Epic, Novel, Genre:
Bakhtin and the Question of History

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1. Mikhail Bakhtin has in the course of several major works attempted to characterize the literary forms of epic and novel, as well as the relationship between them. These efforts are important for the study of genre, and specifically epic and novel, beyond which, however, lies a broader sphere. One should be careful not to oversimplify complex and detailed arguments or continuously evolving historical traditions.[1] But as one scholar has put it, Bakhtin's work proceeds from the view that 'genres themselves are forms of thought that have made valuable discoveries about time, society and human agency' (Morson 1999: 176).[2] And it is fair to say that through Bakhtin's arguments about the tensions between epic and novel we can trace his views on the historical development of certain modes of thought—or perhaps we should say *Weltanschauung* or *Geist*. Our reference to *Geist* suggests, of course, that Bakhtin's work should be viewed within the context of a broad (progressionist) critical tradition that paid close attention to the historico-philosophical significance of artistic production, a tradition among whose members we may count, for example, Goethe, Schlegel, Hegel of course, Lukács, and Auerbach.[3] Within this tradition, as in Bakhtin's work, the gen-

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[1] Bakhtin's views on the relations of epic and novel carry different emphases in his different works. See e.g. Nagy 2002: 73–74.

[2] Bakhtin 1984: 270 (cited in Morson 1999: 176): 'We consider the creation of the polyphonic novel a huge step forward not only in the development of novelistic prose … It seems to us that one could speak directly of a special *polyphonic artistic thinking* extending [even] beyond the bounds of the novel as a genre.' See also Adams 1998: 382–384.

[3] See Todorov 1984: 83. I am not, of course, suggesting that the list above forms an undifferentiated group. For a discussion of progressionist readings in the context of antiquity and (Homeric) epic see e.g. Williams 1993; Gill 1996.

res of epic and novel were often seen as contrastive emblems of antiquity and modernity respectively, and the change in the fortunes of these genres as emblematic of the historical progression of culture and society.

We shall momentarily turn to some details of Bakhtin's views. But we should perhaps begin by allowing that it *is* indeed tempting to map certain aspects of antiquity and modernity onto generic domains. Epic poetry does appear early on in the history of Western literature, and is often viewed as an important marker of 'beginnings' in the Western canon; we can (given a certain sense of drama, and notwithstanding the fact that nothing is ever a pure beginning), describe the first word of the *Iliad* along with Calvert Watkins, as 'the first word of Western literature.' (Watkins 1995). By contrast the novel is usually regarded as a relative newcomer, emerging in its full diversity as the dominant literary genre only in the context of (Western) modernity (Bakhtin 1981: 3). It seems reasonable, then, to associate each genre with the chronological/historical surroundings within which it flourished, the ancient and the modern respectively. A generic/historical mapping of this type might remain attractive even if, for example, we argued for the inclusion of Greek romances and Roman novels in the domain of the 'novel,' and even if we locate the emergence of the novel within the ancient era.[4] Romances and novels appear only late in antiquity, from about the first century A.D. and on, and always on the periphery rather than at the centre of the ancient canon. Also, ancient Romances and novels often subvert the central social and cultural values of classical antiquity and present an upside-down and often comical image of the world.[5] From this perspective we can still read the emergence of ancient novels and novelistic literature as a distinct marker in the transition from ancient to modern: It's a case of the ancient novel being triggered by the waning power of antiquity and its sensibilities. We could argue that this early appearance of the genre marks the closure of the ancient era and also heralds the coming, in the more distant future, of modernity and its radically new modes of understanding the world.

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[4] See Branham 1999; Doody 1996; Heiserman 1977.

[5] Consider, e.g. the wealthy freedman Trimalchio in Petronius' *Satyricon,* who is a caricature of the figure of a Roman emperor. Petronius himself, of course (or at least the figure of Nero's *elegantiae arbiter* as described by Tacitus [*Annales* 16. 18–19], which we assume to be the author Petronius) is a man who lives an upside-down-life, sleeping by day and living his waking life at night. Petronius also ends his life in a mock-Socratic and hence "upside-down" suicide.

Now, to the degree that the basic chronological/generic mapping obtains, it might also seem, assuming that literature does not operate in a vacuum, that by describing the basic characteristics of a genre we can also characterize, with relative ease, something much more resonant and far-reaching within historical realities. We have an excellent and convenient optic. We may, for example, point to epic as an oral form of discourse, or at least as stemming from an essentially oral experience, and contrast it with the novel, which may be a product of literate cultures. We might argue that epic is more of a public medium, where the novel relies more heavily on individualized, interiorized experience. We might say that epic heroes tend to be larger than life, while the novel often deals largely with anti heroes. Epic is serious, the novel more comic. Epic unfolds through the mediation of an impersonal voice, the novel is characteristically narrated by a 1st person narrator. Ancient epic is a verse medium, the novel's language is prose. Epic is formal, the novel realistic. These generic features, and others are, of course, closely related to important historical characterizations of (post-Cartesian) modernity, to interiorized individuality, historical consciousness, rationalism, etc. Such characterizations are echoed, developed, and refined in Bakhtin's work.

Needless to say, generic features, and indeed genres themselves, let alone wider historical categories, are not static. Bakhtin himself was adamant about this.[6] Which, however, need not prevent us, nor did it prevent Bakhtin, from considering basic polarities, or identifying different domains and trajectories.

The heuristic promise of genre is very tempting indeed. Perhaps too tempting, if we consider the sometime disorderly conduct of history, where too many things go *not* according to plan, and where dichotomic categories often turn out on closer inspection to require far-reaching qualification. This, we must stress, is not simply a matter of allowing, as we have already, that genres, or generic properties evolve over time, overlapping, and often 'bleeding' into each other. There is no question that within history we point to particular literary artefacts or bits of discourse, for example to Homer's *Iliad* and say 'this is epic' or to Melville's *Moby Dick* and say 'this is a novel.' There is also no question that we often point to other, related works, such as Virgil's *Aeneid*, and say 'this too is an epic,' or to Joyce's *Ulysses* and say 'this is a novel,' even as we acknowledge crucial aspects of change in these works, relative to their predecessors. We may even allow that the process of change transposes significant components from one genre to another and thus significantly re-configures our understanding of generic relationships.[7] These approaches to genre, whether or not they assume essential objects, are not trivial. At the very least they make up a fragile, accruing, but for this very reason also precious historical matrix. But we must also consider the possibility that even in its most canonical attestations, there exist resonant and perhaps deeply problematic instances of overlap that challenge our very basic generic distinctions, and thus our ability to distinguish on the basis of generic categories. That may be a less comfortable possibility.

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[6] See Morson 1999: 171–73.

We have, for example, mentioned the distinction between oral and literate above. It may serve us as an illustration. Most contemporary scholars, quite rightly in this author's view, allow for the oral provenance of early epic, and especially of Homeric poetry.[8] Furthermore, even later epics that were unquestionably produced by means of writing, take on a mantle of *fingierte Mündlichkeit* by various means–as for example when Virgil at the beginning of the *Aeneid* says *Arma virumque cano*, 'I sing of arms and the man.' It is obviously a matter of great significance that Virgil does not say 'I write of arms and the man,' even though writing is by most accounts just what he has done. Epic is closely associated with the spoken voice. The novel, by contrast, is essentially a written artefact, closely associated with other, fundamentally literate forms of discourse, such as the diary, the newspaper, or the letter. We may thus be tempted to see, broadly speaking of course, a transition from 'oral' to 'literate' reflected in the movement from epic to novel, and to regard this as one more aspect of the movement from ancient to modern.

Nevertheless—and it might seem very strange to say this—the dichotomy oral/literate has serious drawbacks as a means of generic differentiation inasmuch as, for example, even the most distinct examples, the 'beginning' of epic, the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, may not be oral poems. Let me try to explain. Amidst an abundance of ancient testimonies concerning the voiced performance of Homeric poetry there is, amazingly, not a shred of direct evidence for the voiced performance of the monumental poems in their entirety.[9] There are, furthermore, overwhelming and quite convincing arguments to suggest that oral performance of Homeric epic was always tailored for the moment, always a matter of 'recomposition in performance.'[10] But if so, where is the 'moment' which called for the vocalized performance of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* in their monumental form? Monumentality is not a trivial aspect of the poems. Nor, by definition almost, can we allow that a performance of the poems in their entirety was a trivial event. Yet precisely this event seems to have vanished from the record. If we take the performative aspects of orality and its attachment to the 'moment' seriously, we must ask ourselves if voiced performative contexts did in fact require, or even allow for poems as long as the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* in their present, monumental form to exist. Thus, paradoxically, the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* as we have them in their monumental form—even as they preserve their oral provenance so vividly in the structure of their language, and regardless of our precise view of the process of transition from oral to written—may be artifacts more suitable for the medium of writing, put together in literary contexts, by literary means.

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[7] See e.g. Harrison 1997; Nagy 2002. It is not my intention to discuss genre as such here—a vast topic and a vast bibliography—but see conveniently work collected in Duff 2000, with further annotated bibliography therein; for genre in antiquity see Obbink and Depew 2000. My own more detailed views on genre in antiquity will be set out in a contribution to a forthcoming special issue of *New Literary History* (ed. R. Cohen) and in *Epic Novel, and the Historical Progress of Antiquity* (forthcoming, Duckworth, London).

[8] As in the case of genre, the bibliography the question of orality and literacy is vast. In general see bibliographic survey in Foley 1985. Work on Homer surveyed in Edwards 1986; 1988. Some later work described Russo 1997 and in other contributions to Morris and Powell 1997. See also Kahane 2005.

I must stress that my point in putting forward the above is not to deny aspects of orality in Homeric poetry, and it is certainly not to argue for Homer as the product of a literate culture *per se*. I would have said that the state of the Homeric poems as we have them is a dialectic construct of the oral and the literate, but for the fact that the assumed polarities of this relationship themselves seem to overlap and cross over to each other in so many complex ways. As some important scholars have suggested, the distinction itself can be misleading.[11] No doubt there are such things as spoken words and written words, which are not the same. No doubt there have been cultures in the past in which writing did not exist, and it is indeed quite likely that some of these cultures were in one way or anther involved in the production of poetry (or some other type of special discourse, to which particular authority or importance was attached). Yet it is a simple fact that the spoken voice is a highly perishable thing. Arguably that perishablility, that quality of performance, is an important characteristic of the spoken voice. Pure voice, pure orality, pure oral performance, as it were, is impossible to preserve or represent. Once the moment of utterance has passed, anything that remains of the voice, anything that claims to be voice, whether written or recorded by some other means, is something which is different, we might even say radically 'other' than voice. Looking at this matter from the other side, we may note, for example, that many indisputably literate texts embody various degrees or components of vocalized speech. We have just mentioned the case of Virgil's *Aeneid*. That work is an 'epic', but we could just as easily mention, for example, Apuleius' *Metamorphoses*, a Roman novel which begins *At ego tibi … varias fabulas conseram, auresque tuas beniuolas lepido susurro permulceam* 'I shall … stitch together for you many different tales and assuage your willing ears with tenuous whispers …'[12] It would, of course, require more than what has been said above to provide a conclusive argument. But again, my point here is merely to suggest that even with regard to some of our most basic categories, and even in the case of our most canonical examples, the picture is not as clear as we might otherwise imagine. We must, in other words, temper that temptation which Bakhtin in his work on epic and novel, for example, offers us. Or, at least, we must try to flag some of the complications involved, which impinge on our understanding of epic, novel, genre, and in some ways perhaps also the process of history itself.

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[9] Hainsworth 1969, often cited, e.g. in Ford 1997. Attempts to reconstruct the context of monumental performance have been made, e.g. by Taplin 1992.

[10] See e.g. Nagy 1990.

[11] See Zumthor 1990; Oesterreicher 1997 and further bibliography therein. Important questions about the dichotomy oral/literate can be found already in Finnegan 1977 and in Goody 1987. Ong 1988 is (or was) a widely read, but somewhat rash text.

2. Bakthin's characterization of the relations between epic and novel range over many important issues. It would take to long to consider all. Let me therefore focus my attention on just three crucial 'axes of change' as they have been termed in an important recent study of Bakhtin and his approach to antiquity and its genres (Branham 1999). These are: language, time, and space.

Consider first the matter of language. Bakhtin often stresses 'heteroglossia' as the 'basic distinguishing feature of the novel,' which is quite contrasted to epic practice (1981: 263). This view is summed up by Branham, who points out that (1999: 205):

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[12] See Kahane 2000.

> … the ‘three dimensionality’ or heterogeneity of the novel’s linguistic style is not just that the genre is open to linguistic diversity, but that the diachronic sedimentation of natural language and the synchronic diversity of social and cultural languages is of central thematic importance in the novel … In epic, on the other hand, the poet narrator shares with all his characters, mortal and immortal, a single language and ideology given by tradition. There is, of course, linguistic characterization of individual voices in epic; the speeches of Achilles, for example, exhibit distinctive kinds of imagery, but such distinctions can only be registered against the monumental consistency of Homeric style, a kind of consistency entailed by the nature of oral traditions. Such variations as there are appear within this style *and do not represent divergence from it or violations of its norms* [my emphasis].

This argument sets an important Bakhtinian distinction between epic and its “monologic” discourse (with special emphasis on Homer) and the novel, with its “dialogic” discourse of “polyphony.” It is also, as we have noted, part of a framework of broad historical perceptions and traditions of understanding genre. Perception and representations are, of course, an important component of historical realities. A Thucydidean narrative may not replicate a speech verbatim, or even precisely reflect some larger sequence of events, but it constitutes an important, inalienable part of what e.g. ‘the Peloponesian War’ has been, if only since, as a matter of principle, events of the past, precisely like past voiced discourse (itself a type of event), cannot be preserved, transmitted or experienced ‘directly.’ Yet because perceptions and representations play such a significant role in history that we must also take into account the simple fact that they can, and indeed do reflect the contexts of our understanding and change with them. This has immediate bearing on the question of epic, and specifically Homer which, as a particularly distinct epic, as the ‘beginning’ of Western epic, is often used as a paradigmatic example.

Consider then Homer’s language and style. Although we all use such terms (this must be stressed), it is today not quite clear what we mean by ‘the monumental consistency of Homeric style, a kind of consistency entailed by the nature of oral traditions.' The essence of such consistency, and the feature which is indeed often most closely associated with oral traditions is so-called formulaic discourse, which since the first quarter of the 20th century (Parry's 1st thesis was published in 1928) has dominated discussions of Homeric language. It has been studied in great depth. Yet precisely because so much attention has been paid to formulae, their limitations have been increasingly exposed. As Joseph Russo, one of the most authoritative students of Homeric language today rightly says in the conclusion to his recent survey in *The New Companion to Homer* (Russo 1997: 259–60):

> … the word formula proved to be a poor thing, hopelessly inadequate to cover the different *kinds* of formulaic realities in Homeric diction. And it is reasonable to assume that the talented traditional poet would always have been capable of some non-formulaic, original language.

This, of course, does not mean that the kind of formulaic systems discussed by Parry for example are to be abandoned. But, as the work of many scholars has shown, our understanding of the systematic character of Homeric discourse must be significantly tempered by an acknowledgement of 'non-formulaic, original language.' As a matter of principle, Homer's language embodies diversity and indeed 'disparate' discourse. Thus, for example, Parry's classic definition of the formula (1971: 272. Cf. 13; 329) revolves around words that express an 'essential idea' and which are used repeatedly under regular metrical conditions. Yet as David Shive (1987) has convincingly shown, even in the most prominent Homeric systems (Shive's example was the expressions for naming Achilleus), do not quite follow the kind of systematic 'economy' otherwise assumed of Homeric formulae.

We can, perhaps, nudge this type of argument a little further. It may even be that there is a built-in 'transgressive' component, as it were, of Homeric discourse. For example, the 'essential idea' in formulae that name Achilleus (*podas ôkys Achilleus*, 'swift footed Achilleus) and Odysseus (*polymêtis Odysseus*, 'much suffering great Odysseus') is surely 'Achilleus' or 'Odysseus.' Yet these in the Greek these names, *Achilleus* and *Odysseus*, as well as the alternative forms *Achileus* and *Odyseus* (each name has two forms, to allow for greater flexibility of metrical usage), do not on their own fit any of the standard metrical slots, or cola, in the hexameter: they always require (this is part of the way formulae work) some kind of extension and adaptation. There is no question that, in practice, this is not difficult to do. But we can perhaps say that, in some sense the 'hexameter house' does not seem to have been built specifically for its most 'essential' inhabitants.

Let me offer another example. It is more technical, a fact for which I must apologize (specialized discussions are hard to avoid when examining the foundations of Homeric language, though readers can, if they wish, skip over to the next paragraph without losing the gist of my argument). Consider, then, one of the most consistent tendencies in Homer, known as 'Hermann's Law,' which characterizes the cadence of the hexameter. Hermann's Law stipulates that the metrical sequence ∪ – ∪ ∪ – –, if preceded by a full word-break, is not allowed at the end of the verse. Out of some 25,000 verses of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* only a handful qualify as exceptions.[13] There are, however, hundreds of verses where a little add-on word, known as an appositive, such as a relative pronoun or a conjunction, is placed in front of the offending words. The add-on is so closely bound to the next as to prevent a word-break, creating a verse-concluding sequence (∪ ∪ – ∪ ∪ – –), which is permissible and very common. Such usage is highly formulaic. It falls into various distinct patters, such as ['and'] + [VERB + OBJECT], ['and] + [VERB + QUALIFIER], or [RELATIVE PRONOUN] + [NOMINATIVE ATTRIBUTE]. Thus, for example, we find … *hos Aristos Achaiôn* ('… *who* is the best of the Achaians,' *Iliad* 13. 313), or *ho kakistos Achaiôn* ('… *who* is the lowest of the Achaians,' *Iliad* 17. 415). The add-on seems to solve the metrical problem. Yet as we can see from Parry's definition above, a key component of formulae is their 'essential idea.' What, then, is the 'essential idea' of the expressions at hand? By almost all accounts, it is not '… *who* is the best of the Achaians,' but simply 'the best of the Achaians,' which, as we have pointed out, has precisely the forbidden metrical shape. Furthermore, as many scholars have argued persuasively, the idea of being 'best' is not unimportant in Homer. It is, we could say, the focus of the dispute between Achilleus and Agamemnon and, in a sense, the basis of the drama of the *Iliad*. It has to be said, these examples and many others like them generally create no practical difficulties. They do, however, suggest that within the seemingly consistent and regular language that defines Homeric metrical/formulaic convention lies, inextricably, discourse which is at odds with the very standards of Homeric regularity.[14] Homeric discourse, in other words, smooth as it seems, contains inherent, deeply embedded diversity. Furthermore, this is not just an abstract principle. In the *Odyssey* we find the expression … *ton ariston hapantôn* (‘*who* is the best of all,’ 14. 19), which is consistent with other examples we have just seen. Yet the subject of the expression here is, in fact, not a noble hero, but a simple pig. This is consistency in language, but with a very big difference indeed.

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[13] See Van Leeuwen 1890. For data see Meister 1921. More generally in West 1982; Maas 1962. Exceptions to the bridge, e.g. in *Iliad* 9. 394; 24: 753.

This revised image of Homeric discourse may not, however, on its own allow us to view Homeric language in Bakhtinian ‘novelistic’ terms. For, as Bakhtin himself quite rightly argues (1984: 181–182).

> From the vantage points provided by *pure* [emphasis in the original] linguistics, *it is impossible to detect in belletristic literature any really essential differences between a monologic and a polyphonic use of discourse* [my emphasis] … In Dostoevsky’s multi-voiced novels, for example, there is significantly less language differentiation, that is fewer language styles, territorial and social dialects, professional jargons and so forth, than in the work of many writer-monologists.

Clearly, any other approach would ‘essentialize’ both language and literature. It would create impossible practical problems (precisely how ‘different’ does different have to be?), and thus also grave ontological and epistemological problems.[15] This is why ‘Dialogic relationships … are impossible both among elements in a system of language, … and among elements of a "text" when approached in a strictly linguistic way' (1984: 182). It is also for this reason that Branham (above) argues that having distinct kinds of imagery in the speeches of Achilleus is not sufficient to generate divergence or to break the norms of Homeric discourse.

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[14] For a full discussion of this complex issue see Kahane, forthcoming (*Diachronic Dialogues*), Chapter 2. In this work and in another forthcoming publication (‘Formule, Theorie, Ideologie’) I explore an even more important, though more complicated example, showing that even at the very core of systematic formulaic usage there is, ultimately, a substantial, irreducible component of indeterminacy. I show, for example, that the basic relationship of semantic and metrical ‘constants’ vs. ‘variables’ which is at the heart of recent systematic representations of Homeric diction (Visser 1987; Bakker and Fabricotti 1991) can easily be turned upside down, so that what was fixed (‘core,’ or ‘nuclear’ components) turns out to be widely variable (‘periphery’), etc. The result does not invalidate systematic analysis, but introduces radical ‘complexity’ (in the sense given to the term, e.g. in the physical sciences. See e.g. Nicolis and Prigogine 1989).

[15] As a matter of basic principle, all representation involves, of course, some distance between the represented thing and the representing medium, as well as an awareness of this distance. Without such awareness there can be no notion of ‘re-presentation.’ Foolish birds excepted, viewers know that even the finest and most beguiling image of grapes by Zeuxis is not an edible grape (see Pliny, *NH* 35.66). Similarly, as a matter of principle, literary/poetic discourse, even when it claims to be a precise rendition of ‘ordinary dis-

What then, constitutes "dialogic" (and in this sense novelistic) discourse? Bakhtin is very explicit in his answer—language and style must be embodied in the discourse of a socially situated subject, i.e. an individual(1984: 183):[16]

> "Life is good." "Life is not good." … between these two judgments there exists a a specific logical relationship: one is the negation of the other. But between them there are not and cannot be a *dialogic* [my emphasis] relationships; they do not argue with one another in any way …. Both these judgments must be embodied, if a dialogic relationship is to arise between them and toward them. Thus, *both these judgments can, as thesis and antithesis, be united in a single utterance of a single subject, expressing his unified dialectical position on a given question. In such case no dialogic relationships arise. But if these two judgments are separated into two different utterances by two different subject, then dialogic relations do arise* [my emphasis].

Strangely, perhaps, it is precisely this idea that allows us to mark the dialogic in Homeric discourse, and helps us in our claims that categories and genres 'bleed' not only at some interface, but at their very core. Allowing that diversity can in principle exist in Homeric discourse, the important question now is not 'does the discourse of this or that character literally correspond to some real form of language?'[17] nor even 'does the discourse of this or that

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course,' is always, by definition, a matter of artifice, a representation, a perception. Furthermore, no matter how 'realistic' the language, neither the meaning nor the effect of representation is directly related to how lifelike it is. What is important is, in a sense, knowing, being told or in some other way informed, that this or that object or group of words is a representation, which is why understanding the frames and framing of discourse. See note 17 for a practical example, and also further below.

[16] This point, of course, reaches to the very foundation of Bakhtin's perspective and his insistence that we can only understand discourse and literature in their historical contexts.

[17] Consider, for example, the following early lapidary hexameter text (IG 12.1.737. 600–575 BC? Kamyros):

sâma toz' Idameneus poiêsa hina kleos eiê.
Zeus de nin hostis pêmainoi leiolê theiê.

character *literally* differ from the discourse of some other character?' Rather, following Bakhtin, we must ask, 'how is discourse *embodied* in speaking subjects in Homer?' and 'is the discourse of such subjects [re]presented as different?' Let me add that this shift in emphasis is a matter of very practical import. It means that we should now direct our attentions, not at the speeches as such, but at *how such speeches are represented on the 'outside'*, in their narrative frames, in the discourse of the Homeric narrator and other framing voices. We must, in other words (using Emile Benveniste's terms here), turn our attention from *discours* to *histoire*.[18]

It seems to me that once we have made this shift in perspective the extraordinary 'three-dimensionality' of Homeric discourse comes into full, plain view. For example, one of the most obvious antitheses to heroic individuals in the *Iliad* is the Greek soldier Thersites. He is 'the only character in the *Iliad* to lack both patronymic and place of origin' (Kirk 1985: 138). He is 'the most shameful man that went to Troy,' deformed and ugly, and much hated, especially by Achilleus and Odysseus (2. 216–20).[19] However, what is most important for our purposes here is that his discourse is emphatically marked *qua* discourse (*Iliad* 2. 212–16):

> One alone, Thersites, a man of unmeasured speech (*ametroepês*), still scolded.
> He knew in his heart words (*epea*), many and disorderly (*akosma*),
> Idle, (*maps*) and lacking all order (*ou kata kosmon*), to quarrel with princes (*erizemenai basileusin*).

> I, Idameneus, made this tomb (*sâma*), so that I might have fame (*kleos*).
> Whoever harms it, may Zeus make him utterly accursed.

Hexameter is a medium in which art and 'real life,' e.g. oracular, magical, and funerary discourse are prominently and inextricably mixed. The above inscription is thought by most critics (Hansen 1983; Jeffery and Johnson 1990; Faraone 1996) to be a real funerary text. The language, specifically the words 'tomb' [*sama* = *sêma*], 'Idameneus,' [=Idomeneus], 'fame' [*kleos*] are all typically Homeric. The first verse is hexameteric, although, significantly, the verse terminal formula *hina kleos eiê* breaks Hermann's bridge (see in main text above, on *aristos Achaiôn*). The second verse's metre is hopelessly confused.

[18] See Benveniste 1966.

[19] Many other, more detailed verbal features distinguish Thersites, for example, we are told that 'he alone (*mounos*) … still scolded …' The word *mounos* is an 'unheroic' adjective. Solitary heroic figures in Homer are often described by means of the word *oios*, an exclusively epic lexeme. See Kahane 1997.

with whatever words he thought might raise a laugh (*geloiion*) among
the Argives.
He was the most disgraceful man (*aischistos*) who came to Ilion.

Thersites bodily deformity, and social perversity, his identity as the 'most disgraceful man' who went to war and as a man who 'quarrels with princes,' is matched by the ugliness of his discourse. He is described as 'unmeasured in speech' (*ametroepês*), as someone who knew many words (*epea*, pl. of *epos*) that are 'disorderly' (*akosma*), stressed by the formula 'not in [good] order' (*ou kata kosmon*) in the following verse. Thersites 'used to say whatever seemed to him likely to raise a laugh (*geloiion*) among the Achaians' (Kirk 1985: 139),
This in itself constitutes a significant characterization of Thersites' speech.

But, these lines can perhaps also be read more technically, as pointed linguistic comments on Thersites' speech. *A-metro-epes*, 'un-measured-speech' can also be taken in reference to its formal and stylistic characteristics. *Metron*, and *epos* can be technical terms, 'metrical unit/foot' (as in *hexa-meter*, a unit of six measures. See e.g. Hephaestion 5. 3. 20) and 'hexameter verse.'[20] At some point in antiquity audiences/readers will have also heard the meaning 'out of metrical measure' in the expression 'un-measured.' Further support for this potential arises from the twice-repeated (213–214) emphasis on the lack of *kosmos* or order, in Thersites' speech. *Kosmos* is a word of broad semantic range, and it can certainly also echo the meaning of more-technical formal structure, especially in Homer.[21] Thus, Thersites' speech is described, in hexameter, as being 'un-hexametric.' In a curious way Homeric epic strives to represent, not simply a diversity of speech, but, embodied in its subjects, discourse that is so different as to lie, strictly speaking, outside of the representing medium.[22]

The difference between the un-heroic Thersites and the main figures of the *Iliad* is very sharply marked. But his arguments, his 'logical' arguments, we might say, are, as many scholars have pointed out, not only reasonable (life is short, precious, and once lost – irretrievable. Why should anyone give his own precious life for the glory of another?), but also directly comparable to those of best of Achaians Achilleus.[23] Significantly it is precisely here that we can again rely on Bakhtin's argument for an understanding (1984: 183–184):

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[20] See Martin 1989: 13 n. 42; Nagy 1996: 128; 1999: 26–29, and further references therein.

[21] Cf. *Odyssey* 8. 489 and the expression *kata kosmon* ('in order') elsewhere in Homer.

[22] The idea of representations representing that which they seem to be incapable of representing can be found in many works of art (see e.g. Searle 1980. Foucault 1970 on Velasquez *Las Meninas*. One might think also of the works of Escher). It is sometimes used to characterize modern, as opposed to classical perspectives – but the example of Thersites suggests otherwise. We may note that despite its impossible characterization, Thersites' speech is "a polished piece of invective" (Kirk 1985: 140).

> 'Life is good.' 'Life is good.' Here are two absolutely identical judgments, or in fact one singular judgment written (or pronounced) by us *twice* [emphasis in original]; but this 'twice' refers only to its verbal embodiment and not to the judgment itself. We can, to be sure, speak here of the logical relationship of identity between two judgments. But if this judgment is expressed in two utterances by two different subjects, then dialogic relationships arise between them (agreement, affirmation).

In short, the discourses of Achilleus and Thersites may share certain logical components, but the two are unquestionably differentiated as *subjects*. As such, it seems to me, their judgments do, in the strict sense defined by Bakhtin, generate dialogic relationships.[24]

There are many other examples of dialogic discourse in Homer which space will not permit us to discuss. But we should perhaps briefly note that one of *the* most typical and iconic examples of Homeric discourse are speech-introductory formulae, highly repeated expressions, usually spanning one or two verses of hexameter, which introduce the direct discourse of speaking characters. Among the best known examples are expressions of the type *ton d' apameibomenos prosephê* … 'then in reply said …,' *ton de meg'*

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[23] See, e.g. Willcock 1978: 200 (*ad* 2. 228): 'Thersites … speaks rather like a parody of Achilleus in the quarrel in Book I.'

[24] It might be argued that figures like Thersites are ultimately subdued, marginalized, thus ruling out epic 'polyglossia,' and suggesting that epic speaks only with the voice of 'heroic' ideology. But, we might ask, if Thersites and Achilleus voice similar arguments, what exactly *is* heroic ideology? We might point out that, as scholars such as Pucci and Segal and others forcibly argue, the very foundations of the so called heroic code are paradoxical, given, for example, that such key terms as *kleos*, the very essence of heroes' willingness put down their lives, and the key to their aspirations to overcoming mortality through song, embodies, within Homeric poetry itself, belongs both in the realm of (imperishable) "fame" and the (passing) "rumor." Needless to say, this complex issue requires extended separate discussion.

ochthesas prosephê … ‘then greatly angered said …’[25] The iconic status of such speech introductions is hugely significant. It means that the most prominent and representative examples of Homeric language throughout the ages are precisely those verses which characterize and, I would argue, differentiate speaking subjects – those subjects within which language is embodied. As many scholars have argued, such characterization constitutes the very fabric of formulaic discourse. Furthermore, as I myself have argued in great detail in an earlier study (Kahane 1994), there are important differences in the metrical usage of proper names, for example, positioning in the verse, especially relative to the verse-end, and the social status and general personal standing of characters in Homer. Different names have different metrical values, and can thus be used within some formulae, but not others. Thus, different introductory formulae are often both distinct to specific characters and part of a broad and inherently ‘hexametric’ device that embodies discourse in speaking subjects.

But let us consider two more prominent ‘axes of change’ in Bakhtin’s work, used to characterize epic as a genre. These are the axes of time and space, bound together by a third, closely related attribute: epic’s non-personal traditional character. As Bakhtin says (1981: 13):

> Epic as a genre in its own right may, for our purposes, be characterized by three constitutive features: (1) a national epic past—in Goethe’s and Schiller’s terminology, the ‘absolute past’—serves as the subject for the epic; (2) national tradition (not personal experience and the free thought that grows out of it) serves as the source for epic; (3) an absolute epic distance separates the epic world from contemporary reality, that is, from the time in which the singer (the author and his audience) lives.

Bakhtin adds (1981: 13–14):

> The world of the epic is the national heroic past: it is a world of ‘beginnings’ and ‘peak times’ in the national history, a world of father and of founders of families, a world of ‘firsts’ and ‘bests.’ … the formally constitutive feature of the epic as a genre is rather the transferral of a represented world into the past, and the degree to which this world partici-

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[25] Speech introductory verses were apparently regarded as typically Homeric in antiquity too. See e.g. Cratinus fr. 355 K.-A. and discussion in Fantuzzi 1988.

> pates in the past. The epic was never a poem about the present, about its own time … In its style, tone and manner of expression, epic discourse is infinitely far removed from discourse of a contemporary about a contemporary addressed to contemporaries ('Onegin, my good friend, was born on the banks of the Neva, where perhaps you were also born, or once shone, my reader …'). Both the singer and the listener, immanent in the epic as a genre, are located in the same time and on the same evaluative (hierarchical) plane, but the represented world of the heroes stands on an utterly different and inaccessible time-and-value plane, separated by epic distance. …To portray an event on the same time-and-value plane as oneself and one's contemporaries (and an event that is therefore based on personal experience and thought) is to undertake a radical revolution, and to step out of the world of epic into the world of the novel.

As in the case of language, so with regard to these aspects, Bakhtin sees epic and novel in more or less dichotomic terms. As Branham (2000: 206) puts it:

> where epic is public, impersonal, and set in a spatiotemporally remote heroic past, the novel is personal, that is, told by first-person actor-narrators, who in speaking to and about their contemporaries open up a new and linguistically variegated world (or 'zone of contact with reality').

Now, of course, Bakhtin's views are anchored, in the case of Homer for example, in some very prominent features of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. In the former poem we find various characters, for example Diomedes son of Tydeus who is one of the mightiest warriors on the Greek side, performing larger than life deeds (5. 302–4):

> … But he picked up a boulder in his hand,
> the son of Tydeus, a huge thing (*mega ergon*) which two men could not lift,
> mortal men such as they are now (*hoioi nun*). But he easily managed it on his own.

The same superhuman quality is attributed, in highly formulaic language, elsewhere in the *Iliad* to Hector (12. 447–449), Aias (12. 378–86), and

Aineas (20. 285–87). All are uttered by the anonymous narrator of the *Iliad*. We find here overt indexical references to the present (men ‘such as they are now’) and to ‘the time in which the singer (the author and his audience) lives,’ which is contrasted with the time and place of the archaic, heroic past. Indeed, these passages seem to materialize, and (paradoxically) perhaps even to quantify (“1 hero of the past”>“2 men of the present”) the unbridgeable gap between past and present.

And yet it seems to me that on closer reading these passages also raise serious questions about the real breadth, as it were, of the gap. In order to show this we must first underline some prominent features of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. It is, for example, a fact that the heroic protagonists of both the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, Achilleus and Odysseus, are explicitly portrayed as singers. In the *Iliad* we find Achilleus ‘singing the fame of men’ (*aeide d’ ara klea andrôn* 9. 189). The verb used to describe Achilleus, *aeide*, is the same as the one used (in different grammatical form) in the first line of the poem to appeal to the Muse to sing the *Iliad* itself. Furthermore, the contents of Achilleus’ song, *klea andrôn*, ‘the fame of men,’ is, as many have argued a distinctly epic way of describing heroic poetry (such as the *Iliad*). As for Odysseus, he too, although in much more extended form, acts like a singer in the *Odyssey*. From book 9. 39, when Odysseus begins his tale to the Phaiacians, to the end of book 12 (453) Odysseus is in effect the narrator of a heroic poem. Indeed, his host, King Alcinoos says so openly (11. 367–69):

> [Odysseus,] your words are well-shaped (*morphê epeôn*), and your mind is noble,
> You have narrated your tale (*muthos*) skillfully, like a singer (*hôs hot’ aoidos*),
> the sorrowful toils (*kêdea lugra*) of all the Argives, and your own.

The last line of this passage sums up the *Iliad* (‘the sorrowful toils of all the Argives’) and the *Odyssey* (‘your own [sorrowful toils]’), indeed in the appropriate sequence. The overlap between Odysseus and the narrator is further enhanced by the fact that during extended sections of the narrative their discourse is quite literally identical. Exactly the same words are uttered by both figures.[26]

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[26] This similarity applies to *all* speaking characters in epic, of course, most of whom are not, however, represented as singers.

We might add that there is an important existential similarity between the Homeric narrator as well as singers in general, and Achilleus and Odysseus *qua* singers. As we have already noted, an important component of the separation of heroes from the 'men of today' is the characterization of heroes as being capable of superhuman feats of strength (e. g. throwing huge boulders). We might extend and generalize this distinction: heroes, *qua* heroes, are men of action; the 'men of today' as they are characterized by the indexical passages above are audiences and singers, i.e. men of the word. This important dichotomy extends well *into* the poems: all singers in the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* are portrayed by and large as non-heroic characters, or at least as characters who for one reason or another do not possess the capacity for independent, self-reliant action. The point is that both Achilleus and Odysseus, when they sing, are also in some important way deprived of the capacity for such action. Achilleus has been humiliated and robbed of his rightful position in the Greek host by the actions of Agamemenon. Odysseus reaches the Phaiacians in a state of total exhaustion and extreme suffering. He is at this point totally dependent on the Phaiacians and their good will. The only weapon in his arsenal is, of course, his skill with words.

It would take a much longer essay to argue in full detail for the analogy between key heroic figures *within* the Homeric poems and singers, including the narrators *of* the Homeric poems and the performers of those poems at any given moment, who assume the role of those narrators. But even from our abbreviated discussion it should be clear that this analogy can be very close indeed. Odysseus' narration is, as we have seen, described as an epic poem by an epic singer. It is also de facto an epic, hexameter poem (although, as before, we must pay attention not only to what things are, but to how they are represented). It is an act of narration directly analogous to the act of narration by the Homeric narrator. What is significant for our purposes is that it is also one in which the narrated time and the narrated space extend continuously and seamlessly from the past into the present and from distant lands to the site in which narration takes place. Everything Odysseus says ultimately converges on the present and on his arrival in Scherie, as is attested, for example by his frequent, 2nd person addresses to his interlocutors, Queen Arete and King Alcinoos. Odysseus' tale is also, of course, a 1st person narration. For the first part of his encounter with the Phaiacians Odysseus withholds his identity. This is a matter of great importance. But once he is assured of his audiences' good will his name is stated very prominently indeed: In 9. 19 he boldly declares: 'I am Odysseus son of Laertes.'[27]

What we must stress here is that Odysseus and his narration closely resemble novelistic narrators and the novel's narrative as they are characterized by Bakhtin. Indeed, Odysseus' narration seems to fit particularly nicely with Bakhtin's own example of the novel's contemporary spatio-temporality (Bakhtin 1981: 13–14, see above), drawn from the second stanza of Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin*, which is itself a novel in verse (!): 'Onegin, my good friend, was born on the banks of the Neva, where perhaps you were also born, or once shone, my reader …'

The basic line of my argument must now be very clear. If the Homeric narrator bears resemblance to important internal narrators in the Homeric poems, and if, within those poems, the boundary between heroes and narrators is so often crossed, then it may also be that the spatiotemporal gap between the heroic past and the singing present is not as wide as we might wish it if our objective is to make precise generic distinctions. In any case it is certainly not 'absolute.' At this point, the indexical reference of 'the men of today' (*hoioi nun*), formerly a marker of the separation of past and present becomes, in fact, an element that can link the two temporal realities, even as it separates different types of action. For 'now' now refers both to the present and to a directly analogous past experience.

Once we allow this, other details which could support our view immediately surface. To give but one last brief example: In the *Iliad* we are told that the Muse has been everywhere and seen everything (*Iliad* 2. 484 ff.). She is a direct, contemporary witness to heroic events. But this is the same Muse which the contemporary singer, in the *now* of the narration appeals to in the beginning of the poem and at several crucial points in the poems. Indeed, in the very first line of the *Iliad*, when the narrator says 'Sing Goddess, of the wrath of Achilleus' he is uttering words that in an important way *link* narrated realities to the reality of the narration.

3. The time has come for us to bring our argument to a close. We began by noting, in extreme brevity, some apparent distinguishing features of epic and

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[27] Odysseus' anonymity is, of course, an important factor earlier, and later in the poem. It is flagged already in the un-named reference in the first line of the poem: 'tell me, Muse, the story of a man …' Odysseus remains unnamed until line 21. See ad loc. In de Jong 2001.

novel. However, taking Homeric epic and orality as our test case (on the assumption that these would provide us with a sharp a contrast to the novel), we saw that important doubts could be cast on the validity of our dichotomies. As we stressed, this was not an attempt to argue positively for a non-oral Homer. Nor were we trying to remove historical dichotomies from the critical tradition. From our general, fleeting list of attributes we moved to consider in greater detail three key features in Bakhtin's contrastive understanding of the genres of epic and novel. We saw that the very characterizations which he applied to the novel and which he denied to epic could be traced, quite precisely, already within Homeric poetry, the 'earliest,' and certainly a particularly distinct example of epic antitheses to the novel. It was precisely Bakhtin's fine-tuned distinctions that helped us characterize epic in novelistic terms. Other scholars have argued that the boundaries between epic and novel are blurred in later (and possibly less distinct?) evolutionary stages of the genre epic.[28] We have tried to suggest that the blurring may be there, as it were, already from the start.[29]

But, to return to the opening observations of this paper: for Bakhtin, as indeed for many other exponents of his critical tradition, questions of genre extended well beyond the limited realm of literary form. In genre they saw much broader reflections of historicized thinking and ways of understanding the world. And in the movement between genres they saw the important aspects of the progression of history itself. Have we, then, used Bakhtin against himself? Have we in challenging discrete boundaries between the genres epic and novel challenged the very notion of genre and, by implication, since we seem to have lost important markers of historical change, the notion of history itself? Should our argument be taken in support of the broader (well-known) claims about the 'end of history'? This is a question that calls, of course, for many pages of separate discussion. But the short answer (itself following well-known suggestions), with which I wish to bring this essay to conclusion, is a confident 'no.' We have argued, for example, that its not the literal language uttered by the hero that matters, but its frame, its embodiment in a subject. Our emphasis throughout has been on perceptions and representations, and thus on the gap between the assumed external object and its image. If nothing else, this point of view suggests that 'Homer' or 'epic' or indeed 'history' is not reducible to a single thing 'out there,' to a logical content or a formal linguistic structure, but is rather a dynamic series of historically contingent arguments, points of view, and narratives, which themselves must be embedded in subjects, cultures and social relationships. Such narrative may not be history *an sich*, but, we must hasten to add, nor is our own narrative history ‘in itself.’ Both are something more fragile, more ‘historical.’ From this perspective our argument neither tries, nor can ever make a dent, as it were, in Bakhtin’s definition of the genres of epic and novel (or indeed in history). Epic *does* exist as an ‘absolute past’ and its language *is* undifferentiated. Not because it *is* that way in some formal sense—we have tried to show otherwise in this paper—but because of its fragile historical embeddedness.[30] That, it seems to me, is not an un-Bakhtinian thought.[31]

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[28] See e.g. Harrison 1997; in part also in Nagy 2002.

[29] See also an interesting discussion of Bakhtin and epic in Farrell 1999.

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[30] There are important questions of subjectivity, authorship and more basic philosophical, historical, and ideological issues at stake in making this statement, all part of broad contemporary debates. Suffice it to say here that I agree with Adams 1998: 382 who says “This old chestnut of literary history—the novel-epic debate—still retains its interest for us, in part because it continues to be used as an objective explanatory device and as an ideology.” For a full discussion of these issues see Kahane (forthcoming), *Epic, Novel, and the Historical Progress of Antiquity*. Discussions of the (absence of) “essential” Homeric attributes in Kahane 2005.

[31] I am deeply indebted to R. Bracht Branham for his criticism of earlier versions of this paper and especially for pointing out to me several key details in Bakhtin’s analysis.

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