in the realm of improvised oral performance. I do not understand what Ford (2002: 10) means by stating that archaic Greece's 'many forms of song . . . were not referred to as instances of a single art or activity . . . called "song"' (my emphasis): what else does the terminology of *ἀοιδή*, *ἀοιδός* etc. amount to if not designation of an activity called 'song'? Ford himself happily speaks of 'song', 'singing', and 'singers' in archaic Greece; cf. Ford (1992: 171), 'the older conception of poetry as singing'. For the likelihood that 'song' terminology is already traditional, partly non-literal, usage even in the earliest texts, see Nagy (1989: 4–8).

comes into view in the fifth and fourth centuries. The roots of poetics are entangled with the roots of poetry itself.

Despite many modifications and variations, some of the most fundamental issues generated by ancient Greek debates over poetry have long continued to influence and inform later traditions of poetics—partly via the reading of texts such as Aristotle's *Poetics* and Longinus (I retain the traditional name) *On the Sublime* which acquired canonical status during certain periods; partly via more diffuse processes of conceptual translation and adaptation. In considering some of the questions which motivated Greek thinking about poetry, we are therefore retracing concerns which have had a shaping impact on the history of poetic criticism and theory, as well as on the wider disciplines of aesthetics and philosophy of art. This means that there is a double motivation for continuing to be interested in Greek poetics: first, the challenge of trying to make sense of ancient ideas within their own cultural settings;<sup>9</sup> secondly, the fact that those ideas are part of the genealogy of arguments and attitudes in whose modern forms some of our own values may still be invested.<sup>10</sup>

The project pursued in this book is not a history of ancient Greek poetics but a series of linked explorations in some of the greatest texts and some of the hardest problems which *gave* Greek poetics a history. Although the topics addressed follow the promptings of the individual texts rather than a monothematic agenda of my own, the chapters of the book (summarized below) are nonetheless broadly organized around what I see as a recurrent dialectic between distinct, though not necessarily incompatible, paradigms of poetic value—paradigms designated here loosely, but I hope usefully, by the notions of 'ecstasy' and 'truth'. This pair of terms serves as a sort of conceptual shorthand for competing views and priorities in the works to be studied, though their equivalents in Greek, together with other closely

<sup>9</sup> Hunter (2009: 168) complains about 'the modern tendency to treat "ancient literary criticism" as a discrete area of ancient writing, to be studied in isolation from the literature which the ancient critics discussed'. But he does not explain exactly what is wrong with treating criticism as a subject in its own right (with, NB, 'its own history', *ibid.* 8); nor does his own patchwork method of reading do more justice to the ideas of ancient critics: on this point, cf. the comments of Ford (2010: 705–6).

<sup>10</sup> Halliwell (2002a) is one attempt to show how ancient ideas can continue to inform modern critical problems. Cf. Feeney (1995) for reflections on the complex relationship between modern and ancient critical priorities.

associated vocabulary (see below), do play an active role in much of the material under discussion.

Under the heading of ‘ecstasy’ I group those viewpoints in poetics which locate and seek value above all in states of intense psychological absorption and transformation (being ‘taken outside oneself’) as experienced in direct encounter with song or poetry. Ecstasy, for these purposes, is not straightforwardly or uniformly a feeling of bliss and exhilaration. Its scope includes exposure to powerful emotions, such as those of tragedy, whose essential content may have a dark, disturbing side. The conditions of poetic ecstasy can generally be thought of as those in which the mind is ‘turned aside’ from or made to ‘forget’ its ordinary existence, and for which the vocabulary of ‘entrancement’ or ‘bewitchment’ (θέλγειν, κηλεῖν), ‘stirring/drawing the soul’ (ψυχαγωγεῖν), ‘stunning impact’ (ἐκπληξίς), as well as ‘ecstasy’ itself (ἔκστασις), forms an important cluster of lexical markers in many of the texts discussed in this book.<sup>11</sup> The supreme valuation of such states—collectively describable as ‘psychagogic’,<sup>12</sup> in derivation from one of the Greek terms just listed—has a tendency, moreover, to regard poetic experience as psychologically complete in itself and therefore having no need of (perhaps even being inherently resistant to) discursive interpretation. One might draw here an illuminating modern parallel with the well-known essay ‘Against Interpretation’ by Susan Sontag, who forcefully opposes the procedures of interpretation, which she considers an impoverishing exercise of the critical intellect, to a conception of authentic experience of art as a matter of ‘pure, untranslatable, sensuous immediacy’.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>11</sup> ‘Turn aside’, see *παρέτραπε* at Hes. *Theog.* 103, with 16–7 below (where I translate as ‘alter’); cf. the force of the same prefix in *παραψυχάς* at Timocles fr. 6.4, with my text below. Pl. *Menex.* 235a–c gives a *parodic* account of ecstasy (in response to oratory) as temporary loss of self (NB the retrospective clue in *ἀναμνηστικοί ἐμαντοῦ*, 235c), thereby attesting the appeal of such ideas; cf. Ch. 7 n. 12. On the other Greek vocabulary in my text, see the Index of Greek Terms; cf. surveys in Pfister (1939, 1959). Compare ‘enchantment’ as the organizing theme of Walsh (1984), but my interpretations differ from his at almost every point. Recent usage of ‘ecstasy’ to denote aesthetic responses specifically to music can be found in Jourdain 1997: esp. 327–31, Kivy 2009: e.g. 99, 232, 259–60; much less favourable use in Kundera 1995: 84–90, 234–7. Experiences of poetry, music, and art are among the many triggers of ‘ecstasy’ documented in Laski (1961).

<sup>12</sup> See Ch. 5, 223–6, for the semantic evolution of the *ψυχαγωγεῖν* word-group from necromancy to the quasi-magical influence of (poetic) language on the mind.

<sup>13</sup> Quotation from Sontag (1983: 100). Sontag’s defence of art as ‘magic’ (95, 101) harks back to archaic Greek precedents (cf. Ch. 2, 47–9, Ch. 6, 274). Ironically (given

In contrast to views which privilege ecstatic intensity, often assimilating it to the dynamics of erotic experience,<sup>14</sup> I use the term ‘truth’ here to characterize the fundamental thrust of positions which emphasize (or, in some instances, *question*) poetry’s more lasting cognitive and/or ethical value for the beliefs and attitudes of its audiences—a value which depends on some kind of enlarged grasp of reality (whatever that is taken to be) and which can extend to the idea of poetry as sufficiently instructive to be something ‘to live by’.<sup>15</sup> The scope of such a category of truth is wide; it can embrace any of the following (as well as the shifting interplay between them): narrative and representational accuracy; generalizing, even universal, fidelity (or ‘truth to’) various aspects of the world (including the less than fully accessible world of the gods); emotional or psychological realism; and ethically normative statements or injunctions (whose truth encodes what ‘should be’ rather than what merely is the case). Whereas ‘ecstatic’ models of poetic experience typically carry with them a resistance to (the need for) interpretation, truth-centred conceptions of poetic value appear intrinsically to place discursive and rational(izing) demands on interpreters, requiring those who discern truth in poetry to explain its presence and justify its credentials—or, equally, allowing those who deny poetry’s expression of truth to assert its absence. A clash between the specifically hermeneutic implications of such contrasting paradigms of poetic value is foregrounded as a locus of theoretical concern in its own right, but also (on my reading: see Chapter 4) framed as an unresolved conundrum, in Plato’s *Ion*, a work whose own subtleties have ironically

her view of Plato as the originator of artistic *theory*, 95–6) Sontag’s position displays a kind of reverse Platonism, contrasting ‘the luminousness of the thing in itself’ (103) to the ‘shadow world’ of meanings and ideas (99). Cf. also Ch. 4 n. 108. McGilchrist (1982) constructs a cognate opposition between art and criticism: ‘art exists precisely to transcend those patterns of thought which criticism imposes on it’ (65).

<sup>14</sup> See Ch. 2, 46–7, Ch. 3, 101–3, Ch. 4, 194–9, Ch. 6, 280.

<sup>15</sup> See Pl. *Resp.* 10.606e for the (contested) idea of living one’s life in accordance with Homer, *κατὰ τοῦτον . . . ζῆν*, with a possible echo of Xenophanes B10 DK, ‘from the start everyone has learnt according to Homer’, *ἐξ ἀρχῆς καθ’ Ὀμηρον ἐπεὶ μεμαθήκασι πάντες*, with Babut (1974: 116). Various formulations of the idea of poets as ‘guides to life’ occur at Pl. *Lysis* 213e–14a, *Leg.* 9.858c–e, *Isoc.* 2.3, 43. For one perspective on ideas of ‘truth’ in Greek poetics, see Puelma (1989). The history of ideas on literary ‘truth’ is richly sampled in Ruthven (1979: 164–80). Zuidervaart (2009) offers a vigorous attempt to reinstate a concept of truth in a modern theory of aesthetics.

been obscured by a long history of interpretative overconfidence.<sup>16</sup> What is looked for in the experience of poetry will always make a difference to what is expected of its interpreters.

The kind of contrast I have sketched between ecstasy and truth, a contrast for more than one reason not reducible to a bare dichotomy between pleasure and edification, appears in numerous versions across the whole historical span of Greek poetics. Used not as an all-explanatory key but as a guiding schema flexible enough to be modified for the preoccupations of particular texts and contexts, the contrast can throw light on patterns of thought which gave Greek arguments about poetry much of their cultural urgency and which help them retain much of their continuing vitality. As may already be apparent, my initial account of the organizing theme of the book points to models of value which have, so to speak, different centres of gravity but which, even so, *need* not come into direct conflict. If ecstasy and truth are logically independent of each other, might not the first nonetheless be in some way a vehicle of the second, and the second part of the content of the first? If the range of psychagogic experience for which 'ecstasy' is shorthand lifts audiences out of quotidian states of consciousness, must this always involve a kind of bewitching illusion or might it (sometimes) be a conduit for the attainment of insight or enlightenment? If truth (in whatever respect) is a prime desideratum of poetry, might it be the case that what produces a quintessentially *poetic* apprehension of truth is something which belongs to a special plane of imaginative and emotional concentration?

In a cameo illustration of this point (though one whose dramatic context and implications we cannot reconstruct), the speaker in a fragment from a comedy by the fourth-century playwright Timocles claims that the experience of tragic theatre provides a kind of temporary escape (a turning aside and consoling of the mind, *παραψυχάς*) into a realm where spectators can forget their own woes and become 'spellbound by the sufferings of others' (*πρὸς ἀλλοτρίω τε ψυχαγωγηθεὶς πάθει*). Yet this experience, he explains, is one which allows the spectator to leave the theatre better 'educated' (*παιδευθεὶς*) about the nature of life and suffering. A lasting effect ('the tragedians

<sup>16</sup> See my reading in Ch. 4, 166–79; note esp. 172–3 on Ion's split reaction to Socrates' account of inspired rapture in relation to his roles as performer and (critical) interpreter.

benefit us all') comes about through cognitive processes in which the mind gets closer to the truth of things: having 'comprehended' (*καταμανθάνειν*, stressed by repetition) the cases of individual tragic figures depicted on stage, the spectator ponders (*ἐννοεῖσθαι*) what he sees in the plays and takes back into his own life a better capacity to cope with misfortune.<sup>17</sup> Sustained emotional absorption, it seems, can be the medium of truth-bearing shafts of insight. The price of this view, however, is a double paradox: being imaginatively transported into the lives of others takes one out of one's own existence yet somehow leaves one with an altered perception of one's own life; and that perception is accompanied by a reduced susceptibility to pessimistic emotions, even though what tragedy has shown its audience is, on this very account, how extreme human sufferings can be.

The condensed reasoning exhibited in this fragment may be coloured by comic exaggeration, but it nonetheless reflects habits (and puzzles) of thought and feeling which were embedded in the culture of classical Athenian theatre. In subsequent chapters of this book I shall examine texts whose critical values can be inspected in far greater detail, even if they do not always present themselves with the pithy directness of Timocles' speaker. On the broadest scale, it is my aim to argue that the conceptions of poetry elaborated by authors as different as Aristotle, Gorgias, and Longinus all work towards a synthesis of the types of values I am associating with the categories of 'ecstasy' and 'truth', while Aristophanes, Plato, Isocrates, and Philodemus (each in a distinctive mode of writing and with a distinctive agenda) recognized—and left—the relationship in question as an acute problem. And before them all came Homeric epic, which had made the nature of poetic value, as we have already glimpsed, a theme of profound resonance. But for all these authors and texts the issues at stake are the stuff of competing judgements: the history of Greek poetics, as of Greek poetry itself, is indelibly agonistic. In terms of the overall shape of my project, therefore, the word 'between' in the title of the book is not to be neglected. My readings will chart a dialectic of ideas, not a rigid antithesis or polarity, in Greek attitudes and sensibilities towards poetry.

<sup>17</sup> Timocles fr. 6; cf. n. 11 above, with Ch. 5 n. 39, Ch. 6 n. 115. There is no compelling reason to follow Pohlenz (1965: ii. 462–3) in detecting the legacy of specifically Gorgianic ideas in this fragment.

Matters of poetic ‘truth’ acquire an extra layer of complexity when we start to reckon with the Greek notion of ‘likeness/resemblance to the truth’, an ancestor of the family of literary and aesthetic concepts which includes *vraisemblance*, illusionism, and realism in their multiple guises. In some contexts, such as Xenophanes’ recommendation that certain ideas (about the divine) should be ‘believed as being like the truth’ (ταῦτα δεδοξάσθω μὲν εἰκότα τοῖς ἐτύμοισι), this notion serves as a form of epistemological plausibility and thus a surrogate for, or approximation to, the value of the (otherwise imperfectly attainable) truth itself.<sup>18</sup> In other contexts, such as the Hesiodic description (to be considered below) of certain kinds of song as ‘falsehoods that seem like true things’ (ψεύδεα . . . ἐτύμοισιν ὁμοῖα), a different rationale comes into play. As soon as one contemplates the thought of poetic materials which merit that categorization, and about whose status there is therefore something more to be said than that they are either true or false *tout court*, one thorny issue that has to be faced is whether, or how far, Greek culture can be said to have possessed anything like a concept of ‘fiction’.

Views on this subject are widely at variance. Modern scholars can be found who locate an awareness, even the ‘invention’, of fiction (as practice and/or idea) in such diverse places as Homeric epic (especially the *Odyssey*), Hesiod’s account of the Muses, the archaic growth of literacy (and its impact on ideas about different functions of communication), Pindaric *aperçus* on poetry, Gorgias’ theory of language, Plato’s dialogues, Attic comedy (Old or New), Aristotle’s *Poetics*, Theocritean bucolic, and the Greek novel.<sup>19</sup> This is not the place for a dissection of each of the claims just indicated, which

<sup>18</sup> Xenophanes B35 DK, with Leshner (1992: 165, 169–76). Cf. n. 40 below.

<sup>19</sup> Homer: e.g. Bowie (1993: 9–20); specifically on the *Odyssey*, Richardson, *IC* vi. 26, Collobert (2004), Hunter (2008: ii. 854–6, 861). Hesiod: see n. 31 below. Literacy: Rösler (1980). Pindar: Richardson 1985: 385–6 (NB ‘the art of fiction’). Gorgias: Finkelberg (1998: 177). Plato’s dialogues: e.g. Hunter 2008: ii. 850–4, cf. Morgan (2003), Gill (1979) specifically on the Atlantis myth, and note Nietzsche’s idea of Plato as inventor of the novel (*Birth of Tragedy*, 14: Ch. 4 n. 8). Old Comedy: Lowe 2000*b*, cf. Lowe 2000*a*: 88, 158, 186 (but NB qualifications on 85). New Comedy: Konstan 1998: 9–10. Aristotle’s *Poetics*: e.g. Nightingale 2006: 40, Janko 2011: 233. Theocritus: Payne 2007: esp. 1–15, but drawing a problematic distinction between ‘mimetic’ and ‘fully fictional’ fictions (cf. n. 23 below). Greek novel: Konstan (1998). Gill and Wiseman (1993) remains a stimulating collection on the problem of defining ancient conceptions of fiction; cf. Laird (2007: 285–98). See Momigliano (1993: 46–57) on the place of fiction in Greek ‘biography’, including Socratic dialogues as a genre; cf. Kahn 1996: 32–5.

evidently depend on something less than unanimity about the criteria of fictionality. My own position, in brief, is that what might count as fictionality within the Greek cultural framework is a historically as well as conceptually intricate question which does not lend itself to resolution in terms of determinate origins, let alone an act of primal ‘invention’.<sup>20</sup> On the level of verbal classification, it is true that one-to-one matching of any single lexical item in Greek criticism with a concept of fiction is unsustainable. But that does not mean that there is no Greek terminology which overlaps with English uses of ‘fiction’, a word with its own less than entirely stable history of semantics (not to mention the further complications which would enter the picture if we considered the vocabulary of ‘fiction’ in other modern languages). ‘Falsehoods that seem like true things’ may indeed be a case in point of such terminology (see below), and there are other candidates too, not least the word-group which includes *πλάττειν* (to fashion, mould), *πλάσμα* (fabrication), etc.<sup>21</sup> We have good reason, moreover, to suppose that fiction amounts not to a sharp-edged category but a blurred spectrum of communicative modes and practices. If so, we may expect its forms to be recognized, and its implications signalled, with varying degrees of self-consciousness and conceptual explicitness.<sup>22</sup>

The basic possibility of fiction is inherent in the operations of human imagination, language, and narrative. It consists, roughly, in thought or discourse whose contents do not lay claim to literal truth (even though such claims may be ostensibly made *inside* fiction) yet

<sup>20</sup> Halliwell (2012*b*) offers fuller treatment of the issues. For considerations which treat fiction as a broader category of discourse and/or thought, see Trimpi (1971) with Vaihinger (1924: 135–43), Eden (1986); cf. Kermode (2000: 36–43).

<sup>21</sup> For *πλάττειν* and congeners, see e.g. Xenophanes 1.22 *IEG*, *Pl. Resp.* 2.377b, Eratosthenes *apud* Strabo 1.2.3, Asclepiades of Myrlea *apud* Sext. *Emp. Math.* 1.252 (cf. Ch. 5 n. 18). Other vocabulary relevant to Greek awareness of fictionality includes *ποιεῖν* (‘make’, ‘invent’: e.g. Arist. *Poet.* 9.1451b20–30, with Ch. 5, 233; cf. Ch. 6 n. 69), *ἀπάτη* (aesthetic ‘deception’, with Ch. 6, 275–7), *μῦθος* (qua partly fabricated narrative, e.g. *Pl. Phdo* 60c, *Tim.* 22c–d; cf. n. 44 below, Ch. 6, 293–4, Rispoli 1988: 29–56, Brisson 1998: 40–8), *μίμησις* (mimesis as world-simulation: Halliwell 2002*a*: index s.v. fiction), and even *ψευδής* (‘false’ as inclusive of fictional: e.g. *Pl. Resp.* 2.376e–7a; cf. n. 40 below).

<sup>22</sup> For philosophical recognition that fiction allows of degrees, and/or mixture with ‘non-fiction’, see e.g. Walton 1990: 71–2, Iser 1993: 1–4; on the applicability of this point to archaic Greece, cf. Pratt 1993: esp. 37–42. Gill (1993: 69–73) emphasizes that fictionality can be more or less explicit/determinate as a cultural category, but he uses too narrow a conception in order to deny a sense of poetic fiction to Greek culture before Plato.



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