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PART ONE  
EPIC AND ELEGIAC POETRY



## CHAPTER ONE

### HOMER

I.J.F. de Jong

#### *The Place of Space*

It is a remarkable paradox that despite the unique position which Troy and Ithaca take up as *lieux de mémoire* within European cultural history the role of space in the Homeric epics—at first sight—is modest.<sup>1</sup> We are not given a plan of Priam's or Odysseus' palace, we have no real perception of the distances in the plain between Troy and the Greek camp or between Odysseus' palace and Eumaeus' farmstead, or of the arrangement of harbour, city, and royal palace on Scheria. Whereas many a novelist will start with a description of the setting, providing his narratees with a background against which they can picture the action, the Homeric narrator—as is the case with his plot and his characters—plunges them *in medias res* and presents a large canvas on which occasionally an item is sketched in (the Scaean gate of Troy, the tomb of Ilus in the Trojan plain, Penelope's upper-room), the result being an 'impressionistic framework'.<sup>2</sup> According to Bowra, such neglect of space is a general characteristic of epic poetry, and it may also be relevant to realise, with Rackham, that 'ancient authors rarely tell us what Greece looked like, for they assumed that their readers would know'.<sup>3</sup>

It is, however, misleading to claim, as Andersson does in his otherwise valuable analysis of Homeric scenery, that scenic items are entered 'more or less at random'. The Homeric narrator inserts—or makes his characters insert—settings or props at the exact moment when the action demands them.<sup>4</sup> Thus we hear about Pandarus' bow when he uses it to wound

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<sup>1</sup> Bassett 1938: 91; Parry 1957: 7; Andersson 1976: 15–16; Elliger 1975: 26.

<sup>2</sup> Andersson 1976: 17; cf. Elliger 1975: 42; Lesky 1947: 154.

<sup>3</sup> Bowra 1952: 132; Rackham 1990: 85.

<sup>4</sup> Bassett 1938: 92; Bowra 1952: 132–149; Elliger 1975: 56–57; S. Richardson 1990: 50–57; Minchin 2001: 101.

Menelaus and break the truce (*Il.* 4.105–111) and about Calypso's cave when Hermes arrives there (*Od.* 5.59–75). The care with which scenery descriptions are placed may be illustrated from Achilles' barrack (*klisiē*), where the action is located in books 9 (185), 16 (221), and 18–19 (*passim*), but which is only described in detail in book 24 (448–456). Then, the description, which brings about a retardation, marks the importance of the moment, the memorable meeting of Priam and Achilles.<sup>5</sup> It is also relevant to what follows: the detail that only Achilles could move the bar holding the gate (24.453–456) will soon figure in the dialogue between Achilles and Priam, when the Greek hero guesses that a god must have helped the Trojan king enter the camp, since 'no mortal man could easily push back the bar across our gates' (566–567).<sup>6</sup>

The reverse technique, by which an object is introduced *long before* it becomes relevant, by way of a seed, is also observable: Achilles' formidable Pelian spear is described twice (*Il.* 16.141–144 = 19.388–391) before he actually wields (22.133–135) and uses it (326–327); the dirty laundry which Nausicaa sets out to wash (*Od.* 6.26, 58–59, 74, 91) in the end will conveniently provide the naked Odysseus with a clean set of clothes (228) but also trigger the suspenseful intervention of Arete, who recognizes the work of her own hands (7.234–235, 323).<sup>7</sup> The secondary narrator Odysseus in particular is wont to introduce props or locations early on in his story<sup>8</sup> (the strong wine of Maron, 9.196–211, or the narrow harbour of the Laestrygonians, 10.87–90), to underscore his own foresight: bringing along the wine allows him to inebriate Polyphemus and rightly judging the potential danger of the narrow harbour makes him moor his ship at its very beginning and thereby prevents it from being destroyed by the Laestrygonians.

In the *Odyssey* in particular props and settings are an integral part of the action: the descriptions of Ithacan scenery (13.345–351), Odysseus'

<sup>5</sup> See SAGN 2: 12 and cf. (from a cognitive perspective) Minchin 2001: 102.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. the country garden of Laertes, referred to at *Od.* 1.190; 4.737; and 11.187–194, but only described in full at 24.226–234, at the moment it hosts the reunion between Odysseus and his father; the palace of Alcinous, mentioned at *Od.* 6.299–303; 7.22, 46, fully described at 7.81–134, when Odysseus reaches it; Odysseus' bow, first mentioned by Penelope at 19.577, but described at 21.11–41, when she sets out to fetch it.

<sup>7</sup> After its elaborate description at *Il.* 18.478–608 Achilles' shield is only mentioned in passing (22.290–291). After the long description of the scar at *Od.* 19.392–468, brief references suffice (21.219–220, 221; 23.74; 24.331–335). The heavy doors of Odysseus' *megaron*, described at *Od.* 17.267–268, are used at 21.389–391.

<sup>8</sup> De Jong 2001a: 298.

brooch (19.226–231), his marital bed (23.184–201), and Laertes' garden (24.340–344) function as signs of recognition; Circe's detailed description of the entrance to the Underworld serves as a guide-book to Odysseus, who, of course, has never been there before (*Od.* 10.508–515). Odysseus' palace even plays a major role in the action:<sup>9</sup> the suitors feast in the *megaron* (1.144–155 and *passim*), the same place which witnesses the contest with the bow (21.4) and their deaths (book 22); Penelope spends most of her time in her upper room (1.328–329 and *passim*), so as to avoid as much as possible any contact with the suitors; Telemachus retires after his first public performance to his 'sheltered' bedroom (1.425–426); Telemachus and Penelope descend to carefully locked and guarded store-rooms (2.337–347; 21.8–56); 'the beggar'/Odysseus humbly positions himself on the threshold of the *megaron* but also shoots his first arrows from that strategic position (17.339–341; 22.1–4); accomplices of Odysseus close the doors of the *megaron* and courtyard, when the massacre of the suitors is about to begin (21.387–391); and after their reunion Odysseus and Penelope retire to the bedroom built by Odysseus himself (23.295–296). The narrator even uses the palace to create tension, when all of a sudden at the height of the battle between Odysseus and the suitors there appears to be a little side-door in the *megaron*, which, for a brief moment, threatens to offer the suitors a means to get out and fetch help (22.126–128). The references to carpenters fashioning door-posts or chairs (17.340–341; 19.56–58) or wine-jars 'hoping for the return of Odysseus' (2.342–343) 'embody' Odysseus' palace. The hero's nostalgia, which motivates his actions during the ten years of wanderings, is in the first place a longing for persons (1.13; 9.34–36), but his palace (7.225) and Ithaca (1.57–59; 9.27–28) follow closely.

Though lacking the detail spent on Odysseus' palace, it could be argued that the city of Troy also acquires considerable substance in the *Iliad*, this time mainly through the repeated use of epithets:<sup>10</sup> it shares with other cities epithets like 'set on a steep', 'windy', 'with broad streets', 'high-gated' and is individually characterized as 'well-built', 'well-walled', 'with good fortifications', and 'set on the brow of a hill'. Again, there is a connection with the action: Troy is not always endowed with an epithet; when we find one, it is voiced mainly by the Greeks, who talk about

<sup>9</sup> See Kullmann 1992: 305–316.

<sup>10</sup> See Trachsel 2007: 12–24, 27–32; for the epithets Bowra 1960; Scully 1990: 69–80; and Visser 1997: 83–94.

their desire to take—or frustration about not taking—this strategically situated, strongly fortified city, and by the narrator in the second half of the *Iliad*, who underscores the pathos of the destruction of this seemingly invincible object being imminent after all.<sup>11</sup>

Up to now my discussion has been concerned with space as setting. But the Homeric epics also make use of a very characteristic form of *frame*: the world of the similes.<sup>12</sup> While the Iliadic battlefield, the Trojan plain, is surprisingly empty and devoid of nature (we do not hear about bushes to hide in or stones to stumble over), nature comes in in the form of similes featuring wild torrents, immovable rocks, rolling waves, and sparkling stars. Thus, the noise of armies clashing together and men being killed is compared to the situation ‘when two winter-swollen streams coursing down from the mountains hurl together the mass of their waters where the valleys meet, joining in the gash of a ravine from the great well-heads above, and a shepherd hears their thunder from far in the mountains’ (*Il.* 4.452–456).<sup>13</sup> It is passages like these that made Voltaire and Goethe admire Homer as a painter of nature,<sup>14</sup> but it should be realised, with Bouvier,<sup>15</sup> that nature only enters the story when the force or glitter of warriors needs to be illustrated. The eyes of the heroes themselves are fixed on their opponents, not on the sky or hills or trees.

The ‘other world’ status of similes is often carefully exploited, in that their scenery (and activities) contrasts with that of the story, e.g. when Odysseus desperately clinging to a fig-tree and waiting for Charybdis to disgorge the mast and keel of his ship compares the moment the monster finally does so with the time ‘when a man rises from his seat in the market-place and returns home for supper, having settled many disputes from young men seeking justice’ (*Od.* 12.439–441). ‘There could hardly be a greater contrast between Odysseus’ lonely and desperate situation ... and the civilized and social activities of the man in the simile, which in normal circumstances would be those of Odysseus. Is this how Odysseus managed to survive his ordeal, thinking of his ordinary life in the past (and, as he hopes, the future)?<sup>16</sup> Or when Penelope in her

<sup>11</sup> Scully 1990: 78.

<sup>12</sup> For the space of similes, see Lesky 1947: 165–175; Elliger 1975: 73–87.

<sup>13</sup> Translations are those of M. Hammond (*Iliad*: Penguin 1987, *Odyssey*: Duckworth 2000), with minor changes.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Andersson 1976: 28.

<sup>15</sup> Bouvier 1986: 241–246.

<sup>16</sup> De Jong 2001a: ad 12.438–441.

palace on Ithaca is compared to a shipwrecked sailor on a beach, a role normally played by Odysseus (*Od.* 23.233–239), the reversal suggests that in her way she has undergone as many dangers and suffered as much as Odysseus. But the difference between the worlds of simile and story need not always take the form of a contrast. Many similes transport us to the world of animals, which are, however, engaged in the same kind of deadly encounter as the warriors on the battlefield, e.g. when Agamemnon pursuing the Trojans through the plain is compared to a lion pursuing herds of cows across a plain (*Il.* 11.172–177).<sup>17</sup>

Upon closer inspection space turns out to be everywhere in the Homeric epics, mainly in the form of small details carefully inserted whenever the action needs them. The question who presents these scenic details now deserves closer attention.

*The Presentation of Space 1:  
By Whom and from What Standpoint?*

A first and vital presenter of space is of course the Homeric (primary) *narrator-focalizer*, who in doing so may adopt various standpoints. He may opt for a *panoramic* standpoint, as at *Il.* 11.166–171, where he describes how Agamemnon pursues the Trojans across the Trojan plain, past the tomb of Ilus, past the fig-tree, until they reach the Scaean gate and the oak-tree.<sup>18</sup> Usually these landmarks of the Trojan plain are mentioned individually, and their rare combination here in one majestic view both conveys a sense of the speed with which the Trojans run for their lives and adds to the glory of the one who makes them run, the ‘lion’ Agamemnon.

Conversely, the narrator may also present a *close-up*, as in the case of Andromache’s headdress, which is elaborately described at the moment she throws it off, swooning at the sight of Hector being dragged by Achilles across the plain (*Il.* 22.468–472).<sup>19</sup> The mass of descriptive detail

<sup>17</sup> See e.g. Giesecke 2007: 49–51, who notes that in general the Homeric outlook on nature is that of a hostile world which needs to be controlled and tamed.

<sup>18</sup> Other examples: *Il.* 2.459–468 (a synoptic view of the Scamandrian plain, with Greek warriors strewn over it like flowers); *Od.* 13.81–92 (the narrator looks at the Phaeacian ship speeding over the sea to bring back Odysseus to Ithaca).

<sup>19</sup> Other examples: *Il.* 4.105–111 (bow of Pandarus); 10.261–270 (helmet of Meriones); 11.632–637 (cup of Nestor); *Od.* 4.125–132 (work-basket of Helen); 21.6–7 (key to Odysseus’ storeroom).



creates a retardation, thus marking this emotionally charged moment. The sense of order and domestic harmony evoked by this elaborate headdress, which consists of no less than three different hair-nets and veils, also symbolises the kind of life Andromache will lose now that Hector is dead.

Finally, and most commonly, the narrator may position himself *at the scene* and insert evocative details (e.g. the exhausted Trojans leaning against 'the beautiful battlements' of the Trojan wall, *Il.* 22.3) or give a fuller picture, as when he describes the harbour of Phorcys, following the pace of—quasi positioning himself on—the Phaeacian ship that enters it (*Od.* 13.96–112). Such descriptions by the narrator are typically in the present tense and are often introduced by *esti*, 'there is a place X', a stylistic feature that would become commonplace in later literature ('There lies a vale in Ida ... Thither came ...': Tennyson *Oenone*).

Instead of focalizing himself, the narrator also may make use of a *character* to introduce a setting, especially in the *Odyssey*.<sup>20</sup> Whereas in the *Iliad* the palaces of Priam, Paris, and the barrack of Achilles are described by the narrator, in the *Odyssey* the palaces of Menelaus, Alcinous, and the cave of Calypso are all focalized by characters, one indication of which is the use of the imperfect tense.<sup>21</sup> A particularly fine example is the long description of Goat-Island (*Od.* 9.116–141) as focalized by Odysseus: both the many negations (hunters do *not* visit the island, *no* flocks or ploughed fields occupy the island, the harbour is such that ships need *no* moorings) and the positive assessments (it has soft water-meadows bordering the shore of the sea, where vines could flourish; it has level land for ploughing, which would yield thick crops; at the head of the harbour there is a spring of bright water) clearly reveal the eye and mentality of its beholder. As a civilised Greek Odysseus is both enthusiastic about the potential of this island and surprised by the fact that no one has as yet exploited it.<sup>22</sup>

At times we even find a highly refined technique of *zooming in* on a place via the focalization of a character. In *Odyssey* book 5 the narrator follows the perception of Odysseus as he slowly approaches Scheria: at 279–281 the mountains of the island, which to Odysseus resembles a shield, become visible; at 358–359 he sighs that the island is still 'far off';

<sup>20</sup> Elliger 1975: 147–148, 153.

<sup>21</sup> See de Jong 2001a: ad 5.63–75.

<sup>22</sup> See Elliger 1975: 141–142 and Davies 1987. Other examples: *Od.* 11.568–600 (the interior of the Underworld) and 9.218–223 (the interior of the Cyclops' cave).

at 392, lifted up by a wave, he views it ‘nearby’; at 398 he is able to see the woods; at 400–405 and 411–414 he hears the breakers and gets a good look at the steep coast; and at 441–443 he finally spots a place to go ashore, the mouth of a river, bare of rocks and out of the wind.<sup>23</sup>

But even in the *Iliad* we occasionally find focalized space, e.g. when Zeus, taking up a panoramic standpoint on Mt Ida, ‘looked far out over the land of the horse-herding Thracians, and the Mysians, fighters at close quarters, and the proud Hippemolgi who live on mares’ milk, and the Abii, most civilised of all men’ (13.3–6), or a focalized object, when Achilles, in his hands the deadly Pelian spear, ‘looks over Hector’s fine body, where it would be most exposed. All the rest of his body was covered by his bronze armour ... but flesh showed where the collar-bones separate the neck from the shoulders, at the gullet, where a man’s life is most quickly destroyed’ (22.321–325).

It is not uncommon for the narrator to intrude upon the focalization of his characters and add details which they cannot see from their position or which they simply cannot know. A well-known example is the description of Alcinous’ palace (*Od.* 7.81–134), which is clearly focalized by Odysseus, who stands on the threshold and gazes in admiration (7.83, 133–134). Yet, from 95 onwards we are given a description (in the present tense) of the interior of the palace, including the customs, tasks, and qualities of the inhabitants, and from 112 onwards a description of the garden in all seasons.<sup>24</sup>

Characters may not merely focalize a place or object but *describe* it to another character in a speech, never for its own sake but always in order to make a point: when Achilles describes to the Greeks the sceptre that he holds, which will never sprout again after the bronze axe stripped it of its leaves and bark (*Il.* 1.234–239), he underscores the irrevocability of his decision to withdraw from battle; when he describes a ‘sword with silver-nailed hilt, a beautiful piece of Thracian work’ (*Il.* 23.807–808), he makes clear how valuable a prize he sets out to honour his dead friend Patroclus.<sup>25</sup>

<sup>23</sup> De Jong 2001a: ad 5.279–493; and cf. Andersson 1976: 38–39. Another example: 9.166–167 + 181–186 + 216–223 (the Cyclops’ cave).

<sup>24</sup> See also the description of Eumaeus’ farmstead (*Od.* 14.5–22), which is focalized by Odysseus (5), with the narrator intruding at 7–9 and 17–19.

<sup>25</sup> Other examples: e.g. *Il.* 18.83–85 (Achilles describes his own armour to Thetis); 21.446–447 (Poseidon describes to Apollo the wall that he once built with him); 23.560–

A final form of presentation has been noted and admired since Lessing's *Laokoon* (chapter 16): it consists in the narrator describing an object *while it is being created* (or assembled or put on) by a character: Odysseus, 'like a man well skilled in ship-building', builds his raft, felling trees, trimming and smoothing them, boring through the timbers and fastening them together with treenails and joints, making hull, deck, mast, steering-oar, and sails (*Od.* 5.243–261). This way of describing Odysseus' raft while it is being made has the advantage of building up suspense (the narratees already know that the raft so carefully put together here will be shipwrecked, 5.33–34) and endows it with a characterizing function (it marks Odysseus as a man of culture: cf. 9.391–394, where he is compared to a smith, and 23.184–201, where we hear about him making his own bed and bedroom).<sup>26</sup>

The example *par excellence* of 'description by action' is of course Achilles' new armour, especially his shield, which is created 'before our eyes' by Hephaestus. The situation here is in fact slightly more complicated than in the other instances. We do indeed hear of Hephaestus making 'many ornaments' (eight scenes) on the shield. However, these scenes are presented in such a way that the *description* of Hephaestus' work of art subtly blends with *narration* on the part of the narrator himself. A clear example is the scene of the ambush (18.513–529): men defending their city have decided to go out and ambush their opponents. They are led by Ares and Athena, 'both made of gold' and 'dressed in golden clothing', and 'standing out as gods will, clear above the rest' (*description*). When they reach a river, they take up their position, 'covered in shining bronze' (*description* or *narration*). Then two scouts are posted at some distance, to wait for the herds. 'Soon' they appear, and with them two herdsmen playing on their pipes, 'with no thought for danger' (*narration*). The ambushers see them coming and rush out towards them, and then 'quickly' surround the herds (*narration*). The effect of the mingling of description and narration is that the Homeric narrator and the divine

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562 (Achilles describes the corselet he is offering as a prize); *Od.* 3.293–296 (Nestor describes part of Crete); 4.72–75 (Telemachus describes the palace of Menelaus); 4.615–619 = 15.113–119 (Menelaus describes the mixing bowl that he offers Telemachus); 19.226–235 (Odysseus describes to Penelope the brooch and chiton of Odysseus).

<sup>26</sup> Other examples: e.g. *Il.* 5.722–731 (Hebe assembles a divine chariot); 24.266–274 (sons of Priam assemble his chariot); *Il.* 3.330–338 (Paris puts on his armour); 11.16–45 (Agamemnon puts on his armour); *Od.* 23.184–202 (Odysseus narrates how he built his bed).

artisan Hephaestus *together* create this work of art, the one making a shield, the other an ekphrasis.<sup>27</sup>

Of course, the various forms of description may also be combined, as happens in the piecemeal description of the ditch around the Greek camp, a technique also found e.g. in (→) Herodotus. At the time it is made, we hear relatively little: ‘they dug a deep ditch, large and wide, and fixed stakes in it’ (7.440–441). Its appearance becomes more concrete when focalized by the horses (!) of the Trojans, who stop at its edge: ‘they were frightened by the breadth of the ditch, not easy to jump right over or to cross through. For along the whole length there were overhanging edges on both sides, and on top they were fitted with sharp stakes, which the sons of the Achaeans had fixed there long and close set, as a defence against their enemies’ (12.50–57). One of the generals, Polydamas, finally describes it to his men in full, military detail: ‘It is folly for us to drive our fast horses across the ditch. It is very hard to cross. For there are sharp stakes set on its edge, and the Greeks’ wall is close beyond them. There is no room there for horsemen to dismount and fight; it is a narrow space, where I think we will suffer losses’ (12.62–66).

Having established where space is introduced and by whom, it is time to take a closer look at the manifestation of space itself: what form does it take, which senses are being appealed to?

### *The Presentation of Space 2: What Is Described?*

This section, again, starts with a paradox: Homer, celebrated for the vividness of his narrative style, i.e. his making the past present and drawing his narratees mentally into the action,<sup>28</sup> is at the same time a narrator who, as was already noted by Lessing (chapter 21), is hardly interested in informing us in detail about the outward appearance of objects and places (and persons).<sup>29</sup> According to what Andersson has aptly called ‘the principle of the single property’, one feature by way of a *pars pro toto* has to serve for many: mention of the golden floor and golden cups serves to evoke a picture of Zeus’ splendid palace on the Olympus (*Il.* 4.1–4). Also, the narrator is keenly interested in the *working*

<sup>27</sup> See de Jong 2011 with ample secondary literature of which A.S. Becker 1995 is most important.

<sup>28</sup> See e.g. Ford 1992: 49–56.

<sup>29</sup> Elliger 1975: 52; Andersson 1976: 25; Minchin 2001: 106.

of an object or place: Athena's spear is sharp-edged with pointed bronze, but above all the instrument 'with which she brings low the ranks of men' (*Od.* 1.99–101); Odysseus' palace, has 'stout, double doors, which no man could force his way through' (*Od.* 17.267–268); Ithaca is a 'rough land but a good place for bringing up children' (*Od.* 9.27).<sup>30</sup>

When the narrator appeals to our *visual* senses, he hardly refers to colours:<sup>31</sup> what colour the robe has that Hecuba offers to Athena, the wedding gown that Helen gives to Telemachus, or the tunic that Penelope gave to Odysseus we never get to know; all we hear is that these clothes are 'shining'. Similarly, the long descriptions of the residences of Calypso, Alcinous, Eumaeus, all do without a single colour. When colours are used at all, it is mainly 'black', for blood, waves, the earth, a shield, wine, and water, and 'white', for snow, female skin, a veil, and water. Scenic colour combinations which for us are a cliché, such as a blue sky, a green wood, or a yellow cornfield, are entirely absent from the Homeric epics, which instead focus on glitter and shine.

This striking indifference to colour was at one time explained in terms of (collective) colour-blindness on the part of the early Greeks, an explanation flatly contradicted by the abundance of colour in Greek art, starting with the Minoan/Mycenaean frescoes. A better explanation might be that the epic genre is less interested in realistic colours than in ideological glitter, which better expresses its heroes' martial valour.

Turning from the visual to the *acoustic* we may note that the Homeric epics at times include sounds in their evocation of scenery,<sup>32</sup> e.g. when the Trojans, relentlessly pursued by Achilles, were 'crowded into the deep silvery swirls of the river, and fell into the water with a great crash, and the rushing stream resounded and the banks echoed loud all round. The shouting men swam in many directions, spun about in the eddies' (*Il.* 21.8–11); when Penelope opens the doors of the storeroom containing Odysseus' bow, and they 'bellowed like a bull at pasture in a meadow; so loud was the noise of the fine doors when struck with the key' (*Od.* 21.48–50); or when Odysseus has strung his bow and 'plucked the string to try it. And it sang sweetly to his touch, a note like a swallow's' (*Od.* 21.410–411).

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<sup>30</sup> Homer is interested in *energeia* (Aristotle's term) rather than *enargeia* (the term of Hellenistic literary criticism), though the latter word is often used in connection with him (already by Plato); see Otto 2010: 71–76.

<sup>31</sup> See Elliger 1975: 96–102; Irwin 1974: 3–30.

<sup>32</sup> See Wille 2001: 19–124.

At times even the *olfactory* sense of the narratees is mentally activated, when odours or scents are mentioned as part of the description of places and objects: altars smell of incense (e.g. *Il.* 23.148) and storerooms or clothing are fragrant (*Il.* 3.382; *Od.* 4.121).

The description of Calypso's island and cave (*Od.* 5.59–75) may well serve to conclude this section, in that here we find an appeal to all the senses: there is the *sight* of the large cave, the many trees, springs, meadows, and birds, the *scent* of cedar logs and citron-wood burning, the *sound* of the nymph's lovely voice singing, and finally the *touch* of the soft meadows that surround her habitat.

### *The Presentation of Space 3: The Structure of Descriptions*

Long descriptions, such as those of Goat-Island (*Od.* 9.116–150), Calypso's cave (*Od.* 5.59–75) or Alcinous' palace (*Od.* 7. 81–134), may be structured in the form of a *list* (*on it* [Goat-Island] wild goats breed ... *on it* are soft meadows ... *on it* is level land for ploughing ... *on it* is a harbour), *spatially* (*round* Calypso's cave there grew trees ... *in parallel lines* ran four springs ... *at both sides* grew soft meadows),<sup>33</sup> or as a combination (*on both sides* of Alcinous' palace walls of bronze were built ... *on either side of* the door were dogs of gold and silver ... *inside* there were chairs fixed along the walls ... *outside* is a great garden, *there* tall fruit-trees grow ... *there* a vineyard was planted ... *there* neat vegetable-plots grow ...).<sup>34</sup> Different structures have different effects: Odysseus' list-like description of Goat-Island 'organises this empty landscape into a progression of four regions in terms of their utility to man: the wilderness suited to hunting, grazing land, farm land ..., and the site for a city with a spring and a good harbour'; the spatial description of Alcinous' palace gives the narratees a virtual tour of the palace, taking them 'across the threshold, into the great hall, past the fifty serving women at their tasks, out into the orchard, the vineyard, and the vegetable garden, and finally to the springs which supply the house and the town'.<sup>35</sup>

<sup>33</sup> Another example, on a smaller scale, is the description of the palace of Priam (*Il.* 6.242–250).

<sup>34</sup> Another example of a combination is the description of the harbour of Phorcys (*Od.* 13.96–112).

<sup>35</sup> A.T. Edwards 1993: 28; Minchin 2001: 117–118.

Shorter descriptions of objects or places<sup>36</sup> may also take the form of a list: e.g. Patroclus' spear is 'long-shadowed, huge, heavy, massive, and tipped with bronze' (*Il.* 16.801–802). The description typically is inserted at the moment this spear is actually shattered by Apollo, the retardation marking the moment of Patroclus' demise. Another example is found at the moment Hephaestus turns against the river Scamander, which threatens to drown Achilles, and burns 'the elms, willows, tamarisks, clover, rushes, and galingale that grew in abundance around the lovely stream of the river' (*Il.* 21.350–352). Only now do we get this close-up of the banks of the river, of which we had heard earlier that it was 'rich in flowers' (2.467–468).<sup>37</sup>

But much more often than being a mere list a Homeric description consists of a combination of different elements: (1) a summary description ('beautiful', 'shining'), (2) indications of material, workmanship, size, value, or a special feature, and (3) the history of the object. A typical example is the bow of Pandarus (*Il.* 4.105–111), which is well-polished (*summary description*), made of horn from a leaping goat (*material*) that he himself once had shot (*history*). The horns were sixteen palms long (*size*). These an artisan, polisher of horn, had fitted into a bow, smoothed to a fine polish (*workmanship*), and capped with a golden tip (*material and value*).

The history of the object usually concerns a remote or not-plot related past (as in the case of the bow of Pandarus),<sup>38</sup> but it may also, quite effectively, refer to the more recent past, e.g. when we hear that the clothes from which Hecuba chooses a robe for Athena 'had been brought from Sidon by godlike Alexander himself, as he sailed over the breadth of the sea on that same voyage when he brought Helen to Troy' (*Il.* 6.290–292).<sup>39</sup> Surely the most arresting example of this type is the internal analepsis found when Achilles, about to kill Hector and take his revenge for

<sup>36</sup> See Andersson 1976: 35–36; Minchin 2001:100–131; Grethlein 2008.

<sup>37</sup> Other examples: the rivers of the Trojan plain listed at the moment they collectively destroy the wall around the Greek camp (*Il.* 12.20–23); the countries visited by Menelaus on his way home (*Od.* 4.83–85).

<sup>38</sup> See *SAGN* 2: 21–22.

<sup>39</sup> Other examples: e.g. *Il.* 9.188 (the lyre that Achilles took when sacking Thebes); 11.20–23 (the corselet that Agamemnon got from the Cyprian Kinyres when he set out for Troy); 15.705–706 (the ship of Protesilaus, which brought him to Troy but not back home again); 16.222–224 (the chest of Achilles, which Thetis had given him when he set out for Troy); 23.560 (the thorax which Achilles took from Asteropaeus); *Od.* 9.197–207 (Maron's wine, which he gave Odysseus on the occasion of his sack of Ismarus).

Patroclus, scans his opponent's armour, 'which he [Hector] had stripped from mighty Patroclus when he killed him' (*Il.* 22.323). But the object's history may also take the form of an external *prolepsis*, e.g. when Helen gives Telemachus a robe, which 'should make him remember her and is to be worn by his wife at the time of their marriage' (*Od.* 15.125–128).<sup>40</sup>

This typical element of the 'genetic description', or the 'biography of things' has rightly attracted the attention of scholars. It may be due to the orality of the epics, since narration is cognitively easier than description,<sup>41</sup> but above all it is to be connected with the commemorative function of these texts: material goods are an important sign of status and something to be remembered by, and thus for the narrator to commemorate his heroes means including the often impressive histories of the objects they possess. Thus, it reflects positively on Odysseus to have a bow which once belonged to a mythical archer like Eurytus (*Od.* 21.32). Some objects have travelled not only through time but also through space, as is the case with Meriones' boar-tusk helmet, which, repeatedly changing owner, moved from Eleon to Cythera, to Crete and, finally, to Troy (*Il.* 10.266–271).<sup>42</sup>

Whatever the form of their description, space and objects without exception are inserted in order to fulfil various narrative functions.

### *Functions*

The function of space to *set the scene* for actions to come has already amply passed review. Very often the primary scene-setting function of space or props is accompanied by one or more secondary functions.

Highly important in the Homeric epics is the *symbolic* function of space.<sup>43</sup> The oak-tree standing near the Scaean gate means safety for the Trojans and their allies: the wounded Sarpedon is carried there (*Il.* 5.693) and Achilles notes that when he was still active Hector did not move beyond this point (9.354). The tomb of Ilus in the Trojan plain stands

<sup>40</sup> Other examples: *Od.* 4.591–592; 8.430–432; 24.83–84.

<sup>41</sup> Minchin 2001: 116 ('narrative is ... easier to call to mind and to perform because of its logical chain of cause and effect').

<sup>42</sup> Archaeology has shown that in historical reality, too, objects, exchanged as guest-gifts, travelled over long distances and accumulated 'biographies' or 'genealogies', sometimes made explicit in the form of inscriptions; see Crielaard 2002: 249–256.

<sup>43</sup> See Elliger 1975: 57–62; Griffin 1980: 1–49; Thornton 1984: 150–163.



for the royal family: it being surrounded by dust and blood when his descendants are chased and massacred by Agamemnon points up the dire straits Troy is in (11.166–169) and Paris leaning against it when shooting an arrow against Diomedes but barely wounding him reveals that he does not really live up to his family's heroic standard (11.369–372).<sup>44</sup> When Andromache throws off the elaborate headdress that she got from golden Aphrodite on the day of her marriage, this signals the loss of her happiness and safety now that her husband Hector has died (*Il.* 22.468–472). Odysseus aptly uses an object associated with guest-friendship, the bow that Iphitus gave him just before he was killed by his host Heracles (*Od.* 21.11–41), to kill the suitors, who, like Heracles, offend against the laws of hospitality.

The symbolism of an object may also be problematised, as happens famously when Agamemnon, about to announce the plan to attack that he has conceived on the basis of a false dream sent by Zeus, is said to lean on a sceptre with an impressive genealogy, reaching back to Zeus (*Il.* 2.100–109). There is clearly irony here, but what seems to be at issue as well is 'the difficulty of getting things right in a crisis for even the greatest of men. Even kings, who can expect backing from Zeus, are going to be victims of Zeus' deception if Zeus has so willed it ... The point might be that no one could wield the 'imperishable *skēptron*' like Zeus.'<sup>45</sup>

Other manifestations of space have a symbolic function that transcends the individual text in which they occur and that is, if not universal, at least widespread. We may think here of the association 'left = bad' and 'right = good', which comes to the fore explicitly e.g. at *Il.* 12.200–227, when Polydamas interprets the flight of a bird from the right to the left of the army as a bad omen;<sup>46</sup> the *locus amoenus* (represented by Calypso's habitat and Antinous' garden, which combine trees, water, breeze);<sup>47</sup> and mountains as typical places of danger, where uncivilized persons (the Cyclopes, *Od.* 9.113) or wild animals (e.g. lions: *Il.* 5.554; jackals: 11.474; wolves: 16.158) live or vehement natural forces rage (e.g. *Il.* 4.452–455).

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<sup>44</sup> Other examples: the Scamander-Xanthus (place of safety); the Scaean gate (the liminal space between the city and the plain); Achilles' new shield (the life which Achilles stands to lose); Odysseus' immovable bed (the solidity of his marriage); the olive, which symbolises culture (Odysseus meets with Athena under an olive tree, blinds the Cyclops with an olive stake, builds his marital bed from an olive tree).

<sup>45</sup> Easterling 1989: 111. For the ironic interpretation, see Griffin 1980: 10.

<sup>46</sup> For more examples, see Cuillandre 1944: 343–346.

<sup>47</sup> Schönbeck 1962: 61–77.

The interesting thing here is that, again, the typical nature of such *loci* is often destabilised when it become clear that for one character it has a different value. Thus Hermes may consider Calypso's habitat a *locus amoenus*, witness his admiration (5.75–76), but Odysseus is less appreciative: sitting on the beach he literally turns his back on it and longs for home. The sea is first and foremost a danger, as Odysseus (*Od.* 5.291–381) and sailors in similes experience (e.g. *Il.* 15.624–628), and, in the absence of ships, a barrier between one's present location and home (*Od.* 4.558–650). However, it is also a means to get to know other people (*Od.* 9.127–129), to accumulate goods (*Od.* 1.183–184), or to escape from war (*Il.* 1.140–154).<sup>48</sup> The city as the centre of legal, political, economic and religious power is generally considered superior to the countryside (fields, grazing lands, and wilderness), but in the second half of the *Odyssey* this hierarchy is turned upside down, when the city becomes vulgar and base, and the countryside noble.<sup>49</sup>

Extended descriptions may *mirror*—parts of—the plot, in a way comparable to embedded narratives.<sup>50</sup> The scenes of the two cities on Achilles' shield, including a teichoscopia, a debate over a peaceful settlement, a fight over dead bodies, and a dispute on whether to accept a price for a slain man (*Il.* 18.490–540), recall the *Iliad* itself.<sup>51</sup> The scene depicted on Odysseus' brooch, 'a hound holding a dappled fawn in its forepaws, gripping it while it struggled ... the dog was throttling the fawn in its grip and the fawn was scrabbling with its legs in the effort to escape' (*Od.* 19.228–231), anticipates the story: the dog stands for Odysseus, the fawn for the suitors, and the scene for his revenge on them.

Subtle and at the same effective is Homer's use of space to *characterize* people: when Hector finds Paris 'in his bedroom' sitting amongst the women and fussing over his armour (*Il.* 6.321–324), this is just as revealing of this hero as his 'wearing a leopard skin' when challenging the Greeks on the battlefield (3.17).<sup>52</sup> Likewise, the typical element of the workmanship in descriptions may contain characterizing information:

<sup>48</sup> See Lesky 1947: 149–197; Clare 2000.

<sup>49</sup> See A.T. Edwards 1993. For the views on city and nature in Homer, see also Giesecke 2007: 11–51.

<sup>50</sup> For embedded narratives in Homer, see SAGN 2: 22–24.

<sup>51</sup> See Andersen 1976, esp. 7 ('The Shield is ... a kind of mirror for the *Iliad*').

<sup>52</sup> Cf. Nastes, who went to war wearing gold (*Il.* 2.872–873) but is killed by Achilles; Euphorbus, who has his love-locks plaited in silver and gold (17.52) but is killed by Menelaus; and see Griffin 1980: 1–49.

Hephaestus, of course, has built his house himself (*Il.* 18.371), as has the loyal and industrious Eumaeus (*Od.* 14.7–8), while the barrack of Achilles is built ‘for their master’ by the Myrmidonians (*Il.* 24.449–450). When Patroclus does *not* take Achilles’ heavy Pelian spear, which only the latter can wield (*Il.* 16.140–144), this immediately signals that in the end he will prove no real stand-in for Achilles.

There seems to be only one sure example of the *psychologizing* function of space: the coast bordering on the loud-thundering, endless, or dark sea signals feelings of isolation or despondency, e.g. of Chryses (*Il.* 1.34), Achilles (*Il.* 1.348–350; 23.59–60; 24.12), or Odysseus (*Od.* 5.82–84). What happens much more often in Homer is that emotions are *compared to* natural phenomena in similes, e.g. when the panic of the Greeks is like two winds that come suddenly ‘and whip the fish-filled sea, the north wind and the west wind, blowing down from Thrace: the mass of the dark swell rears into crests, and piles the seaweed thick along the shore’ (*Il.* 9.1–8).

The phenomenon of *personification*, finally, is found throughout: ships ‘revel in a fair wind from Zeus’ (*Od.* 5.175–176); a spear ‘is eager to sate itself with man’s flesh’ (*Il.* 21.168); when Poseidon drives with his chariot over the sea, the sea ‘divides a path for him in joyfulness’ (*Il.* 13.27–29); and the river Scamander has human emotions and speaks in the shape of a man (*Il.* 21.212–382). It seems best to regard these passages as expressions of religious feeling and animistic thinking, rather than as instances of a literary device.<sup>53</sup>

### *Homeric Space and Reality*

Although strictly speaking a discussion of the extratextual existence of the space in a narrative text falls outside the boundaries of a narratological analysis, some words may be said on this subject, since it is such a much discussed one in Homer. The first question is the space of the narrator Homer and his narratees. Most scholars agree that this is Ionia, on the basis of the predominance of Ionian elements in his language. Then there is the question of the world described in his works: is it largely Mycenaean (1600–1200 BC), ‘dark age’ (1200–900 BC), eighth- or early seventh-century, or an amalgam? This is too large and complex a topic

<sup>53</sup> Discussion in Copley 1937: 195–200; Lesky 1947: 185–187; Elliger 1975: 64–69; Hurwitt 1982; and Jenkyns 1998: 21–59.

to even summarise here.<sup>54</sup> What is relevant, however, is that most localities mentioned in the main stories of *Iliad* and *Odyssey* are really existing ones (Ithaca, Pylos, Mycenae, and, most would now agree, Troy), even though quite a few of these cities had lost their grandeur and importance in the time of the narrator and narratees (which, though specified nowhere, is later than the time of the story).<sup>55</sup> The Catalogue of Ships in *Iliad* 2 serves amongst other things to present the narratees with a long list of towns and regions familiar to or even inhabited by them, thus establishing a close relationship between the world of the story and their own world.<sup>56</sup>

The phenomenon of the decor of the story occasionally having vanished by the time of the narrator is on one occasion illustrated very graphically: at *Il.* 12.13–33 the narrator reveals how after the fall of Troy Poseidon and Apollo will run the rivers of Troy against the wall that the Greeks built around their ships. When they are done, the wall will have been carried away into the sea, the deep shore will be covered once more with sand, and all signs of human activity, the ox-hide shields, the helmets, and the race of heroes will have disappeared. This memorable passage conveys more than one message: it may be, as Aristotle suggested, that the narrator wanted to explain why in his time the Greek wall, which probably was no more than a figment of his imagination, was no longer to be seen. It also rehearses the typically Homeric theme of human efforts being dwarfed by the power of the eternal gods. But above all it implies that only poetry can keep alive the memory of the past: who would know about Troy and the Trojan war if not for Homer and his epics?

Although Pylos or Mycenae refer to localities with a historical reality, this does not mean that *all the details* which the narrator mentions are equally historical. As we saw earlier, he inserts details when the action needs them and this already makes a certain degree of invention likely. Moreover, a tendency towards aggrandizement is typical of the epic genre, which sets out to commemorate the glorious past. There are also settings that do *not* correspond to historical places at all: Scheria and Ogygia in the main story, and all the stations of Odysseus' travels as recounted by himself, except for the first, the Ciconians in Thrace. Scholars, starting with the Alexandrian Eratosthenes in the second century

<sup>54</sup> For an overview, see e.g. Osborne 2004.

<sup>55</sup> See *SAGN* 1: 13.

<sup>56</sup> See Visser 1997: 16–48.

BC, have disputed the reality of Odysseus' travels, who, in their view, seems to have been blown off the map and into the world of fable.<sup>57</sup> Some have even suggested that it is not so much the Homeric narrator who is fabulising but Odysseus himself, wishing to impress his Phaeacian audience with another of his lying tales. This last position is firmly contradicted by that fact that the primary narrator at several places backs up the story of his hero (Thrinacia, 1.6–9; the Cyclops, 1.7–20; Circe, 8.448) and nowhere calls it a lying tale.<sup>58</sup> Homer seems to authenticate his own poem by making Odysseus label some of the places that he visits *klutos*, 'famous' (10.60, 87, 112). But perhaps more important than the reality of Odysseus' travel story is the way in which it can be read as a specimen of poetic anthropology or ethnographic imagination, an exploration of new worlds and cultural identities.<sup>59</sup>

### *Conclusion*

This chapter has shown that indications of space are sprinkled over the Homeric epics with a sure hand whenever the action needs them, and that they are sometimes carefully introduced at an earlier stage. Usually taking the form of small details, sometimes of synoptic descriptions, space creates settings, prepares for action to come, has a symbolic function, mirrors the plot, characterizes people, and signals moods. The similes open windows to other worlds, where nature is much more present, though hardly as an idyllic decor but more as the stage of violent action between beast and beast, or between man and nature. The close connection between space and action is also brought about by locations being focalized or described in speech by characters.

All in all, the qualification 'latent space' given by Andersson to Homeric space, in contrast to the 'visible space' of Virgil, does not do justice to the ubiquity of scenic details, which always have a function and meaning to the eyes of man, be it the narrator or his characters. The close integration of space and action in Homer also disproves the widespread idea that until the nineteenth century description merely had an ornamental function.

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<sup>57</sup> For an overview of the different hypotheses and reconstructions, see Wikipedia s.v. 'Geography of the Odyssey'.

<sup>58</sup> See S. Richardson 1996.

<sup>59</sup> See Hartog [1996] 2001 (esp. 24–36); Dougherty 2001.