Perceiving and Knowing in the Iliad and Odyssey

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The Homeric epics may contain a 'philosophy of' man, or the gods, or a 'philosophical world view' of the dome of the heavens and the encircling rivers, but they lack those features which usually mark off the beginning of distinctly philosophical thought: a critical attitude toward earlier views, the detection of inconsistencies, and the reduction of various phenomena to a single unifying principle. Homer does provide some of the vocabulary and motifs for later philosophers (e.g. Parmenides and Heraclitus) and he is at least mentioned by philosophers (Xenophanes and Heraclitus) who disagreed with what he said. But beyond this, there seems to be little of distinctly philosophical interest. Indeed, the very idea of philosophical content in oral poetry seems a priori unlikely.

This view of Homeric poetry is not without justification, but it is nevertheless unsatisfactory, and for two main reasons: the Iliad and the Odyssey are not all of a piece; in particular, they present quite different views of the nature of human experience and intellect. Second, the prominence in the Odyssey of the gap between perception and knowledge (or recognition, realization, understanding) should lead us to wonder whether 'pre-philosophical' is really a fair description. If, as is sometimes the case, philosophical thinking takes the form of reflection on the nature of our cognitive faculties (as for example in Heraclitus' Fr. 1), the Odyssey merits reconsideration. Before presenting the evidence from the epic to substantiate this claim, I want first to clear away a preliminary impediment arising from the distinctly oral character which Homeric poetry is now almost universally acknowledged to have. Is it really possible for philosophy to exist in an oral setting? If, as has been recently argued, philosophizing were an essentially literate phenomenon, then the idea of a 'Homeric philosophy' could be easily dismissed a priori, as easily perhaps as an illiterate nuclear physics or an oral biochemistry.

Literacy and Philosophy

The exact date of the emergence of literacy on the Greek mainland is not known. The epigraphical evidence does not warrant a date earlier than the late 8th century B.C.,¹ but the possibility of an earlier written language
cannot be absolutely excluded. There is evidence of a spread of literacy to various parts of Greece over the next three centuries.\(^2\) By the 5th century B.C. there was, at least in Athens, a substantial degree of literacy, but in this also it is difficult to be precise. Our conclusions must be based on disparate bodies of evidence and we cannot assume a uniform development of literacy in different settings. There is evidence relating to 5th century social and political life (e.g. the practice of ostracism which required 6000 citizens to write the name of the person on their potsherds), and evidence from the law courts (e.g. the initiation of a law suit by writing the graphe\(\) or complaint), and evidence from Greek drama (e.g. the line in Aristophanes' *Frogs*: "everyone is a reader these days"), and from the inscriptions on vases or public buildings, and from the surviving documents of commercial trade. The evidence is not of uniform value (literacy might spread at a different rate among different classes and sexes, or in different professions and activities) and it is not uncontroversial (the practice of ostracism is not the conclusive evidence some have believed it to be).\(^3\) It is reasonable to accept Aristotle's generalization as accurate at least for his own time: "reading and writing are useful in money making, in the management of a household, in the acquisition of knowledge, and in political life."\(^4\) Philosophical books moreover existed as early as Anaxagoras,\(^5\) and by the time of Plato and Aristotle, books, readers, and libraries were not uncommon.\(^6\)

When we go beyond rough generalizations, however, it becomes very difficult to specify who acquired alphabetic literacy where and when. If, moreover, we are to have any confidence that some specific philosophical innovation either presupposed or was caused by literacy, this is information that we cannot do without.

Consider for example the claim made by Watt and Goody:

\[\ldots\] some crucial features of Western culture came into being in Greece soon after the existence, for the first time, of a rich urban society in which a substantial portion of the population was able to read and write; and, consequently [my italics] the overwhelming debt of the whole contemporary civilization to classical Greece must be regarded as in some measure the result, not so much of the Greek genius, as of the intrinsic differences between non-literate (or proto-literate) and literate societies — the latter being mainly represented by those societies using the Greek alphabet and its derivatives.\(^7\)

Unfortunately, when so stated, the thesis is transparently implausible, as it is a simple *post hoc* fallacy: philosophy after literacy, therefore philosophy because of literacy. The argument can be bolstered by drawing attention to specific features of early philosophical thought, and arguing point by point that a particular philosophical innovation either required or resulted from