PART ONE

EPIC AND ELEGIAC POETRY
CHAPTER ONE

HOMER

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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.¹ 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’.² 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’.³

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.⁴ Thus we hear about Pandarus’ bow when he uses it to wound

³ Bowra 1952: 132; Rackham 1990: 85.