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**Interruption in the Odyssey**

By ROBERT J. RABEL

**INTERRUPTIONS OCCUR** frequently in the *Odyssey*. Some of the ways interruptions take place in the poem can be understood from studies of the *Odyssey* by Milman Parry and Bernard Fenik. These studies nowhere overlap in terms of argument or supporting evidence, and Fenik takes no account of Parry’s earlier work. The two critics are interested in different kinds of interruptions as these affect the songs of different poets or singers. First of all, Parry called attention to the kind of interruption that occurs *within* the *Odyssey* when professional singers like Phemius and Demodocus are interrupted in the course of singing their songs. Such interruptions occur frequently enough that Parry referred to “the interrupted song” as one of the themes or basic units of narration out of which the poem is constructed.¹ Later, in *Studies in the Odyssey*, Fenik approached the subject of interruption in a different way. He was not concerned with singers within the world of the poem but rather with the poet of the *Odyssey* and a particular narrative technique through which he conveys his story to the external audience of the poem, a technique Fenik called the “interruption sequence” or “interruption technique.”² The poet of the *Odyssey*, Fenik showed, has a tendency to discontinue or interrupt his account of a developing action, leave it dangling, and then later complete the account after an intervening scene during which other matters are settled.³ In this paper, I want, first, to look at examples of Parry’s theme of the interrupted song—what I will call interruption *within* the *Odyssey*—and then go a bit beyond Parry by examining the aftermath of interruption and noting its effects on audiences inhabiting the world of the poem. Interruption within the poem often initiates a pattern whereby the emotional enchantment (*thelxis*) created by a well-told tale is dispelled and the internal audience thereby stimulated to adopt a rational and analytical approach to what they hear. Secondly, I turn to a consideration of interruption of the *Odyssey*, what Fenik called the interruption sequence or interruption technique. Thirdly, I will

*¹ I would like to thank my colleague Jane Phillips for reading and commenting on an earlier draft of this paper.


argue that these two types of interruptions converge in a uniquely complex way during a scene of which neither critic took account: the so-called “intermezzo” of Book 11, the aftermath of Odysseus’ interruption of the story he tells the Phaeacians about his trip to the Underworld. The intermezzo will be seen to conform to Parry’s model of interruption within the Odyssey at the same time as it interrupts the Odyssey in the manner studied by Fenik. In the fourth section, I argue that interruption within the Odyssey, dispelling enchantment and provoking critical reflection, serves an important reflexive function. Such internal interruption calls attention to the poet’s use of the interruption technique, which in its turn temporarily dispels the aura of enchantment created by the Odyssey itself and invites the external audience of the poem to adopt a rational approach to what they hear. In explaining the use of interruption as a narrative technique employed to overcome the spell of poetry and provoke analysis, I will compare and contrast Homeric practice with the use of interruption in the so-called epic theater of Bertolt Brecht. Brecht employed the technique of interruption to accomplish a somewhat similar reflexive effect.

I

Parry’s theme of the interrupted song manifests itself early in the poem. The Odyssey has barely begun when Penelope, in a proleptic show of power, interrupts Phemius’ song about the return of the Achaeans from Troy. She requests a song less painful to herself (Od. 1.328-64). When Telemachus reaches the court of Menelaus in Book 4, his arrival seems to interrupt the song of an unnamed “divine bard” (Od. 4.17), unless this poet keeps singing while Menelaus occupies himself with receiving his guests. In Book 8, Demodocus begins a song about the strife of Achilles and Odysseus (Od. 8.73-82). The song causes Odysseus such stress that Alcinous interrupts and calls for athletic games (Od. 8.83-103). As Parry said, “when one has had enough of singing no more is served.” After Odysseus and the Phaeacians return to the hall, Demodocus is asked to sing a song of the wooden horse of Troy, but again Odysseus breaks down, and Alcinous orders the singer to cease. “Let Demodocus stop,” he says (Od. 8.537). In addition, though Parry failed to note them—perhaps because he was concerned only with the theme of the interrupted song as it applies to professional singers—several other variants of the theme occur within the Odyssey. For example, the theme manifests itself in the intermezzo of Book 11. There Odysseus, who is several times in the Odyssey likened to a poet (Od. 11.363-68; 14.124-32; 17.514-21), breaks off in mid-story while describing his trip to the Underworld and says that it is time to sleep (Od. 11.328-32). After an intervening scene (Od.

4. Unless otherwise noted, all references to the theme of the interrupted song are taken from Parry (1987) 455-57.
6. For a discussion of these passages see Rose (1992) 114-16 (with bibliography).
11.333-84) during which he finally receives the approval of the formerly skeptical Arete (Od. 11.336-42), who earlier greeted his arrival in Scheria with suspicion (Od. 7.233-39). Odysseus resumes the story at the behest of the Phaeacians (Od. 11.385ff.). Finally, in Odysseus’ tale of his wanderings to the Phaeacians, he earlier interrupted the song of the Sirens—simply by sailing away from them (Od. 12.166-96). (Though not professional singers like Phemius or Demodocus, the Sirens bear a startling resemblance to the Muses of the Iliad, who provide inspiration to such singers.) Parry noted that, though such frequent interruption as we find within the Odyssey was probably not typical of actual practice in the Greek world, the theme of the interrupted song demonstrates vividly that professional singers within the poem serve at the convenience of their listeners. In contrast, as we will see below, Odysseus and the poet of the Odyssey demonstrate a command over their audiences not exercised by Phemius or Demodocus. Both suffer no interruption by others; rather, suo arbitrio, they interrupt themselves.

Interuption within the Odyssey often has the effect of dispelling poetic enchantment and eliciting critical reactions from audiences within the poem. Indeed, some of the poem’s most significant remarks on the nature and effects of poetry arise as outcomes of interrupted songs. Presenting full commentary on the various views and criticisms of poetry given voice from within the text is beyond the scope of this paper. I wish simply to document the presence of important reflections on poetry following upon and associated with interrupted songs. Thus, as Telemachus and the suitors sit in silence in Book 1 listening to Penelope’s tale of the baleful homecoming of the Achaeans (Od. 1.325-27), Penelope remarks upon and simultaneously disrupts the song’s enchanting power (cf. thelkteria, Od. 1.337) by interrupting it. The noun thelkteria used by Penelope is related to the verb thelgein, which designates a pleasure that brings about a “loss of oneself.” Poetic enchantment is a form of unconsciousness, whereas interruption has the power to awaken the conscious mind to reflection on what has been sung while the individual remained in a sort of trance induced by the poetry. Penelope’s interruption elicits from Telemachus the earliest example of literary criticism to be found in Greek literature. As Stephanie West points out, Telemachus makes a plea for artistic freedom and at the same time expresses the Greek love of novelty in song:

7. I argue in section IV below that the description of Arete’s praise and reception of Odysseus in Book 11 and the description of her initially hostile reception in Book 7 both employ the interruption sequence and are structurally linked to one another through ring composition.
8. See Pucci (1998) 6: “The Sirens look like Muses and speak with the diction of the Iliad: the implication is obviously that the poet of the Odyssey considers the divine inspirers of the Iliad to possess the attributes of the Sirens . . .”
Why, my mother, do you begrudge this excellent singer
his pleasing himself as the thought drives him? It is not the singers
who are to blame, it must be Zeus is to blame, who gives out
to men who eat bread, to each and all, the way he wills it.
There is nothing wrong in his singing the sad return of the Danaans.
People, surely, always give more applause to that song
which is the latest to circulate among the listeners.
(Od. 1.346-52)\(^{13}\)

The pattern according to which interruption dispels enchantment and stimu-
lates reflection is also associated with the interruptions listed above from
Book 8 (the songs of Demodocus) and Book 11 (the intermezzo). Walsh uses
the discussions of poetry following these interruptions to reconstruct the
norms of two different poetics, one given voice by Odysseus in Book 8 and
one by Alcinous in Book 11.\(^{14}\) The poet and critic James Fenton says that the
first question he asks upon reading a poem is: How did it do that?\(^{15}\) Odysseus
and Alcinous share a similar approach to poetry. First of all, in Book 8
Odysseus weeps copious tears as Demodocus sings a song about an early
quarrel between Odysseus and Achilles (Od. 8.86), so that Alcinous feels
compelled to interrupt him (Od. 8.97-103). Odysseus’ empathetic engage-
ment with a story in which he himself figures as a protagonist is total.
Explaining Demodocus’ power to move him, Odysseus makes no mention of
the uninterrupted song about Ares and Aphrodite (Od. 8. 266-366) that inter-
vened between the song of the quarrel and Odysseus’ explanation of its
effect. He reflects only on the song about the quarrel:

Demodokos, above all mortals beside I prize you.
Surely the Muse, Zeus’ daughter, or else Apollo has taught you,
for all too right (kata kosmon) following the tale you sing the Achaians’
venture, all they did and had done to them, all the sufferings
of these Achaians, as if you had been there yourself or heard it
from one who was.
(Od. 8.487-91)

Demodocus’ song elicits a wide range of emotional responses, ranging from
the delight felt by Alcinous and the Phaeacians (cf. Od. 8.45 and 91), to the
tears of Odysseus. The accuracy or truth of Demodocus’ song would not
alone be sufficient to prompt Odysseus’ strong emotional reaction. Rather, as
Kevin Crotty rightly observes, “Odysseus weeps at Demodocus’ account not
because of its accuracy but because of the vividness with which the singer
conjures up the events recounted in his song.”\(^{16}\) Odysseus’ tears and com-

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13. All translations of the *Odyssey* are taken from Lattimore (1965).
14. Walsh (1985) 5 argues that there is no common ground capable of encompassing the psychologies and
poetics of Odysseus and Alcinous. Odysseus is “too deeply touched by the singer’s performance” and
Alcinous “too serenely pleased” (4).
which include ourselves as actors, or which include people close to us, are more likely to engage our listeners
than the same stories about strangers.”
ments imply that the song of Demodocus possesses the uncanny power to convince the audience that they are actually present at events of the Trojan War that are only being recounted years later at a banquet of Phaeacians. Odysseus attributes the origin of this power to the influence of the Muse or Apollo. He thus anticipates several features of Plato’s later analysis of the nature of poetry in the *Ion*. Plato also remarks upon poetry’s capacity to present an illusion that the emotions of the listener mistake for the reality being represented (*Ion 531b1-e6*). Secondly, Plato attributes this power to the influence of the Muse (*Ion 533e*). However, unlike Odysseus, Plato judges it a form of madness, not a cause for wonder or tears, when the members of an audience in the safety and security of a sacrifice or feast react to a poetic tale with tears or expressions of amazement (*Ion 535d1-e6*).

Interruption also stimulates Alcinous to reflect upon the nature and effects of poetry immediately after Odysseus activates the theme of the interrupted song—or in this case interrupted story—in his account to the Phaeacians of his trip to the Underworld in Book 11. Like Telemachus and the suitors in Book 1, Alcinous, Arete, and the other Phaeacians sit in silence as Odysseus performs (*Odyssey 11.333*). They are held in thrall by enchantment (**kêlêthmôi**, *Od. 11.334*) until the spell is broken by Odysseus’ interruption of his tale. The word **kêlêthmos**, which recurs only at the conclusion of the story of Odysseus’ wanderings at *Odyssey 13.2*, seems to refer to the same powerful effect of song to disarm the conscious mind designated by the noun **thelktêria** in Book 1 (*Od. 1.337*). Alcinous’ expectation that a song should always be a source of pleasure is coupled with the expectation that singers should always accurately speak the truth:

> Odysseus, we as we lock upon you do not imagine that you are a deceptive or thievish man, the sort that the black earth breeds in great numbers, people who wander widely, making up lying stories, from which no one could learn anything. You have a grace (**morphe**), upon your words, and there is sound sense within them, and expertly (**epistomenôs**), as a singer would do, you have told the story of the dismal sorrows befallen yourself and all of the Argives. (*Od. 11.363-69*)

The second sentence of this passage, as Walsh says, is intended to explain the first, for the grace (**morphe**) of a song is taken as an independent guarantee of its truth. Aesthetic beauty and truth do not vary independently according to the poetics of Alcinous. The king ignores a fact that Odysseus recognized in attributing Demodocus’ song to the instruction of the Muse or Apollo: only a god can guarantee truth. One must draw upon a surplus from the supernatural

17. **Kêlêthmos** or its cognates frequently designate poetic enchantment elsewhere in Greek literature. For example, poetry’s connection with the enchantment designated by the noun **kêlêthmos** and its cognates is discussed by Plato at *Republic 601b4-b4*. For other instances of **kêlêthmos** and its cognates used to designate poetic enchantment, see LSJ s.v. **kêlêtis**. The use of **thelgen** to designate the aesthetic effects of poetry, however, is exclusively Odyssean: see Pucci (1987) 193.

sphere in order to “get beyond the closed semantic universe of language.”

Finally, the Sirens, as Circe says, charm (thelgousin, Od. 12.40-44) with their song all men who reach their island. Once again interruption breaks the spell of an enchanting song. In this case, however, Odysseus has little time for reflection on the significance of what he hears, since Scylla and Charybdis lie immediately ahead (Od. 12.201ff.). Yet the task of analyzing this truncated and enigmatic episode has frequently been taken up by later poets, artists, and commentators.20

In comparison with the Odyssey, interruption occurs relatively infrequently in the Iliad. As Parry pointed out, the theme of the interrupted song is found there only once. (Of course, only one song is sung within the Iliad.)

As Achilles celebrates the deeds of great men of the past and Patroclus attends to his song, the arrival of the embassy puts an abrupt end to his performance (II. 9.182-94).21 With the exception of the arrival of the embassy in Book 9, interruption of one speaker by another occurs rarely within the Iliad, where everyone is usually permitted his or her full say. Other interruptions within the Iliad occur when Achilles interrupts Agamemnon during the crucial assembly of Book 1 (II. 1.286-92) and when Achilles interrupts his mother Thetis after she warns him that he will soon die if he goes forth to kill Hector (II. 18.95-98).22 In the next section, we will address the more difficult question of the extent to which interruption of the poem, Fenik’s interruption sequence, characterizes the discourse of the poet of the Iliad.

II

In his discussion of the theme of the interrupted song, Parry failed to note what Fenik demonstrated in detail: the Odyssey itself is a kind of interrupted song. Rather than favoring uninterrupted linear development of his story, the poet of the Odyssey makes frequent use of interruption. According to Fenik, the interruption sequence is a standard narrative device in the Odyssey, whereby the poet interrupts himself, breaking off his account of a developing action or leaving suspended the development of an important theme until other matters are settled.23 A significant example of the interruption technique can be found in Book 7, where Odysseus makes supplication before Arete, queen of the Phaeacians, and requests that she provide him an escort home. 24 (This example will acquire added significance when we come to discuss the intermezzo of Book 11.) The queen does not immediately respond, and the other Phaeacians sit in silence (Od. 7.146-54). Finally Echenēus, the most senior of the nobles, intervenes, urging King Alcinous to give the

20. For example, Eustathius says that the Sirens represent theoretical knowledge without action (1709, 13-31): see Benardete (1997) 166, n.170. Starting with K. Reinhardt, however, commentators have come to see the song of the Sirens as the beginning of a heroic epic: see Reinhardt in Schein (1996) 75.
23. See Fenik (above, n.3).
stranger a proper reception. Much business is subsequently conducted among Odysseus and the Phaeacians (*Od. 7.155-232*) while Arete remains sitting in silence, seemingly frozen in time and space. Finally, she breaks her silence and replies to Odysseus:

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Stranger and friend, I myself first have a question to ask you.
What man are you, and whence? And who was it gave you this clothing?
Did you not say that you came here ranging over the water?
(*Od. 7.237-39*)
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As Fenik notes, the presence of the interruption technique has provided much fodder for analyst critics, who are typically concerned to remove intrusive scenes and sew back together the two ends of interrupted stories. 25 Thus a number of analysts have seen a problem in the considerable delay between Odysseus’ request and Arete’s response. For example, Wolfgang Schadewaldt argued that Arete’s response and questions should follow immediately after Odysseus’ request. In the surviving narrative, he says, our expectations are disappointed, the linear movement of the scene is disrupted, and the important theme of clothing, a leitmotif developed in detail since Book 5, is suspended. 26 Schadewaldt, finding the construction of this part of the plot awkward and confusing, wished to excise lines 155 to 232 from the text, so that Odysseus’ question could be followed immediately by Arete’s reply. Schadewaldt’s argument might have merit if such an interruption as we find here in Book 7 were not a pervasive characteristic of the poet’s discourse.

A second prominent example of the interruption sequence occurs in Book 23, the recognition scene between Odysseus and Penelope. The recognition proceeds in an ordered, linear fashion from lines 85 to 116. At line 116, however, the story breaks off in an unexpected way as Odysseus gives commands for cleaning up the bodies of the suitors, goes off to take a bath, and is rejuvenated by the goddess Athena. Afterwards the recognition continues until its conclusion. A number of analysts, as Fenik points out, have also found fault with the construction of this scene. They ask what Penelope was doing during this interval, what thoughts were running through her head. 27 Is she, perhaps like Arete in Book 7, simply frozen by the poet in space and time, while other matters are settled?

Though Fenik does not discuss this example, Demodocus’ song about the quarrel between Odysseus and Achilles (*Od. 8.62 ff.*) is particularly noteworthy for its close conjunction of the theme of the interrupted song within the *Odyssey* and the poet’s interruption of the *Odyssey*. 28 Alcinous activates the

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25. Fränkel (1973) 41 generalizes too hastily when he asserts: “Ancient epic knew only linear representation...” As we will see below, however, linear representation is more characteristic of the *Iliad* than of the *Odyssey*.
27. Fenik (1974) 64.
28. Merkelbach (1951) 168-71 discerns a conflation of songs from different poets in the nonlinear development of Book 8.
theme of the interrupted song when he calls a halt to a story that features Odysseus himself as a major protagonist (Od. 8.92-103). Following the interruption and in keeping with typical practice in this type-scene, the external audience of the poem might likely expect Odysseus to make some comment on the song or perhaps reveal his identity to his hosts. Instead the banquet is interrupted, and the poet launches into a lengthy digression, providing an account of the Phaeacian athletic games, Demodocus’ song about the affair of Ares and Aphrodite, and Odysseus’ farewell to Nausicaa (Od. 8.104-473). When Odysseus and the Phaeacians finally reconvene in the banquet hall, Odysseus comments upon Demodocus’ song in the way described above in section I, as if all that has intervened had not taken place. The poet is once again at work with his characteristic interruption sequence.29

A particularly striking use of the interruption sequence occurs during the episode of the slaughter of the cattle of the Sun in Book 12. Odysseus falls asleep (Od. 12.338). His men take advantage of his absence to kill and roast some of the cattle (Od. 12.339-65). Odysseus awakens and returns to the ship. Smelling the roasting meat just before reaching the ships, he prays to Zeus (Od. 12.371-73). The scene then switches abruptly to Olympus, where the Sun asks Zeus to exact vengeance from Odysseus’ comrades (Od. 12.374-90). Finally, Odysseus reaches the ships and confronts his men (Od. 12.391ff.). Odysseus’ journey to the ships is thus interrupted by the council of the gods, which, if the poet were striving for linear development of his story, would more naturally have been placed just after the cattle were slaughtered or immediately after Odysseus rebukes his crew.30

An objection might be raised that the council of the gods in Book 12 of the Odyssey does not differ from similar councils that occur frequently in the Iliad. In response, Fenik argues that the councils in the Iliad are regularly directed toward those persons whose actions the Olympian scenes interrupt.31 For example, before the combat of Patroclus and Sarpedon in the Iliad, the scene shifts to Olympus, and Zeus debates whether he should save his son Sarpedon (Il. 16.431-61). This interruption, like the other councils of the gods in the Iliad, is clearly directed toward the person whose action is interrupted.32 In order to conform to the typically Iliadic pattern, the council of the gods in Book 12 of the Odyssey would have to come either during the slaughter of the cattle or after the men began to roast them. Rather, this council interrupts the course of Odysseus’ journey to the ships.

This hypothetical objection to Fenik’s thesis nonetheless brings to the fore a problem that perhaps can never be adequately solved: no hard and fast principle can allow for an unambiguous distinction to be made between a change

29. Hainsworth in Heubeck et al. (1988) 378 remarks: “Odysseus ignores the Song of Ares and Aphrodite, as if the present scene should stand immediately after the first song (72ff.), . . . .”
30. Fenik (1974) 75-76.
32. See Fenik (1974) 77 for discussion of this and other councils among the gods in the Iliad.
of scene and the presence of the interruption sequence. Therefore, Kirk may be correct in speaking of the duel between Glauce and Diomedes (II. 6.119-236) as the kind of “intrusive interruption or diversion ... typical of Iliadic composition.”33 Indeed, Fenik himself cites three examples of the interruption sequence employed in the Iliad.34 However, on the basis of numerous examples cited from the Odyssey it is difficult to resist the conclusion at which Fenik arrives: the interruption sequence is especially characteristic of the course of the Odyssey.35 While the poet of the Iliad seems to favor the uninterrupted, linear development of his plot, the poet of the Odyssey works on a different principle. He takes special pleasure in showing and emphasizing the artificiality of “the seams and joints” of his narrative, the places in the text where the “toolmarks” of his craft most visibly show.36 In Fenik’s words, the poet of the Odyssey avoids “consistency, uninterrupted linear development, and uncompromising verisimilitude.”37 Is interruption in the Odyssey valued only for the sake of the suspense and surprise it engenders, or does it serve some further end? We can begin to discern the outlines of an answer to this question by first looking at the intermezzo in Odyssey 11, where Parry’s interruption within the Odyssey is accompanied by Fenik’s interruption of the Odyssey to produce a particularly complex and telling aesthetic effect.

III

In Books 9 through 12 Odysseus identifies himself to the Phaeacians and recounts at length the story of his adventures since the fall of Troy. His performance proves to be more ambitious and successful than the interrupted songs of Phemius or Demodocus. As we noted above in section I, the Phaeacians are not only held spellbound by enchantment (kêlêthmôi, Od. 11.334) while he speaks, but they never interrupt him. Indeed, Alcinous would have willingly sat and listened even until the dawn (Od. 11.375-76), but Odysseus breaks off after providing a catalogue of famous and infamous women he saw in the Underworld:

I saw Phaidra and Prokris and Ariadne, the beautiful
daughter of malignant Minos. Theseus at one time
was bringing her from Crete to the high ground of sacred Athens,

33. Kirk (1990) 171. On the other hand, the duel may actually be part of an essentially linear design whereby the poet has Hector start off for Troy (II. 6.116-18) and then uses the interval created by the duel (II. 119-236) to allow the hero to reach the city (II. 6.237ff.). The poet may thus be seen to accomplish a smooth transition between the confusion and blood of the battlefield and the relative peace and domesticity of life within Troy.
37. Fenik (1974) 63. The interruption technique seems even to affect the poem’s larger design. Friedrich (1975) 28ff. has shown that the larger units of the poem develop through a series of interruptions. Thus the Telemachia is unexpectedly introduced after the description of Odysseus’ situation at the beginning of the poem and is itself interrupted (unterbrochen) by the main plot at the beginning of Book 5. The Telemachia is then suspended until Book 15, when it is reintroduced in two scenes (Od. 15.1-300; 493-557) interrupting (unterbrechend) the main narrative.
but got no joy of her, since before that Artemis killed her
in sea-washed Dia, when Dionysos bore witness against her.
I saw Maira, Klymene, and Eriphyle the hateful,
who accepted precious gold for the life of her own dear husband.
But I could not tell over the whole number of them nor name all
the women I saw who were the wives and daughters of heroes,
for before that the divine night would give out. It is time now
for my sleep....
(Od. 11.321-31)

In the ensuing intermezzo, which extends from line 333 to 384, Arete breaks
the silence, urging the Phaeacians to be generous in providing gifts to the hero (Od. 11.336-41). Echenēs agrees and urges Alcinous to take the lead (Od. 11.344-46). Alcinous promises gifts, but then he asks the hero to resume the story by telling about the heroes of the Trojan War he saw in the Underworld (Od. 11.348-53 and 363-76). Thereupon Odysseus continues the tale precisely from the point where it was broken off. Making brief mention once again of the women he saw in the Underworld (Od. 11.385-86), he proceeds immediately to tell about his meeting with the ghost of Agamemnon (Od. 11.387ff.).

Commentators have reacted in various ways to the intermezzo. Wilamowitz judged it to be of little worth (sehr geringhaltig), unsatisfactory in both form and content.38 Denys Page expressed a similar view. He believed that the intermezzo was a subsequent insertion, designed to be a link between the Odyssey and an originally independent eleventh book. Page called the intermezzo “not only ruinous to the structure of the story but also of very poor quality in itself.”39 Analyst critics often find fault with the intermezzo in this way. The typical solution is to remove the intrusive scene and then sew back together the two ends of the interrupted story. They would restore linearity to the Odyssey by removing a detour in the narrative, so that the “path” (cf. oïmas, Od. 8.481) of song would move more directly from point A to point B. In the process they ignore the poet’s use of the interruption sequence.

Other commentators have been kinder in their treatment of the intermezzo.40 However, in the claim that the intermezzo is prepared for in the preceding narrative some underplay the abruptness of Odysseus’ interruption. For example, Eisenberger notes that from line 321 Odysseus’ narration becomes more concise and hurried: Phaëdra, Procris, Maera, and Clymene are only mentioned by name, and the myths of Ariadne and Eriphyle are only briefly alluded to. The narrator, he says, is becoming restless (unruhig), and his interruption follows naturally.41 Yet in her study of the use of catalogues and lists in the context of oral performance Minchin demonstrates that such

38. Wilamowitz (1884) 143.
39. Page (1955a) 34.
41. Eisenberger (1972) 178.
catalogues as the one provided by Odysseus most often express a mounting intensity.\(^{42}\) Perhaps like the Phaeacians the external audience of the poem might reasonably expect Odysseus to provide some climactic utterance to mark the conclusion of his verbal crescendo. Instead he interrupts the story at an unexpected point—after the manner of the poet of the \textit{Odyssey}.

The intermezzo employs the theme of the interrupted song and makes \textit{double} use of the interruption sequence, which manifests itself simultaneously on the level of plot (Odysseus’ narration before the Phaeacians) and on the level of epic discourse (the poet’s relating to the external audience Odysseus’ telling of the tale). On the level of plot, Odysseus provides an unusual variant of the theme of the interrupted song or, in this case, interrupted story: his self-interruption is unique among tales told from within the plot of the poem, since he alone interrupts himself. (The poets within the \textit{Odyssey}, Phemius and Demodocus, are always interrupted by others, professional singers within the poem always serving at the convenience of their audiences.)\(^{43}\) Interrupting himself at a point of his own autonomous choice, Odysseus demonstrates a level of influence over his audience not shared with the professional singers in the poem but only with the poet of the \textit{Odyssey} himself, whose similar control over his audience has been well described by Griffin:

\textit{[T]he picture of the position of singers in the \textit{Odyssey} is of performers who are at the mercy of their audience and need to establish an ascendency over them. Very different, in important respects, is the position implied by a huge poem such as the \textit{Iliad} or the \textit{Odyssey}. A singer who embarks on a song of such a size is evidently not expecting to be interrupted.}\(^{44}\)

Though achieving nothing like the monumentality of the \textit{Odyssey}—his tale accounts for only four books within a much larger poem—Odysseus provides a graphic illustration of a storyteller taking steps toward achieving a command over his subject and audience like that wielded by the poet.

At the same time as he activates the theme of the interrupted song, Odysseus also employs the interruption technique—again from within the poem’s plot. That is, he interrupts the linear progress of his secondary narrative, which is directed to the Phaeacians (the primary narrative being that produced by the poet for the external audience). He then leaves the story line temporarily dangling and only returns to the linear sequence of events after a scene during which other matters are settled. Through Odysseus’ use of the interruption technique, the poet holds up a mirror within the text, making visible to the external audience of the poem his own use of the interruption technique in the primary narrative. With the exception of the intermezzo, the interruption technique can otherwise only be \textit{heard} as the external audience attends to the poet’s discourse; it cannot be \textit{seen} activated within the plot. In

\(^{42}\) Minchin (2001) 92.

\(^{43}\) Parry (1987) 457.

\(^{44}\) Griffin (1987) 25.
narratological terms, the intermezzo functions as a “mirror story” or a mise en abyme, the latter a term used to describe “any aspect enclosed within a work that shows a similarity with the work that contains it.”

The mise en abyme in Odysseus’ use of the interruption technique reflects the poet’s use of the same technique on the level of the primary narrative, as he narrates the intermezzo to the external audience of the poem. Indeed, the poet structures the intermezzo so as to recall for the external audience his use of the interruption sequence in Book 7, which we discussed in section II above. There the Phaeacians were frozen in amazement at the unexpected appearance of a stranger at their hearth. Echeneus, the oldest of the Phaeacian nobles (Od. 7.156), broke the silence (pantes akên egenonto siôpêî, Od. 7.154), intervening between Odysseus’ request to be accepted as a suppliant and Arete’s curt response asking where he got his clothes (Od. 7.237-39). Echeneus ordered Alcinous to accept the suppliant and provide him a feast (Od. 7.159-66). Alcinous complied with this request before dismissing the Phaeacians with the promise of a greater feast, a sacrifice the next day, and an escort of the stranger home to his own country (Od. 7.167-206). The interruption sequence was concluded when Arete finally replied to Odysseus. The interruption sequence of the intermezzo both recalls and provides a rather neat chiastic reversal of the interruption sequence of Book 7. In Book 11, Arete, who concluded the interruption sequence of Book 7, assumes the role formerly taken up by Echeneus; she breaks the silence (pantes akên egenonto siôpêî, Od. 11.333), caused this time by Odysseus’ enchanting song. Receiving him as guest (xeinos, Od. 11.238), she requests that the Phaeacians delay in sending him off and not cut short the process of giving him gifts (Od. 11.336-41). Only after she takes charge of the interruption sequence in this way does Echeneus order Alcinous to provide Odysseus with gifts and an escort home (Od. 11.344-46). Once again Alcinous complies (Od. 11.347-53). The interruption sequence in the intermezzo thus repeats—while reversing—the basic story elements found in the interruption sequence of Book 7:

Book 7:
A. Echeneus and Alcinous: Echeneus breaks the silence
B. Arete

Book 11:
B. Arete breaks the silence
A. Echeneus and Alcinous

In portraying Odysseus as a storyteller making use of his characteristic interruption sequence, the poet vividly reflects his own narrating activity and in effect temporarily blurs or even erases the distinction between himself and his hero-narrator. At the same time, he cleverly elides the distinction between

the Phaeacians and the external audience of the poem by subjecting both to the interruption sequence simultaneously. The effect thus produced places the external audience in the subject position of the Phaeacians, both audiences experiencing an unexpected detour in the narratives related to them, both provided the opportunity to reflect on the meaning and nature of the stories being told. As the Phaeacians sit spellbound (cf. kēlethmōi, Od. 11.334) through the narrative, their experience likely reflects back to the external audience their own reaction to the spell (thelxis or kēlethmos) cast by the poet’s narrative of the *Odyssey*. Moreover, just as Alcinous, awakened from his spell and restored to consciousness, analyzes what he has heard, so the intermezzo offers the external audience an opportunity for rational reflection on the poet’s narrative.

Perhaps the analysts’ questions as to what Arete and Penelope were doing and thinking while they seemed frozen in space and time are the very questions the poet wished his audience to ponder during the intervals created by the interruption sequences we discussed above from Books 7 and 23. Similarly, the lengthy interruption sequence of Book 8—athletic games, the song about Ares and Aphrodite, and the goodbye scene between Nausicaa and Odysseus—offers the external audience the opportunity to reflect on just what Odysseus’ reaction will be to a song that features him as a major protagonist.

IV

**THE EMPHASIS THE poet places on interruption within the Odyssey and interruption of the Odyssey signals the workings of a reflexive form of art.** Alter explains the sense of reflexivity I intend when he says that such a work “flaunts its own condition of artifice” and conveys to the audience the idea that the world represented within the work is “an authorial construct set up against a background of literary tradition and convention.” Alter finds such self-consciousness expressed in literature as early as the *Odyssey*, where poets play a role in the story. Cook elucidates the idea of reflexivity on the analogy of a reflexive verb in an inflected language and says that such a work “considers itself.” According to Stam, reflexive art “points to its own mask and invites the public to examine its design and texture.” The *Odyssey* points to its own mask in a number of ways that critics have identified as reflexive. Following this approach, I hope to have shown that the processes at work in the interruption of stories within the *Odyssey* reflect the processes at work in the interruption of the story of the *Odyssey* and that interruption comprises an element of reflexivity inviting the external audience to look closely at the poet’s narrative technique. Through interruption the poet

46. So Merkelbach (1951) 236.
47. Alter (1975) x-xi.
51. See section II above.
openly admits the status of his work as a representation: he calls attention to
the presence of a mediator between the audience and the story. Moreover, interruption within the Odyssey and interruption of the Odyssey take audi-
cences of silent, uncritical spectators and transform them into active and rational
interpreters of the poetry they hear.

Insofar as the poet of the Odyssey employs reflexivity he anticipates a rich
and complex history of reflexive techniques used later in fiction and even in
film. But his use of the interruption technique as a reflexive device for the
instigation of critical reflection seems to me to have a particularly close ana-
logue in the modern epic theater of Bertolt Brecht. Brecht and the author of
the Odyssey were both poets. Both were involved in the process of conflating
genres normally treated as distinct: narrative and dramatic art. According
to Aristotle, Homer alone of narrative poets knew how to construct dramatic
representations: Homer actually invented drama and included it within a nar-
rative framework. Brecht, working from the other end, took the existing
genre of drama and made it into narrative. Brecht’s actors were expected to
appear on stage simultaneously as narrators, as actors, and, in the freedom
given to them to participate in the creation of their roles, also as authors.
Brecht wanted them to engage in a kind of third-person acting, not identifi-
ing with their characters but keeping them at a distance, making themselves
observed—much like epic performers—as actor-mediators standing between
the audience and the event. In rehearsals he advised his actors to “epicize”
(episieren): to tell the scene. (Brecht himself saw the obvious analogy
between his recommended style of acting and the kind of theatricality
involved when the Homeric poems were performed in antiquity.) For our
immediate purposes, however, Brecht is worth discussing in the context of
interruption in the Odyssey because his modern epic theater is highly reflex-
ive and makes prominent use of interruption as a narrative technique for
stimulating critical reflection.

Many of Brecht’s plays and operas are models of reflexivity. They display
themselves as artistic constructs through a variety of means such as the

52. See Starn (1985). Godard’s film Contempt, which deals with the making of a film about the Odyssey,
mimics the poem in the emphasis the director puts on the appearance of various reflexive devices like movie
Cameras in the film.
53. Willett (1964) has edited and translated into English Brecht’s most important writings on the nature of
epic theater. Certainly, Jameson (1998) 43 is correct in pointing out that “the crucial term—epic—by no
means involves the lofty and classical associations of the Homeric tradition but, rather, something as humdrum
and everyday as narrative or ‘storytelling’.” Nonetheless, it is clear that Brecht conceived of actors in his epic
theatre as engaged in a type of storytelling closely analogous to that practiced in the performance of Homeric
epic: see below.
54. According to Willett and Manheim (1979) ix, “Anybody who fails to see that his [sc. Brecht’s] lan-
guage was that of a poet is missing the main motive force of all his work.”
56. See Bentley (1998) 41: “The root idea of Brecht’s Epic Theatre is expressed in the name. Of the three
types of literature—epic, dramatic, and lyric—the first two are to be fused . . . .”
58. See Willett (1964) 58.
60. See Willett (1964) 70. I expect to pursue parallels between Brecht’s works and the poetry of the
Odyssey in a book tentatively entitled The Poetics of the Odyssey: Homer’s Epic Theater.
61. See Starn (1985) xii.
use of internal narrators, an emphasis on song, and the use of masks, placards, and images set in narrative sequence. Brecht's concern with interruption can be gleaned from his own words: he wanted his actors to show or narrate their characters "by means of interruptions and jumps." Perhaps the clearest exposition of the place of interruption in the epic theater was provided by Brecht's close friend and confidant Walter Benjamin in an essay on the nature of epic theater. Benjamin begins with the proposition that the task of the epic theater is the discovery of the conditions of life. He takes several lines from one of Brecht's poems to illustrate how this discovery is to be made: "The effect of every sentence was waited for and laid bare. And the waiting lasted until the crowd had carefully weighed our sentence." According to Benjamin, Brecht is here referring to his technique of interruption. Epic theater "moves in spurts." It creates intervals "reserved for the spectator's critical reaction—to the actions of the players and to the way in which they are presented." In Brecht's dramas, characters frequently interrupt themselves in mid-song, and dramatic scenes are truncated through interruptions created by the commencement of other scenes. A simple example of the workings of the Brechtian technique of interruption should suffice for our purposes. As Leach describes the technique in operation in *Mother Courage and Her Children*:

The technique of interruption is . . . strenuously applied. The stage presents a vivid comparison between the two characters, Mother Courage stoical and determined, sitting and waiting, and the Young Soldier furious and energetic, marching up and down, shouting. The scene proceeds crabwise, through an unpredictable series of interruptions, which provide a number of "frame-like" moments. . . . First Mother Courage's patient determination is interrupted by the entrance of the furious Young Soldier. Then his frenzied stamping up and down is interrupted by the Scrivener—"Be seated!" *(The young soldier sits).* The song interrupts the action, and it is worth noting that the song itself is interrupted several times by the singer's asides.

Leach later continues:

Brecht focusses our attention by way of gesture and interruption: peace is interrupted by war; direct address is interrupted by conversation; song by speech, and the method of singing, *Sprechstimme*, is a method of interrupting singing with speaking and vice versa: Mother Courage's failure is interrupted by her success as a businesswoman, her mother's pride by her grief; even the melodrama of the shooting of Kattrin as she drums to awaken Halle is interrupted by comedy.

Interruption is prominent in Brecht's plays and operas because it effectively breaks the dramatic illusion. "The audience," he says, "can no longer have the illusion of being the unseen spectator at an event which is really taking

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62. Brooker in Thomson and Sacks (1994) 191. The masks of Greek tragedy are also coming to be recognized as reflexive devices, indicators "of the fictive character of a role in a stylized performance"; see Segal in Falkner et al. (1999) 6. Brecht employs internal narrators in his plays and in such operas as *Die Dreigroschenoper*, where the street singer begins with spoken lines to the effect that the audience is about to hear an opera. Stravinsky makes interesting reflexive use of an internal narrator in his opera *Oedipus Rex*.

63. See Willett (1964) 55.

64. See Benjamin (1968) 150-51.


place." Brecht makes a sharp distinction here between the traditional dramatic theater and the epic theater. Traditional theater implicates the emotions of the audience in the situation on stage and proceeds by linear development in which one scene follows the next in accordance with Aristotelian probability and necessity. Such theater, Brecht thought, induces a state of hypnosis in its audience. (Dickson suggests that Brecht was thinking here of dramatists like Strindberg, who requested that his Miss Julie be performed without intermission, so that the audience would have no chance to escape "the suggestive influence of the author-hypnotist.") The situation is entirely different in the epic theater: "Whatever is intended to produce hypnosis, is likely to induce sordid intoxication, or creates fog, has got to be given up." Epic theater privileges narrative over dramatic action, treats the spectator as a detached observer, proceeds through a series of curves, jumps, and interruptions and elicits a rational rather than an emotional response from its audience.

I suggest that Brecht uses interruption as an antidote to the kind of poetic hypnosis or intoxication that goes by the name of thelxis or kēlēthmos in the Odyssey. This poetic hypnosis, as Plato describes it in the Ion and as Odysseus explains to Demodocus (see section I), has the power to convince an audience that they are watching reality being magically conjured up before their eyes. However, differences between the poetic purposes and the styles of Brecht and the poet of the Odyssey must also be noted. Brecht's dramas and plays, with their series of brief, frame-like moments, contain an extraordinarily high coefficient of reflexivity in direct proportion to their frequent employment of the interruption sequence. Brecht's plays (like Mother Courage and Her Children) or operas (like Mahagonny) are as close as Western art has probably ever come to a pure form of reflexivity. Brecht sought to combat poetic intoxication through various reflexive techniques such as interruption because he believed that such a mood of intoxication prevented poetry from achieving its proper effect, which was to make an audience apply their rational faculties to what they see and hear. In contrast, the poet of the Odyssey, I think, has a rather more positive view of poetic enchantment (thelxis). Indeed, insofar as he himself casts such a spell through his poetry, the poet puts himself in the company of others like Phemius and the Sirens, who also work magic with their verse. However, the poet of the Odyssey—and Odysseus also, at least in the intermezzo where

68. See Willett (1964) 92.  
69. Brecht provided a convenient table that demonstrates the differences between traditional drama and the epic theater: see Willett (1964) 37. Brecht’s theater is non-Aristotelian in two senses: it dispenses not only with Aristotelian probability and necessity but also with emotional catharsis: see Willett (1964) 57, 78, 87.  
70. Dickson (1978) 232.  
71. Willett (1964) 38.  
72. See note 69 above. After the period of his Lehrstücke, however, Brecht became a little less strictly rational, so that by 1936 he would write that the epic theater "intervenes, not in the form of the absence of emotion, but in the form of emotions which need not correspond to those of the characters portrayed": see Willett (1964) 94.  
73. See Rose (1992) 126.
his performance closely reflects that of his poet—first casts a spell and then periodically rouses the audience to reflection through the use of the interruption technique and other reflexive devices. In the Odyssey both stages of a repeating cycle—emotional engagement followed by detached, active analysis—seem equally important in the act of properly attending to poetry. The Sirens, on the other hand, seem to sing without interruption—even to the death of their audience (see Od. 12.39-46).

The Odyssey confronts us with the paradox Harry Levin identified in Don Quixote: the poem seems to cast a spell while dispelling an illusion. The poet of the Odyssey conjures up what Borges has called the “partial magic” of self-conscious art, which consists in a simultaneous joy in both mystification and demystification.74