

Circe and the Poets: Theocritus IX. 35–36

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The Theocritean Ninth *Idyll* ends with a rather curious claim: "Those whom the Muses regard with favor Circe does not harm with her potion" (35–36).¹ Commentators on the passage have little to say, but two rather different kinds of interpretation have emerged somewhat fitfully. According to the first, song is an antidote to the cares of life. But that hardly meets the case in the Ninth *Idyll*; everyone, poet and audience alike, can be cheered by the minstrel's art, whereas Theocritus singles out a blessing available only to the poet.

A scholiast points the way toward another line of interpretation. Theocritus, he suggests, alludes (αἰνίττεται) to Homer's account of the contrary fortunes of Odysseus and his crew in their adventures with Circe. Odysseus survived Circe's magic because he was "wise" (σοφόν) and "beloved of the Muses" (Μούσαις φιλούμενον), while his crew succumbed because they were neither.² In other words, Circe represents a universal threat against which only the μουσικοί may prevail, for they live under a special kind of divine dispensation: "Der Sänger steht unter dem Schutz der Götter, auch eine Kirke kann ihm nichts anheben."³ Theocritus would not be the only poet to claim the protection of a divine shield, but the claim and the scholiast's gloss give rise to a number of questions. In what sense are the Muses protective deities? How can Odysseus be adduced as a paradigm of

¹ Few critics now believe that the poem is authentic: see A.S.F. Gow, *Theocritus*, vol. II (Cambridge 1952), pp. 185 ff. But see also Claude Meillier, "Quelques Nouvelles Perspectives dans L'Étude de Théocrite," *Revue des Études Grecques* xciv (1981), 318–24, on alleged problems in the text. I shall continue to refer to the author as Theocritus. If the text reads γαθεῦσιν rather than γαθεῦσαι (see Gow, p. 192), there will be a change of emphasis—"those the Muses regard with favor rejoice: those they do not, Circe harms"—but not of essential meaning.

² C. Wendel, *Scholia in Theocritum Vetera* (Leipzig 1927).

³ Erich Kaiser, "Odyssee-Szenen als Topoi," *Mus. Helv.* 21 (1964), 200. R.G.M. Nisbet and M. Hubbard declare that "conventionally the gods protect the good man and the poet," without suggesting what may lie behind the convention and the connection (*A Commentary on Horace: Odes Book I* [Oxford 1970], p. 262). Gow (above, note 1), p. 192, like Fritzsche before him, cites Tibullus III. 7. 61 without comment, but that passage explicitly refers to Ulysses, not to poets.

the poet's fortunes? And what precise threat does Circe pose, to heroes and poets alike?

Answers circle around the complex issue of *μανία*. "Madness" fascinated the ancients. It also puzzled them, but they consistently linked it with disassociation; Circe's power served as one of their mythical examples of the threat of psychic disintegration. Particularly vulnerable are "heroic" princes, since heroism reaches perilously high and wide; and those fired by the energies of the creative imagination. At the same time, only poets and princes have access to certain Odyssean resources that alone can ensure survival. This, at least, seems to be the tradition which the Theocritean verses echo, even if the poet in this instance recalls the myth more as a rhetorical flourish than as an article of faith.⁴

But cannot Theocritus have meant simply, "song (the Muses) comforts the poet beset by life's cares (Circe)"? If "cares" can comprise life's most exacting challenges that put us all on our mettle, then this interpretation of Circe is attested in at least one passage. Tibullus, commending Messalla as an even greater hero than Ulysses, cites the latter's exemplary conquest not only of Circe but also of his many other adversaries (III. 7. 52-81). He gives us a condensed version of the entire *apologos*, he refers neither directly nor indirectly to Muses, and he grounds his hero's triumph in his *audacia* (52) and his *labor* (81). The great man surmounts all obstacles, Circe among them. But it is one thing to generalize Circe's potion by making of it a typical challenge facing the hero throughout his labors. It is another, for example, to pair Circe and Medea as sorceresses whose draughts offer the despairing lover an alternative to the consolation of his Muse (Tib. II. 4. 55; cf. Theoc., *Id.* II. 15 ff.). And it is yet another to isolate Circe altogether in a context of poetry, attack, and defense. As the scholiast realized, Theocritus' image sends us directly back to Odysseus' encounter with Circe, and only Circe. The Homeric scene as a self-contained episode became a favorite topos in later literature.⁵ It served various rhetorical purposes, but always central to the topos was the theme of *labor* and divine support combining not only to overcome danger but to end in delight. The hero frustrates Circe's designs. More than that, he finds the means to enjoy her charms to the full, and without penalty. Circe is a special kind of "care."

We shall return to Circe and the hero's divine aid. As for the interpretation of song as alleviation of care, it is valid for such passages as Horace, *Odes* I. 32. 15, where the poet speaks of song as a *lenimen*,⁶ but

⁴ On Theocritus and the Muses, see Frederick T. Griffiths, *Theocritus at Court* (Leiden 1979), pp. 48 ff.; also Thomas G. Rosenmeyer, *The Green Cabinet* (Berkeley and Los Angeles 1969), pp. 146-48.

⁵ See Kaiser (above, note 3), 201-03.

⁶ Cf. Apoll. Rhod., *Argon.* III. 897 ff. On poetry as performance to alleviate harsh emotions, see Gilbert Lawall, *Theocritus' Coan Pastorals* (Harvard 1967), pp. 7 ff. On the application of this kind of interpretation to *Idyll* XI, see K. J. Dover, *Theocritus: Select Poems* (London

falls short in *Idyll IX*. Theocritus says that Circe οὐτι . . . δαλήσατο, "does not harm" (gnomic aorist), with her potion the man favored by the Muses. The Muses here do not help the poet cope with distress, they prevent him from being harmed. The Odyssean echo is appropriate: Homer's hero did not find consolation that alleviated or cured a condition of existing pain; he drew upon heroic qualities that enabled him to master a new threat and finally enjoy its source. Song as consolation anyway runs into the question, rarely addressed but crucial to the present study, of what distinctive blessings the Muses bestow on the poet. By the "Muses" Theocritus cannot simply mean "song." The consolations of song are available to everyone, for any frazzled soul can turn to a θεῖος ἀοιδός to cheer him (Hes., *Theog.* 98–103). The therapeutic properties of a poem, from simple lyric to full-scale epic, may include its soothing rhythms, its didactic content (for example a cautionary or inspirational message), the opportunities it affords for identification with examples of heroic humanity, and the redemptive power of its mythological symbols. But what are the Muses for the poet, and the poet alone?

There is one form of consolation open only to the bard, namely the power to sing when all other faculties are in decline (e.g. Aesch., *Ag.* 72–82, 104; Eur., *H.F.* 638–40, 673–79), but that can hardly be the meaning of Theocritus' verse. Nor can the benefit described by Callimachus: "those the Muses look upon favorably when young they do not abandon when their locks turn grey" (*Ep.* 21. 5 ff.); that is, true talent is innate and endures (cf. Hor., *Odes* IV. 3. 2). We need to know what the Muses actively do to protect the poet.

What does "by the Muses" mean when we hear of Sappho as Μούσαις εὐφώνις ἰωμένη τὸν ἔρωτα? Does she comfort her condition with song? With any song? Or does "by the Muses" mean "by virtue of being a poet"? Our informant, Plutarch, paraphrasing Philoxenos, had more than distraction in mind, for he says first "she speaks things truly mixed with fire and through her songs gives expression to the heat from her heart."⁷ At issue is how the poet "gives expression to" (ἀναφέρει) her passions in the form of song, and so obtains relief. In the course of time, certainly by the Hellenistic period, the Muses became unambiguously metaphorical,⁸ an aspect of the poet's inner resources. The concept of the Muses as part of the poet's self might even be reflected in the Ninth *Idyll*, if there is any method in the comparisons that precede the reference to Circe: "as the cicada is dear to the cicada, the ant to the ant, and the hawk to the hawk, so to me the Muse and song" (31–35). These comparisons are of the type "like prefers

1972), pp. 173 ff. On the larger implications of poetry as therapy, see Bennett Simon, *Mind and Madness in Ancient Greece* (Ithaca 1978), pp. 87, 115, 147, 283.

⁷ Plut., *Am.* 762 ff.; cf. Page, *Poetae Melici Graeci*, 822.

⁸ The foundation study of this development is J. Croissant's, in *Aristote et les mystères* (Paris 1932). See too Steele Commager, *The Odes of Horace* (New Haven 1962), pp. 2–10, 17.

like,"⁹ so confirming the likeness of poet and Muse; which is to say that they are mirroring accounts of the one creative imagination. To claim that the Muses favor and protect the poet is to imply a special power within him that enables him to overcome certain problems. Manifestly, a poet may fail in his declared aim, for example to beguile the beloved into reciprocal passion. Yet every "successful" poem is, however tragic its theme or unresolved its crisis, by definition a solution of some sort. We must distinguish, then, between the ostensible problem, which may remain intractable, and the problem which the Muses always help the poet solve, precisely because he is a poet.

Something of a consensus has emerged in the considerable literature on the love-sickness of Simaetha in *Idyll* II and, especially, of Polyphemus in *Idyll* XI, to the effect that they solve their problems by "working through" them (a Freudian concept) in cathartic song.¹⁰ The Cyclops is hardly distracted or consoled; he sings of his love without cease for much of the poem, and it is a painful experience. And, like many another ancient wooer, he fails to seduce his beloved through sweet flattery seductively packaged. What in fact happens is that by means of the Muses he scotches his μανία, and so, for the moment at least, comes to his senses (XI. 72). In what manner is this happy outcome attributable to the Cyclops' Muse? Polyphemus succeeds to the extent that Theocritus creates for him a harmonious song. That the song is harmonious few would deny; it is therefore enough for our present purpose to draw attention to two moments which particularly suggest that "by the Muses" means in the Cyclops' case "by virtue of being a poet." Early in the song we hear that Polyphemus φάρμακον εὔρε (17, "found a cure"). The verb εὐρίσκειν can refer to any kind of discovery, not least of a generalized solution (e.g. *Id.* II. 95) or of a medical cure (e.g. Soph., *El.* 875). It can also, in simple or compound form, express the notion of poetic invention, as in Pindar's finding "a path of words" (*Ol.* 1. 110) and in Plato's description of Tynnachus' paean as εὐρημά τι Μουσῶν (*Ion* 534d). Since Theocritus follows φάρμακον εὔρε

⁹ See Gow (above, note 1), pp. 191 ff.

¹⁰ Although a recent trend is to argue that Polyphemus is not really cured (the issue may be more semantic than substantive): see Edward W. Spofford, "Theocritus and Polyphemus," *American Journal of Philology* 90 (1960), 22-35; R. Schmid, "Theocritus 11. The purblind poet," *Classical Journal* 70.4 (1975), 32-36; Meillier (above, note 1), 325-27. Dover (above note 6), pp. 173 ff., echoes the long-standing view that Polyphemus "soothed his pains." He cites *Id.* X. 22 ff., but this passage is clearly a happy love song to sweeten agricultural toil. Ettore Bignone, *Teocrito* (Bari 1934), pp. 201 ff., finds in *Idyll* XI a sequence familiar in tragic drama, a crescendo toward *limite di follie* before the moment of sudden catharsis that immediately follows. E. B. Holtmark emphasizes the Cyclops' Apollonian act of self-discovery ("Poetry as Self-Enlightenment: Theocritus 11," *Transactions of the American Philological Association* 97 [1966], 253-59). (On therapy as self-knowledge, see Simon [above n. 6], pp. 141-43). See also Anna Rist, *The Poems of Theocritus* (Chapel Hill 1978), pp. 102-04; and F. T. Griffiths, "Poetry as Pharmakon in Theocritus *Idyll* II," *Arktouros: Hellenic Studies Presented to Bernard M. W. Knox* (New York 1979), pp. 81 ff.

immediately with ἄειδε ("he began to sing"), we are encouraged to hear an allusion to poetic invention. What Polyphemus discovers is a φάρμακον. The term is most appropriate in a text that echoes medical practice,¹¹ but it also suggests song as a spell, an ἐπαοιδή (cf. Callim., *Ep.* 46. 1), a construction of magically compelling power that works inexorably on the singer himself, bringing him to his senses and so curing him of his μανία (X1. 72).

Toward the close of the poem an editorial comment sums up how the Cyclops' φάρμακον works: "and so he ἐποίμαινεν" his passion (80). The verb ποιμαίνειν, "to shepherd," carries the associated meanings of "soothe," "beguile," "cheat" in a number of passages; so *LSJ* interpret its use in the Eleventh *Idyll*. But, as Gow noted, the meaning "keep under control" or "guide in the right way" is also surely present.¹² In view of the Cyclops' occupation, we take seriously the pleasant pun in the verb's literal meaning. As early as Homer ποιμήν, a shepherd, served as a metaphor for kings (e.g. *II. II.* 243), denoting a power to master, order, control what would otherwise be inclined to behave randomly, and so chaotically. This is also the characteristic power of poetry itself. Just as φάρμακον εὔρε is followed by ἄειδε, so ἐποίμαινεν is followed by μουσίσδων (81 ff.).¹³ We remember that νόμος ("strain") and νομός ("pasture") are etymologically related as expressions of order. What Polyphemus "shepherds" is his erotic μανία, achieving through his art an awareness of his proper place in the scheme of things (Galatea belongs to the sea, he to the land) and emotional equilibrium.

Again, however, we confront the question of what, if anything, distinguishes Polyphemus from other ailing lovers with remedial music at their disposal. Cannot his audience experience passions similar to his and, through the power of his song, find similar release? Does Polyphemus' cathartic experience really enable us to understand how the poet himself is to be understood as specially blessed?

It does only if we concentrate on the poet's creative experience itself as something denied, even vicariously, to his audience. It is an essential paradox of art, as Aristotle well knew, that it does not obliterate painful experiences, but turns them into beautifully tolerable forms.¹⁴ If that paradox is, or usually is, a source of gratification for the listener, it is crucially and excruciatingly redemptive for the inspired imagination that brings art into being. Not that the ancients knew a great deal about what

¹¹ On medical imagery in the *Idyll*, see especially H. Erbse, "Dichtkunst und Medizin in Theokrits 11 *Idyll*," *Mus. Helv.* 22 (1965), 232-36; also Meillier (above, note 1), 325-27.

¹² Gow (above, note 1), p. 220. For a full consideration of possible meanings of ποιμαίνειν, see Pierre Monteil, *Théocrite* (Paris 1968), p. 139.

¹³ The verb ποιμαίνειν is closely linked with the poet's task at Pind., *Ol.* 11. 8-9: τὰ μὲν ἀμετέρα γλῶσσαι ποιμαίνειν ἐθέλει (a reference to praise without envy).

¹⁴ ἃ γὰρ αὐτὰ λυπηρῶς ὀρώμεν, τούτων τὰς εἰκόνας τὰς μάλιστα ἠκριβωμένας χαίρομεν θεωροῦντες (*Poet.* 1448b10).

inspiration is, nor that we are much wiser than they. But, as Bennett Simon has well observed, "Greek culture stood in awe of creativity."¹⁵ Systematic thinkers tried, perplexedly, to articulate a *μανία* of inspiration that is somehow not a disease but a blessing. And artists found a series of powerful images, of which the encounter between Odysseus and Circe is one, to express their intuitions about something that mattered greatly while remaining largely incomprehensible.

The Eleventh *Idyll* makes a number of points, at least indirectly: that art as process is therapeutic and mysteriously so; that the poet's pain, even thoughts of suicide and fear of death, are inseparable from the poem's beauty and the pleasure it gives; that the poet redeems the pain by finding a shape to "work it out"; that the result is, for the poet, self-knowledge and emotional stability. At the same time, the Cyclops is not cured forever. As lovers, he and Galatea illustrate the fluctuating pattern of erotic flight and pursuit (cf. *Id.* VI. 6–19). And as poet, Polyphemus succeeds here as he failed before and might fail again; poetic "cure" can be only temporary, since each act of creativity is an opening of oneself to a new chaos and a new struggle to transform it into art, and so to redeem it. And yet, as long as he proves himself to be a *ποιητής*, a "maker," the poet is more sure of salvation than the rest of us. Or so the artists themselves believe. Mr. Graham Greene is surely not the first, nor Mr. Philip Larkin the last, to wonder how those without a creative gift survive the assaults of a *μανία* that is inescapably part of the human condition, and yet also, for good as well as ill, a special power in the artist's imagination. In the Eleventh *Idyll* song is both a symptom of the Cyclops' problem (13 ff.) and the means to resolve it (17 ff.). This apparent contradiction has puzzled some commentators,¹⁶ but it is an instance where the Muse reveals several sides of her ambiguous nature. The Greeks used the same word, *πάθος*, for "what happens" and for "emotion," that is, for the event and for the feelings it gives rise to; these in turn generate the urge to compose. "Ἔρωσ as the object of song is the clearest example—external force, internal response, painful experience rehearsed, the impetus to "compose."¹⁷ The Cyclops' song is erotic *μανία* rehearsed and therefore relived. It is also the *μανία* of inspirational energy forged out of pain. And it is the drive to compose marshalled against the forces of dislocation.

There are therefore different levels at which a poem may be said to succeed. The poet who fails in his ostensible object, for example to win the affections of his beloved, may at least claim that his song has served him as an anodyne. But he may, like Medea and Tibullus, admit that not even that

¹⁵ Simon (above, note 6), p. 150.

¹⁶ On the double role of song, see Ph.-E. Legrand, *Études sur Théocrite* (Paris 1898), pp. 70–75. Gow too (above, note 1), p. 211, finds the contradiction intolerable.

¹⁷ "Love makes poets" (Eur., *fr.* 663; see Gow, above, note 1, p. 209, on Nicias' version). On the broad question of emotion and art, see Horace: *format enim Natura prius nos intus ad omnem/fortunarum habitum . . . /post effert animi motus interprete lingua* (A.P. 108–11).

measure of consolation can always be achieved (Apoll., *Argon.* III. 948 ff.; Tib. II. 4. 15).¹⁸ But we must not confuse thematic and aesthetic success. Sometimes they coincide, for example in tragedies like *Oedipus the King*¹⁹ which explore sickness and its cure. Very often, however, lyric art in particular relishes the irremedial condition of its sentiments. The Eleventh *Idyll* is a song of sickness and cure, but if it resembles tragedy it does so as an amusing parody.²⁰ One of the reasons why the Muse cures here rather than merely deadens the singer's pain is surely because it is offered to a doctor familiar with medical processes and used to thinking of disease and cure,²¹ while also himself "beloved of the Muses," a "scion of lovely-voiced Graces" (*Id.* XI. 6; XXVIII. 7). The Cyclops' song is both the rehearsal of pain and the means to its cure. It fails in its ostensible object, the seduction of Galatea, yet succeeds anyway because Polyphemus hits on the secret of poetic invention. The *Idyll* is a striking example of poetry's peculiar ability to triumph over itself in creating ἀρμονία:²² in Longinus' words τέχνη brings to order the poet's "nature," his φύσις, in its sublime form ἐκβολή τοῦ δαίμονιου πνεύματος, "transportation by divine energy" (II. 1-2, XXXIII. 5).

The Muse, then, can mean "song" as a delightful experience able to reduce care. More profoundly, the Muse can personify the creative imagination, something unique to the creator. Ancient iconography often places the Muse, whether song or inspiration, in an agonistic setting. In particular, she keeps her favorites free from harm, on more than one occasion shielding them against the designs of Circe. Circe's classic encounter is with Odysseus in the tenth book of the *Odyssey*. It is an encounter that has nothing to do explicitly with the Muses, but the scholiast's suggestion that there is a link is well founded. Later accounts merely made the link explicit.

As the *Odyssey* represents it, Odysseus' visit to Aeaëa is one in a series of scenes that test the hero's identity against less or more civilized experiences and describe his triumphs. That the divine help he receives suggests "double determination" is an argument that today scarcely needs to be documented. Ancient commentators went further, reducing the Homeric gods to personifications of the hero's inner qualities, and could do so without fatally violating the spirit of the original. A critical tradition interpreted Hermes as λόγος and the *moly* he gives Odysseus as ἀρετή or

¹⁸ And cf. Theoc., *Id.* III, where the poet remains dejected, despite the hopeful example of Atalanta and Hippomanes.

¹⁹ Bignone (above, note 10), p. 202.

²⁰ E.g., the motif of suicidal despair of *Id.* III. 53 ff. ("I'll lie here and die") becomes "I'll tell [my mother] my head and feet hurt, so she may suffer as I suffer" (XI. 67-71). Vergil's Second *Eclogue* (69) provides a more serious parallel.

²¹ See Gow (above, note 1), p. 219, on σφύσσειν at 71.

²² Longinus calls composition a kind of "ἀρμονία of words" (XXXIX. 3).

λόγος.²³ Which is to say that the hero's success against Circe is one example of the theme that runs through the entire *Odyssey* and indeed ancient culture, order as the supreme virtue. The erotic focus in this episode is unmistakable, to the extent that later accounts took Circe as a type of the "bewitching" hetaira and the crew's submission as ἐξ ἡδονῆς ἀλογία.²⁴ We may add that Odysseus not only tames, he finally benefits from what was for his crew merely an enormous threat, the sexual energy of a beautiful goddess who would turn her victims into fawning beasts. The hero triumphs because he applies against female wiles the Odyssean qualities of foresight, preparation, resolve, and masculine aggression (his drawn sword representing, not for the only time in ancient art and literature, both martial and phallic energy).

If there is a connection with art, it begins with the fact that the hero Odysseus is also no mean poet (*Od.* XI. 368).²⁵ Hesiod's account of the relation between the Muses (specifically Calliope) and princes is not as clear as it might be (*Theog.* 77-93).²⁶ He attributes to βασιλεῖς the gift of wise speech from which flow wise judgments in court. Beyond that, we may think of the extraordinary nature of heroic energy, comparable to artistic energy, and of the not rare conjunction of the two in the same man. We recall not only soldier-poets like Archilochus, but the heroization of Sophocles (and the perhaps heroizing belief in Vergil's magical powers that sprang up after his death). Both Achilles and Odysseus sing as well as act. The latter, the very ideal of the civilized man, better exemplifies the connection. As hero he must harness the energies of a Circe to his own advantage and to the larger demands of civilized life. As poet he must remember the past in all its painful details and reassemble them in song, shaping its enormous energies, again in the interests of personal and communal order. The Muses' associations with ἁρμονία apply at each level. Odysseus' skills as a poet reflect his larger ability to embody the value that is centrally espoused, threatened, and restored throughout the *Odyssey*. Two images may be particularly relevant here: the oath that he forces upon Circe, since the oath is a delicate instrument of rational, civilized life, yet grounded in and guarded by the Furies, those embodiments of chthonic power; and Odysseus himself, "bound" as he enjoys the immensely threatening and attractive song of the Sirens, master of himself and of the music.²⁷

²³ See Kaiser (above, note 3), 208-10.

²⁴ See Kaiser (above, note 3), 201, 203. Servius says of Circe (*Aen.* VII. 19): *haec libidine sua et blandimentis homines in ferinam vitam deducebat.*

²⁵ A later tradition has him offer "spells and binding songs" to help the Cyclops in his courtship of Galatea: see Dover (above, note 6), p. 174.

²⁶ See M. L. West, *Hesiod: Theogony* (Oxford 1966), pp. 181 ff.

²⁷ Homer is silent on the Siren's instrument of death (one supposes shipwreck and cannibalism); he speaks only of the danger of their "voice" and "song" (*Od.* X. 236; cf. 472).

Odysseus' visit to Circe's isle resembles, in origin probably was, a crossing into Hades itself,²⁸ and it is its chthonic center that makes the Circe episode particularly relevant to notions of art. When Plato describes the poet as ἐρμηνεύς τῶν θεῶν (*Ion*, 534c), we are reminded that Hermes was not merely a glorified messenger boy,²⁹ but the personification of what connects chthonic, mortal, and Olympian realms of existence and of the relevance of this connection to the mediating role of seer and poet.³⁰ At this level, the contest between Odysseus and Circe takes on pointed significance as a contest between Hermes and Circe: θεός against θεός, magic against magic, power against power. Circe is a singer, a spellbinder,³¹ and a source of information who knows all about the Sirens and all about Hades. She is a θεός yet one completely remote from the rational imperatives of Olympian structure. Her locale is ἱερός (*Od.* X. 275), "infused with power," but totally isolated, her palace a demonic parody of the civilized palace. What she threatens is to transform. Unlike his crew, Odysseus does not "forget his homeland,"³² he is not changed from man into beast, he does not become "unmanned" in intercourse³³ (ἀνῆνορα, X. 301). This erotic imagery of dislocation may also remind us that disassociation lies at the heart of triumphant μανία in all its forms. One either avoids it, or one encounters it in some way and survives it. Heroes and poets must take the second route. It is Hermes who ensures Odysseus' salvation. He is also a θεός, like Circe chthonic and magical in some degree but also, unlike Circe and like the Apollonian Muses, Olympian, rational, constructive. Not surprisingly he becomes a patron god of poets.

The contest between Odysseus and Circe occupied no slight place in the ancient imagination and was entirely relevant to notions of art. We

²⁸ See Ch. Mugler, "Circe et la Nécessité," *Annales de la Faculté de l'Université de Nice* (1979), 59–65.

²⁹ See F.J.M. De Waele, *The Magic Staff or Rod in Graeco-Italian Antiquity* (Ghent 1927), p. 32. He compares *Il.* XXIV.33 ff.; *Od.* V.28 ff.; 24. 1 ff., but Circe and the magic *moly* establish a unique context relevant to magic and art. See Norman O. Brown's argument that the pre-Homeric herald was a "sound maker" like the bard, that the origins of song and poetry are likely to be found in the intoned formulae of magical incantations, and that it is not surprising therefore to find a deity who is at once herald, magician, and patron of poets (*Hermes The Thief* [New York 1947], pp. 31 ff.).

³⁰ Horace calls the poet *sacer interpretisque deorum* (*A.P.* 391), and *vir Mercurialis* (*Odes* II. 17. 29 ff.). Commager (above, note 8) notes that all the gods who protect Horace—Mercury, Bacchus, Faunus—have something to do with poetry (p. 342).

³¹ *Od.* X. 221. Tibullus emphasizes the point: [Circe] *apta vel herbis/aptaque vel cantu veteres mutare figuras* (III. 7. 62–63; cf. Verg., *Ecl.* 8. 70). In Ovid she sings spells "learned from Hecate" (*Met.* XIV. 44); and her rival for Picus is Canens, "Singing Girl" (*Met.* XIV. 337 ff.).

³² *Od.* X. 236. If your homeland no longer exists for you, your identity no longer exists, so it is vital that Odysseus "remember" it (X. 472). The danger of forgetting also reminds us that the power of the singer is precisely to remember (the Muses are the daughters of Mnemosyne) and so preserve the meaning of the past and the identity that is rooted there.

³³ Because of sex with a goddess, but more generally because *all* sex threatens impotence with loss of semen: see Anne Giacomelli, "Aphrodite and After," *Phoenix* 34. 1 (1980), 16–19.

considered earlier the passage in Tibullus where Circe submits to Odysseus' *audacia*, a fate she shares with many others. There is a more telling parallel in Horace's *Epistles* (I. 2. 23 ff.) which identifies Ulysses' enemy as only Circe and the Sirens, and which speaks more nearly to the poet's task. Préaux reads the emphasis here as entirely on Circe,³⁴ although the Sirens too (unlike the Cyclops) are wholly appropriate to represent dangerous energy confronted, mastered, and enjoyed. Horace does not give Ulysses a supporting deity, but the Homeric paradigm is implicit. In Préaux' view, Horace here puts in relief "la sauvegarde accordée par Mercure aux sages," a subtle indication of Horace's own devotion to Mercury as god of a certain kind of intelligence vital to the poet.³⁵ What is at stake? It would be too much to expect that the question of creativity which fascinated but perplexed thinkers like Plato, Aristotle, and Longinus should be made articulate in poetry, however discursive. There are times when Horace defines poetry as a soothing art, a *lenimen* (*Odes* I. 32. 15). However, he so often imagines it as a saving force, even a life-saver, that one may legitimately find in it more than consolation. He tells us that in childhood the gods enabled him to sleep safe from "vipers and bears" (*Odes* III. 4. 9-20). These clearly are threats in the imagination, witnesses to an acutely disturbing sensitivity in the child's psyche but one tempered by a powerful capacity to achieve tranquillity. Here is the making of the poet.

As an adult, Horace still talks of protective gods: *di me tuentur* (*Odes* I. 17. 13), but in this same ode it is Faunus who is singled out, the god elsewhere called guardian of *Mercurialium virorum* (*Odes* II. 17. 27-30). Mercury himself assists the poet, saving him at Philippi (*Odes* II. 7. 13 ff.), while this god's lyre is said to be able to stay swift rivers and calm the *immanis . . . ianitor aulae* (*Odes* III. 11. 14-16). More generally it is the Muses who shield the poet: it is they, now, who protect him from the falling tree and death at Philippi, and who also ensure him safe passage should he journey over the *insanientem Bosphorum* or other wild regions (*Odes* III. 4. 21-36). Such adult "monsters" include autobiographical details, but even these are mythologized to the level of Cerberus, "enemies" rising in the imagination yet at the same time becoming part of the poem's redemptive form and a source of its delight. One of the poet's correlatives of disorder is the wolf, *lupus* (*Odes* I. 22. 9), a word perhaps akin to *lussa*, "madness."³⁶ Critics are divided on whether it is love or song that saves the poet on this occasion,³⁷ but the lover-poet is scarcely a divisible concept in such poems. It is singing of the beloved (*dum meam canto Lalagen*) that

³⁴ Jean Préaux, *Q. Horatius Flaccus: Epistulae, liber primus* (Paris 1968), p. 52.

³⁵ Préaux (above, note 34), *ibid.*

³⁶ Nisbet and Hubbard (above, note 3) compare the lion in Dioscorides (*A.P.* VI. 220), who is chased off by a pure priest of Cybele with his tambourine (pp. 261 ff.). But the image of the wolf may have a sharper point, if the etymology is sound: see Simon (above, n. 6) who also notes the parallel of "berserk" and "bearskin" (pp. 68; 209, n. 38).

³⁷ On the history of the argument, see Nisbet and Hubbard (above, note 3), pp. 261 ff.

does the trick. This ode is an exemplary poem about the man who is *integer vitae scelerisque purus*. What *ars* aspires to is *integritas*. We might be reminded of the *integri fontes* in which the Muses of Lucretius (I. 927 ff.; IV. 2 ff.) and of Horace (*Odes* I. 26. 6) rejoice. Apart from the allusion here to waters uncharted before by Roman poets,³⁸ there is also the suggestion that the waters of inspiration are a mysterious source of both energy and wholeness.

In the *Epistle* Horace gives advice to a young man embarking on the study of philosophy, reminding him that Ulysses defeated his bogies by application of *virtus* and *sapientia* (17). While the explicit context is philosophy, the philosophical and poetical lives were always intimately associated in Horace's mind;³⁹ each requires that order triumph over the dark forces of disorder, however alluring these might be. In the *Epistle* he describes Circe as *domina meretrix* (25). This is the topos of the hetaira as a symbol of what stands aggressively between the philosopher or poet and his goal. Tupet equates Circe's potion here with "déraison,"⁴⁰ to which we would add that Circe herself is a madness not to be avoided but absorbed—the trained colt and hunting dog retain their animal energy (*Ep.* I. 2. 62–67), the tamed Circe her sexual attraction. Horace has the Muses save the mighty Octavian, guaranteeing the boon of peace and so "re-creating" him (*recreatis*, *Odes* III. 4. 40), nourishing him within the Pierian cave before his rebirth as the incarnation of Rome's new, peaceful destiny.⁴¹ The struggle gives way to, redirects its energies into, the heroic, philosophical, and poetical forms of victory.

We do less than justice to Horace and to the tradition if we interpret the poet's multiple enemies as merely the turmoils of life against which poetry serves as a kind of anodyne. All the threatening images are extremely violent, the strange violence of nature and of the bestial; all are given full expression by the poet, and all, not least Circe, are finally transfigured by poetry's ordering power.⁴² They point to a kind of chaotic and awesome energy that Plato called *μανία Μουσῶν* (a paradox we shall take up shortly). But did Horace really believe that such *μανία* lay at the heart of his own craft? "Madness" remains an ill-defined concept, especially in the

³⁸ See Commager (above, note 8), pp. 11, 327.

³⁹ Terms like *virtus*, *pietas*, and *sapere* can carry both moral and aesthetic force in Horace: see Commager (above, note 8), pp. 328–30, 341; also R. W. Johnson, *The Idea of Lyric: Lyric Modes in Ancient and Modern Poetry* (Berkeley and Los Angeles 1982), pp. 141 ff.

⁴⁰ Ann-Marie Tupet, *La Magie dans la Poésie Latine* (Paris 1976), p. 329.

⁴¹ Commager (above note 8), p. 195.

⁴² See Commager (above, note 8), p. 327, on *Odes* II. 19: "animal energy submits to a principle of order." On the Horatian perception of the dangers of following inspiration (*Odes* III. 4. 5–8), G. Williams claims that it is merely because his subject matter is new and difficult—to treat political matters in verse (*Tradition and Originality in Roman Poetry* [Oxford 1968], p. 70). Elsewhere Williams attributes to Horace a universal law of life, but does not extend it to his poetics: "brute force, devoid of judgment, produces its own destruction," in *The Third Book of Horace's Odes* (Oxford 1969), p. 50.

context of creativity,⁴³ but it is one of antiquity's favorite terms for poetic inspiration. Horace, however, explicitly rejects the "mad" poet (*vesanus; qui furit*) as merely insane, and by the same token incompetent, taking issue with Democritus who would exclude *sanos poetas* from Helicon. And he cites Empedocles as an example of an "inspired" poet who took the concept of his divinity so seriously he leaped into Etna to prove it. Good riddance to him, says Horace (*A.P.* 296 ff., 464–66). A number of critics have emphasized the role of "natural talent" (*ingenium*) and hard work (*labor*) in Horatian art and believe that the concept of manic inspiration is irrelevant, indeed antithetical, to it.⁴⁴ Others disagree. Brink, for example, has argued that Horace's image of the mad poet is a caricature and that in Horace himself must be "a generous measure of the quality so caricatured." The mad poet's verses are "lethal . . . not only to himself but to the community," which is to say that Horace was acutely aware, for all the ironic distancing of his poetic voice, of the "safety device" of *ars* that restrains the poet from destroying himself.⁴⁵

The truth of the matter eludes us, mostly because the nearness of inspirational madness to pathological madness remains an intuitive rather than proven concept and seems to apply in different degrees to different artists. But ancient and modern terminology points stubbornly to an identification. Even so cool a poet as Horace is at least intellectually aware of it, and in his most lyrical poetry resorts to pregnant imagery to express it. The subject of *μανία* is vast and complex, but is inescapably linked to unusual states of mind. The author of the pseudo-Aristotelian *Problems* observed: "All [my italics] who have achieved eminence in philosophy, politics, poetry, or the arts are demonstrably *μελαγχολικοί*" (*Prob.* 953a); he specifies the insanity of such heroes as Heracles and Ajax, and the "atrabilious" disposition of such lesser men as Empedocles, Plato, and Socrates. Nietzsche found the explanation of such widespread *μελαγχολία* in the particular conditions of Greek culture, especially the fanatical and defensive Greek preoccupation with the ideal of rationality.⁴⁶ But the legendary fates of Orpheus, torn to pieces by Maenads with their discordant song, his lyre overcome (Ovid, *Met.* XI. 3–20), Sappho, Empedocles, and Lucretius also imply an ancient perception of melancholy and self-

⁴³ See Simon (above, note 6), pp. 148–51.

⁴⁴ Especially Commager (above, note 8), pp. 24, 27, 45, 49. Ovid, himself a most calculating poet, has Sappho sing that she weeps and bums, then deny that she can fashion a song in this mood! (*Heroid.* XV. 7–10, 13 ff.). Nisbet and Hubbard tend to emphasize the conventionality of Horace's odes and find humor everywhere: e.g., Horace "humorously" calls himself a *vir Mercurialis* (*A Commentary on Horace: Odes Book II* [Oxford 1977], p. 286; cf. 106 ff., 115).

⁴⁵ C. O. Brink, *Horace on Poetry: the 'Ars Poetica'* (Cambridge 1971), pp. 421–29; also *Horace on Poetry: Epistles Book II* (Cambridge 1982), pp. 316, 327, on madness and creativity in the "higher" forms of poetry, for Horace, lyric.

⁴⁶ See Simon's discussion (above, note 6), p. 43.

destructive violence in the artistic personality⁴⁷ (we may compare such modern examples as Strindberg, Virginia Woolf, John Berryman, and Sylvia Plath). If the Muses protect the artist, they do so only as long as he continues to be a ποιητής. The battle must be won time and again, and for some victory is never inevitable. Circe sometimes wins.

Ancient thinkers could scarcely avoid noting the relevance of μανία to a large number of conditions, including inspiration. They found a common link in the notions of "possession," and "disassociation," and it is no accident that Euripides' *Bacchae* is about ecstasy, pathological madness, and art.⁴⁸ Nor that ordering power, Bacchic ecstasy, and disintegration unite in the prototypical figure of Orpheus. Nor that Socrates resorts to Bacchic language when he describes the current of ecstasy that flows from poet to performing rhapsode to audience, emphasizing madness, possession, and disassociation.⁴⁹ An example of transforming power is the μανία Μουσῶν (*Phaedr.* 244b). Plato interprets the divinity of the Muse as her enormous energy rather than her ability to create order—more like the horses than the charioteer. This energy is brought to heel by "craft" (τέχνη) and "self-control" (σωφροσύνη) grounded in true knowledge.⁵⁰ But of course energy and order are images that divide the indivisible, the unfathomable complexity of the creative imagination. The Muse herself can represent the sweeter or wilder side of creativity, its Apollonian form or its manic energy. She is the ambiguous power of every θεός.⁵¹ For Plato she is the μανία to

⁴⁷ See C. Bailey on the legend of Lucretius' death, and his conclusion: there is "nothing in the poem which makes . . . morbid depression (*insania*) impossible" (*Lucretius: De Rerum Natura* [Oxford 1947], p.12). Whether or not the poet took a love-philtre (wittingly or unwittingly) and whether or not he committed suicide, it is hard not to link the legend with the theme and tone of his poetry: cf. Statius' *docti furor arduus Lucreti* (*Silv.* II. 7. 76) and the ambivalence of *furor* as inspiration or madness. Sappho's suicidal leap for love of Phaon at least suggests that only with difficulty did she "heal love with the Muses" (above, note 7).

⁴⁸ See especially R. P. Winnington-Ingram, *Euripides and Dionysus* (Cambridge 1948), p.185; Simon (above note 6), pp.115, 147, 150; C. Segal, *Dionysiac Poetics and Euripides' Bacchae* (Princeton 1982), pp.221–23, and *passim*.

⁴⁹ E.g. μαινόμενος (*Ion* 536d; cf. *Phaedr.* 241a; also Longinus VIII.4); poets compared to Bacchants (*Ion* 536a; Longinus III.2, VIII.1,4); κατεχόμενοι (*Ion*. 533a, 536d); melic poets οὐκ ἔμφορες ὄντες (*Ion*. 534a; cf. ἔκφρων, 534b; ἐκ σαντοῦ γίγνη, 535b). Simon (above, note 6) talks about the bard and the blurring of the self's boundaries, with special emphasis on the narrative and tragic poets: "within himself the dramatist must find an Archimedean point somewhere between cold sobriety, controlled ecstasy, and a frenzy bordering on madness" (p. 159; cf. p. 283); he calls the madman a "dramatist manqué" (p. 147).

⁵⁰ Plato's more general psychic opposites are expressed in νοῦν καὶ σωφροσύνην ἀντ' ἔρωτος καὶ μανίας (*Phaedr.* 241a). For σωφρονεῖν as the antithesis of madness cf. Ajax on his return to sanity: ἡμεῖς δὲ πῶς οὐ γνωσόμεσθα σωφρονεῖν; (*Soph. Ai.* 677).

⁵¹ Ancient uneasiness over the Muses' ambiguity is hinted at in several ways. The blindness of the poet (Demodocus, or the bard of Chios) is an ambivalent sign. The distress of Penelope (*Od.* I. 340–42) and Alcinoos (*Od.* VIII. 538) that the bard's art can cause less pleasure than pain reminds us that the ordering power of art can sometimes depend, delicately, on external circumstance. Tradition made the Sirens, those most dangerous singers, daughters of Melpomene and Achelous. Homer and Ovid represented the Muses as no less ruthlessly jealous

be controlled. For Horace and Theocritus she is the shaping hand that brings form out of formlessness, the mistress of Circe and other symbols of dangerous but necessary unorder.

The singers in Theocritus are shepherds. Theocritus may have "invented the herdsman figure as a self-conscious and witty, half coterie poet and entirely rustic—a magnificent impossibility."⁵² But from Enkidu in *Gilgamesh* to David in the Bible to Paris in Greek mythology, the shepherd has been able to represent a "marginal" figure in imaginative art, a bridge between the wildness of nature and the ordered life of the city. The poet too, a ἑρμηνεύς, spans an awesome distance between what is at first chaotic and threatening and what finally is organized and pleasurable; that is, between "divine" inspiration and the ordering function of the same imagination that shapes the poem into its beautiful form. Is it an accident that David rose from rural shepherd boy to urban musician king? Or that Hesiod, whatever his real chores as farmer, was "pasturing his flock" when the Muses first appeared to him on a lonely mountainside? Callimachus many centuries later preserves that detail, in passages that perhaps urge aspiring poets to model themselves on Hesiod (*Aet.* 2; 112, 4–7). Apollo himself served as herdsman for a while. The pastoral genre, where nature and civilization meet in the figure of the learned herdsman-poet, has roots in that tradition. The "magnificent impossibility" of the Theocritean singing shepherd both reflects the complexity of the mythical imagery and affectionately cocks a snook at it. Similar half-conviction, half-parody might lie behind the herdsman-poet's reference to Circe and the Muses. While Theocritus may have grasped the relation of this image to creativity no more securely than Horace did after him, the appearance of the image in both poets at least attests to the enduring force of the tradition.

That in the *Odyssey* Circe changes only bodies is a measure of the typical Homeric relationship between identity and corporal condition. In the fifth century and beyond, the myth speaks to Circaean transformation on many levels, not least the potentially dislocating energies of all intense experiences, out of which we must shape the structures of our response. Artists are more vulnerable since they react with abnormal intensity to such threats, merging the formlessness of each experience with the formlessness where art begins. Paradoxically, however, this very merging inaugurates the "difficult" task of bringing to order (ὑπὸ νόμον τάξαι) the energies of the imagination (Longinus XXXIII. 5), the shaping of experience into redemptive beauty. The hero too may find himself blessed by the Muses, and the Theocritean scholiast does not hesitate so to describe Odysseus. At

of their dignity than any other god (*Il.* II. 594–600; *Met.* V. 662–76). And Plato's μανία Μουσῶν is a mixed blessing; on Plato's ambivalence, see W.J. Verdenius, "Plato's doctrine of Artistic Imitation," in *Plato: A Collection of Essays*, ed. Gregory Vlastos (New York 1971), pp. 259–62.

⁵² Griffiths (above, note 4), p. 113.

the same time, the scholiast draws our attention in the encounter between Odysseus and Circe not only to the poetic qualities of the hero but also to the heroic qualities of the poet in his struggle to create art and preserve identity. The artist transcribes life in the imagination and so masters and redeems it: the lyre of the Muses tames the *μῶνία* of the Muses.

Such, at least, is the intuitive understanding of creativity that lurks behind the discourse of ancient thinkers and the images of ancient poetry. The scholiast, not unreasonably, found in the Homeric encounter between hero and sorceress a paradigm of the Muses' power. Supported by the Olympian god of magic, later a patron god of poets, Odysseus "beloved of the Muses" overcomes the chthonic goddess of magic, avoiding disintegration and achieving a delightful conclusion. The fortunes of his crew "entirely bereft of Muses" are a disquieting reminder of what happens when the center fails to hold.

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