Erich Auerbach, in the celebrated opening chapter of *Mimesis*, "Odysseus’ Scar," makes a number of suggestive observations regarding the contrastive styles of Homer and the Bible.\(^1\) On the one hand, Homer’s narrative world is all surface, where everything is presented in a fully illuminated "foreground." Biblical narrative, on the other, is “fraught with background,” projecting time and space onto an unevenly lit volume whose depths recede into shadow. From this difference follow a number of striking consequences in narrative representation. In effect, the contrasts he so incisively explicates between Homeric epic and biblical narrative delineate two fundamental narrative modes. Although Auerbach does not say so himself, I would like to propose that we account for these two modes of narrative art with reference to the different possibilities available to oral tradition and written verbal art (“literature” in the etymologically precise sense of the term).

It is no coincidence that philologists successfully analyzed the Pentateuch (as well as other books of the Bible) into divers sources. As a result, the “documentary hypothesis,” that great achievement of nineteenth-century philology that created the modern discipline of biblical studies, taught us to perceive behind the Pentateuch the long history of composition and redaction that its narratives and laws have undergone *qua* text. Tellingly, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* did not succumb to the same sort of analysis. While various regional and historical dialects of Greek could be detected in Homer’s poetic language, these did not provide the means to dissolve the epics into discrete sources and strata. Rather, the “Homeric question” found a different solution
entirely in the work of Milman Parry and (his student) Albert Lord. Through the comparative study of Homeric epic with then living South Slavic oral traditions, they revealed Homer to be a singer who “improvised” his tales in an oral performance. Homer’s formulaic style, the apparent product of a venerable oral tradition similar to those they observed firsthand in their fieldwork, provided the epic singer with a language suited to the needs of oral performance unaided by writing.

My hypothesis raises, in other words, the question of medium in the verbal arts. While infrequently addressed, it is not a new problem. Proust, for instance, likened the achievement of Flaubert’s “grammatical genius” to “what certain painters were in the history of art who changed the pigments.” Within this analogy, Flaubert’s celebrated style, his use of tenses and so forth, constitutes an almost technological achievement, marking a milestone in the history of the novel. In the case before us, I suggest, writing, as a technology of the word, constitutes a radically new verbal medium. It has, like any medium in any art, its own—but not necessarily superior—set of inherent possibilities. Specifically, the relationship of speaker to speech is different from that of writer to writing. On the one hand, this difference is linguistic: while the speaker is present in speech through various grammatical signs, the writer by suppressing these signs can attain to an absence from writing. This was Barthes’s argument in Writing Degree Zero, which led to a period of intense theoretical interest in the problem of écriture. On the other hand—and this will be my focus here—this difference resides in the simple fact that writing allows an author to edit, to rewrite, whereas speech exists instantaneously and irrevocably in the act of its utterance. The writer’s increased ability to manipulate language and, more generally, narrative form, gives rise to literary techniques foreign to the traditional, improvisational art of epic. If the performance and reception of orally composed epics require the singer’s adherence to the generative rules of tradition, the biblical writers demonstrate the telling freedom to break such rules. The evidence for my thesis will come from the respective ways Homer and the Bible make use of a shared narrative device: the type-scene. In order to account for this dichotomy I will invoke two theories of verbal art: Walter Benjamin’s description of the storyteller’s craft, and Victor Shklovsky’s definition of art as “defamiliarization.”

Shklovsky, in his programmatic essay, “Art as Technique,” proposes a definition of art based, not on any given specific “device,” but on an underlying technique he calls “defamiliarization”: “The purpose of art
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is to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known. The technique of art is to make objects ‘unfamiliar,’ to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged.” In fact, art not only defamiliarizes concrete objects of perception, but artistic form itself: “By violating the form, [Sterne] forces us to attend to it; and, for him, this awareness of the form through its violation constitutes the content of the novel.” He thus defines literature self-referentially as the manipulation of literary form, so that form itself becomes the object of renewed aesthetic perception. Over against Shklovsky’s theory of art stands Benjamin’s account of the storyteller’s craft. This craft is based not on innovation, but on the conservation of tradition. The greatness of a story lies not in its originality, but in its seamless derivation “from the speech of the many nameless storytellers,” from “that slow piling one on top of the other of thin, transparent layers which constitutes the most appropriate picture of the way in which the perfect narrative is revealed through the layers of a variety of retellings.”

These two theories of art correspond to two radically different conceptions of experience. For Benjamin, authentic experience is “communicable,” that is, traditional:

With the World War a process began to become apparent which has not halted since then. Was it not noticeable at the end of the war that men returned from the battlefield grown silent—not richer, but poorer in communicable experience? . . . For never has experience been contradicted more thoroughly than strategic experience by tactical warfare, economic experience by inflation, bodily experience by mechanical warfare, moral experience by those in power. A generation that had gone to school on a horse-drawn streetcar now stood under the open sky in a countryside in which nothing remained unchanged but the clouds, and beneath these clouds, in a field of force of destructive torrents and explosions, was the tiny, fragile human body. (pp. 83–84)

“Communicable experience,” in turn, provides the storyteller with his material, which his craft exists to conserve and disseminate. In stark contrast, Shklovsky (citing Tolstoy) defines experience precisely in opposition to routine, to boredom:

I was cleaning a room and, meandering about, approached the divan and couldn’t remember whether or not I had dusted it. Since these movements
are habitual and unconscious, I could not remember and felt that it was impossible to remember. . . . If some conscious person had been watching, then the fact could be established. If, however, no one was looking, or looking on unconsciously, if the whole complex of lives of many people go on unconsciously, then such lives are as if they had never been.7

The purpose of art therefore, at least as Shklovsky understands it, is to redeem experience from the corrosive effect of habit: “Habitualization devours works, clothes, furniture, one’s wife, and the fear of war. . . . And art exists that one may recover the sensation of life” (p. 11).

For Benjamin, modern warfare destroys experience; for Shklovsky, even the fear of war must be rescued by art. What ultimately separates the two is their attitude towards modernity. Shklovsky’s understanding of genuine experience is premised on a certain peculiarly modern ideal, namely, a life full of the promise of unending change. In his view, habit, and we might add, tradition, is non-experience, analogous indeed to oblivion—“such lives are as if they had never been.” Benjamin, on the other hand, sees tradition as the very habitus of authentic experience. He therefore mourns the passing of the world of his fathers and the subsequent loss of those shared and therefore communicable experiences that depended for their existence on the stability of a traditional, unchanging, and therefore habitual world, the world of the fast-disappearing storyteller. As he regretfully observes (echoing Paul Valéry), the sensibility of the modern world has no room for that “patient process of Nature . . . once imitated by men . . . when time did not matter. Modern man no longer works at what cannot be abbreviated” (pp. 92–93). Modernity’s impatience and its insatiable demand for novelty preclude the durée of the storyteller’s traditional craft.

While Shklovsky and Benjamin both deal with the threshold of modernity, I believe we can detach their arguments from such historical particulars and focus instead on the transition from oral tradition to literature. For if Shklovsky (implicitly) addresses the question of a written verbal art, Benjamin’s attention falls explicitly on “what can be handed on orally, the wealth of the epic,” which he opposes to “what constitutes the stock in trade of the novel” (p. 87). Specifically, I propose that the oral tradition, comprising la longue durée, has that temporal aspect grammarians call “habitual” or “iterative.” It is in its “variety of retellings,” its countless repetitions in oral performance, that the tradition has its being. Existing as it does in this habitual mode,
traditional art is an *art of the familiar*. Literature, coming *after* the tradition, operates by that other aesthetic principle, *defamiliarization*. As in some sense an “abbreviated” art form (which I will return to in the conclusion), it manifests itself not in the iterative series of oral performance, but in that singular but fixed event known as the text. As I shall now argue, Homer and biblical narrative correspond, respectively, to traditional and post-traditional modes of art.

Milman Parry laid the foundation for a revolution in our understanding of Homer precisely by freeing that epic tradition from the aesthetic standards of a modern, literate culture. He did so by realizing that Homer’s *Kunstsprache* was the achievement not of an individual singer but of tradition: “For the character of this language reveals that it is a work beyond the powers of a single man, or even of a single generation of poets; consequently we know that we are in the presence of a stylistic element which is the product of a tradition and which every bard of Homer’s time must have used.” When in 1933 Walter Arend published his ground-breaking study of *typischen Scenen bei Homer*, namely, Homer’s tendency to recount certain repeated actions using much the same form, details and language, Parry quickly recognized the relevance of these recurring narrative patterns for his own developing theory of Homer’s traditional compositional style:

> The singer of tales, unlike the writer of poetry, is never free of his tradition. He has not learned his art from a varied reading, but only from listening to older singers. He has no pen and ink to let him slowly work out a novel way of recounting novel actions, but must make up his tale without pausing, in the speed of his singing. This he can do only by telling each action as it comes up in more or less the usual way, and in more or less the usual verses which go with that way.

At both the level of the line and the scene, then, the singer generates narrative by following the rules of the tradition.

We see this in Homer’s use of the “arming” type-scene, which occurs four times in the *Iliad*: the arming of Paris (3.328–38), Agamemnon (11.16–46), Patroclus (16.130–44), and Achilles (19.364–91). All four scenes perfectly conform to a fixed underlying pattern: six obligatory elements, always in the same order. Thus, each begins with an introduction signaling to the audience the type-scene’s onset: each hero “puts on” or “helms” himself with “armor” or “shining bronze.” Next, he puts on “greaves” and “corselet” in the course of three lines, which appear
verbatim in all four scenes, highlighting the formulaic nature of Homeric technique: “First he placed along his legs the fair greaves linked with / silver fastenings to hold the greaves at the ankles. / Afterwards he girt on about his chest the corselet” (3.330–32 = 11.17–19 = 16.32–34 = 19.69–71). Then, in the remaining four sections, the hero takes up precisely the same four implements in precisely the same order: sword, shield, helmet, and spear. This fixed sequence of elements constitutes what we might think of as the type-scene’s primary “syntax” or “deep structure.”

Each required element can and does receive an optional “modifier” in at least one of the arming scenes. By calling such passages “modifiers,” I mean to suggest that they function like adjectives and adverbs within the scene’s “syntax.” They particularize each scene with respect to its hero by elaborating or expanding upon the basic elements of the narrative form. The most famous example is that devoted to Achilles’s shield (19.74–80), a type of coda to the celebrated description of the same shield found in 18.478–616. It gives suitable heft to that greatest of heroes, arming him with the handiwork of Hephaestus himself. Homer describes Achilles’s spear at similar length: “huge, heavy, thick, which no one else of all the Achaians / could handle, but Achilles alone knew how to wield it; / the Pelian ash spear which Cheiron had brought to his father / from high on Pelion to be death for fighters” (19.388–91). Interestingly, these lines appear verbatim in Patroclus’ scene (16.141–44), but with one telling difference: “only he did not take the spear of blameless Aiakides” (16.140). Great though he is, Patroclus is no Achilles. As a final example, we might note that, as befits the leader of the Achaean host, an august portent accompanies Agamemnon’s arming-scene as a whole: “And Hera and Athena caused a crash of thunder about him, / doing honour to the lord of deep-golden Mykenai” (11.45–46). In this way, Homer’s conventional technique does not violently force individual heroes into an inflexible mold, but allows for the supple adaptation of a fixed pattern. And yet, the underlying pattern retains its integrity as a generic form, for one could delete any or all of the lines in any of the modifiers from any of these scenes without altering its structure or diminishing its internal coherence.

This is because Homeric variation follows an aesthetic principle of accumulation, not invention. It corresponds to what I have referred to as an “art of the familiar.” From line to scene, all is meant to facilitate rather than impede the perception of narrative form. We do not find deviations from the expected, but realizations, with varying degrees of
Robert S. Kawashima elaboration, of the scene’s underlying syntax. As Bernard Fenik aptly observes with regard to Homer’s battle-scenes: each scene is “a unique combination of familiar details. The technique shows that when the poet, who constructed all his battle scenes out of typical details, wished to narrate an especially long, difficult, or important fight, he did so not by inventing a new action or new details, but by the larger than average accumulation of familiar details.”11 The purpose of the variations from arming scene to arming scene seems to be to facilitate interpretation, namely, by guiding the audience in its evaluation of each hero.12 Indeed, Homer follows an almost algebraic logic. He adds a mere two lines of modifier to Paris’s arming (3.329, 333), six to Patroclus’s (16.134, 140–44); Achilles meanwhile receives 19.5 additional lines (19.65–68, 74–80a, 82–86, 88–91), Agamemnon an impressive 22 (11.20–28, 30f, 33–40, 44–46). Paris pales in comparison to Agamemnon; Patroclus may wear Achilles’s armor, but he cannot wield his spear. True, Agamemnon and Achilles seem to be virtually equal, at least in terms of their arming scenes. While Achilles dons the gifts of Hephaestus, Hera and Athena punctuate Agamemnon’s arming with a clap of thunder. But the conflict between these two heroes, both of whom claim to be “best of the Achaeans,” lies at the very heart of the Iliad.

In order to characterize more precisely Homer’s technique for playing with convention, I would like to draw a loose analogy with transformational grammar. If we think of the fixed basic pattern as the type-scene’s primary narrative “syntax,” its “deep structure,” then Homer varies the arming scenes by inserting optional “modifiers,” but he never “transforms” the pattern’s fundamental structure. Think of a simple sentence such as: The cat sat on the rug. It is perfectly well formed on its own. One could add adjectives, even certain subordinate clauses, without transforming or altering the sentence’s basic syntax, its underlying structure: The black cat sat on the Persian rug, or, The black cat sat on the Persian rug that was in the middle of the room. Such is not the case with a sentence such as: On the rug there sat a cat. In this case, we find the wholesale “transformation” of our original sentence into a secondary form. The analogy with generative grammar is admittedly imprecise from a linguistic standpoint, but it does help us define the technique shaping Homer’s type-scenes: variation without transformation. However Byzantine Homer’s modifiers, they remain discrete insertions within his narrative syntax. In this sense the variations observable within the Homeric type-scene are “well behaved,” that is, they operate within precisely defined boundaries. For in spite of the
considerable amplitude of variation tolerated by the arming type-scene, the nature of Homer’s technique is such that all four instances equally embody the convention’s form. None of this is meant to deny the palpable artistry of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. It is merely to suggest that Homer’s storytelling is not “literary.” We can better appreciate Homer’s traditional craft by considering the radically different art of biblical narrative.

It was Robert Alter who first introduced type-scene analysis to biblical studies. While he explicitly imports the notion from Homer studies, he describes the literary effect of biblical type-scenes, not coincidentally, with reference to the Russian Formalists: “The process of literary creation, as criticism has clearly recognized from the Russian Formalists onward, is an unceasing dialectic between the necessity to use established forms in order to be able to communicate coherently and the necessity to break and remake those forms because they are arbitrary restrictions and because what is merely repeated automatically no longer conveys a message.” In light of our analysis of Homer, his oblique reference to Shklovsky’s notion of “defamiliarization” suggests already that a fundamentally different principle is at work in biblical narrative. All that remains is to give an account of the technique underlying type-scenes in the Bible.

In biblical narrative, key births often play themselves out in the form of an “annunciation” type-scene, the importance of the hero being partly indicated by the very employment of this established narrative convention. The Midrash on Genesis already betrays an awareness of this convention in a typically astute if elliptical comment: “Wherever ‘she had not’ [a child] is found, it means that eventually she did have.” This type-scene, not unlike Homer’s, presupposes an underlying narrative syntax, a set of primary “generative rules,” so to speak: the initial fact of barrenness; the annunciation of the apparently impossible, and hence portentous, birth; and finally the conception and birth of the son. At this point, however, the similarity between Homer and the Bible comes to an end. We have already seen that any of the arming scenes in Homer could serve equally well as the model or paradigm of the convention. It is striking, then, that none of the annunciations actually found in biblical narrative conforms precisely to this putative underlying form. This is because the variations exhibited in biblical type-scenes do not consist of mere modifiers. Rather, the very structure of each scene changes. One should not therefore conclude that there is no convention; it makes good interpretive sense to posit or reconstruct this
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implicit norm. But it indicates already the biblical writers’ restless impulse to innovate, to transform and reinterpret convention. To continue the analogy I have drawn with generative grammar, if the type-scene’s basic underlying form, the convention’s norm, constitutes its “deep structure,” the biblical writers depart from convention, play with literary form, by “transforming” this primary narrative syntax. In this section, then, I will examine how the annunciation type-scene plays itself out in the lives of three successive generations of matriarchs in Genesis. Specifically, I will point out four “transformations” that the biblical writers use to defamiliarize the narrative convention: “substitution,” “parenthesis,” “movement,” and “deletion.” Because I view the use of type-scenes as a compositional, rather than editorial, technique, I will refer to the underlying Pentateuchal sources, not the redacted (final) version of the text.16

In Gen 18:9–15 the so-called Jahwist (J) recounts the annunciation of Isaac’s birth. The shock or unfamiliarity of this scene consists partly in its “substitution” of Abraham for Sarah, for the annunciation typically centers on the would-be mother. Sarah’s barrenness, established in J as far back as 11:30, has just been emphasized in her abortive attempt to gain a son through her servant Hagar (16:1–13)—in J, the episode immediately preceding this one. When God’s messenger asks Abraham where his wife is, convention would seem to dictate that he now summon her and make his announcement. The messenger, however, proceeds instead to inform Abraham of Sarah’s impending pregnancy, emphasizing his unique significance as the first “patriarch.” Sarah meanwhile assumes a conspicuously marginal role, played out within the scene as well in her liminal position at the tent door, where she merely overhears the annunciation that should be hers. Although J gives no indication of Abraham’s personal response to this startling message, Sarah’s laughter (18:12) nonetheless stands in marked contrast to the faith her husband demonstrated less than 40 verses earlier (according to J): “And he believed in the Lord, and he reckoned it to him as righteousness” (15:6).

This scene also surprises the knowing reader through the addition of a narrative “parenthesis” that inserts itself between the annunciation of Isaac’s birth in 18:9–15 and J’s account of the birth itself in 21:1a and 2a—namely, the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah in Gen 18:16–19:38. This fateful interlude further emphasizes Abraham’s central role in God’s designs. For God’s emissaries decide to inform Abraham of their plans for Sodom and Gomorrah precisely in recognition of his
future role: to teach his descendants to “observe the way of the Lord, to do righteousness and justice” (18:19). We have just noted how J juxtaposes Sarah’s incredulous laughter to Abraham’s “righteous” faith. J further develops the motif of Abraham’s righteousness while giving us a first glimpse into his emerging role in history, by having him accompany his mysterious visitors towards Sodom and Gomorrah—Sarah has been completely left behind by this point—and bargain with God over the fate of the cities of the plain (18:20–33). In fact, the key term “righteous” functions as a Leitwort in this conversation, in the course of which Abraham presumes to ask God: “Shall not the judge of all the earth do justice” (18:25)?

Looking beyond the parenthesis to the type-scene’s conclusion, we find that Abraham’s divinely sanctioned lineage stands in stark contrast to Lot’s incestuously conceived offspring. The contrast is all the more naked in J’s narrative, since without Genesis 20, which scholars attribute to the Elohist (E), Isaac’s birth immediately follows the birth of Lot’s sons. Within the narrative world, in fact, they take place simultaneously. We have it on good authority that Isaac will be born about a year after the announcement made in Genesis 18—“I will surely return to you at this season next year” (18:10). Allowing for the usual gestation period, one can likewise surmise that the events of Genesis 19, from the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah to the birth of Lot’s sons, span approximately one year. A pluperfect, often lost in translation, makes this temporal coincidence explicit: “And the Lord had taken notice of Sarah as he had said. And Sarah conceived and bore to Abraham a son in his old age” (21:1a, 2a). In other words, after following Lot’s story as it unfolds in the hazy aftermath of divine judgment, J turns back about nine months in order to recount the parallel fulfillment of divine promise. Lot and Abraham’s parting of ways, begun in Genesis 13 (also in J), comes to term here in the synchronized if antithetical births of the fathers of Israel and of its enemies Moab and Ammon.

Sarah’s promised son, Isaac, eventually marries Rebekah, who receives her annunciation, in turn, in Gen 25:21–26a (J). Here an element is “moved” out of position, the annunciation taking place after conception. Rather than predict the conception and birth, it therefore turns to describing the fate of her sons. In this way, a mere change in order alters the content of the annunciation and the very function of the scene. This scene also makes of Rebekah a striking counterpart to the marginalized Sarah. In stark contrast to her mother-in-law, Rebekah
does not passively receive her oracle, but goes in search for it. It continues the Rebekah of the betrothal type-scene in Genesis 24 (J), who single-handedly waters the camels under Abraham’s servant’s care. It anticipates the Rebekah of Genesis 27 (also J), who will help her favorite, Jacob, deceive both her husband and her firstborn son.

Finally, Rebekah’s chosen son, Jacob, marries Rachel, who as the next matriarch in line after Sarah and Rebekah, seems destined to receive an annunciation as well. But in Gen 30:1–3, the Elohist (E) brings us instead to the limits of formal deformation, raising the possibility of a type-scene only to deflect or “delete” it. The narrative immediately establishes Rebekah’s barrenness, which under normal circumstances would signal the onset of the type-scene. Instead, however, a frustrated Rachel tries, in effect, to dispense with formalities, demanding of Jacob, rather than God, that he provide her with sons. In his heated response, Jacob (with a touch of literary self-referentiality) seems to object to her plea on the grounds that her impossible demand not only usurps God’s role, but also violates the convention’s protocol. E further teases the reader with the elided type-scene in his account of Rachel’s eventual pregnancy, which reads like the fulfillment of a typical annunciation: “And God remembered Rachel, and God heard her and opened her womb. And she conceived and bore a son” (30:22–23a). Compare this with the conclusion of Hannah’s annunciation scene: “And Elkanah knew Hannah his wife, and the Lord remembered her. And it was at the period of days, and Hannah conceived and bore a son” (1 Sam 1:19b–20a). The fulfillment of Rachel’s longing for a son, suggesting as it does that she did eventually direct her request to God, only foregrounds the excluded middle of the annunciation itself. In fact, the specter of this deleted type-scene will haunt the would-be matriarch. While she eventually bears two sons, she will die while giving birth to the second. In the ensuing family drama that sets her firstborn, Joseph, against his brothers, the eponymous ancestors of the tribes of Israel, Joseph will be displaced as a tribe by his own sons, Ephraim and Manasseh. And neither of these half-tribes will produce the royal line of the future kingdom of Israel. That honor will fall to a son of Rachel’s rival and sister, Leah.

Through such juxtapositions, the respective techniques of Homer and the Bible come into proper perspective. On the one hand, Homer follows certain primary rules of composition in order to generate his type-scenes, variations and all. In this way, he never leaves the familiar
terrain of tradition. Biblical narrative, on the other hand, performs secondary operations, “transformations,” upon the convention’s underlying syntax or “deep structure.” Its defamiliarizing art treats the type-scene’s norm as a mere point of departure. For the biblical writers systematically displace, distort, and even delete it, forcing their readers to perceive literary form anew.

As a result, the function and meaning of biblical annunciations differ radically from one example to the next. It sheds light in unpredictable ways on the mother or father of the soon-to-be-born child, while providing information about the child’s birth or even destiny. It is instructive that we find an occasional hint of self-referential play, as in Rachel’s attempt to circumvent convention altogether. In fact, as Alter has observed, the biblical writers could distort the type-scene to the point of satire, as in Eli’s unwitting annunciation to Hannah in 1 Samuel 1, or Elisha’s coldly perfunctory transaction with the Shunamite woman in 2 Ki 4:8–17. We might finally mention the annunciation Samson’s parents receive in Jud 13:2–25. In this example, the divine proclamation takes place, in a sense, three times: the “real” annunciation to the mother; her report of it to her husband; finally, the “command performance” for Manoah himself. At each step, the point of this parodic repetition is Manoah’s obtuseness—like father, like son. Such ironic effects would be unthinkable for Homer, who still fully inhabits his tradition.

Writing marks the crucial boundary. The exigencies of oral performance necessitated Homer’s economy of style, the formal purity of his type-scenes. To defamiliarize the tradition as the biblical writers did, on the other hand, is a more costly procedure. The pen, like a scalpel, can dissect and reassemble literary form, but only through the lengthy procedure of writing and rewriting. It is no coincidence, then, that when we turn to the “scene-patterns” of Virgil, we find that he, too, transforms the conventions inherited from his great predecessor. As Tilman Krischer nicely demonstrates, Virgil, as an epic writer following in the wake of the tradition, can take over “Homeric content but not Homeric form,” producing of necessity “an unhomeric effect”: “Each single motif brings with it from Homer an expectation about where it will stand in a scene, what kind of scene it will stand in, how the motif will be connected with other motifs and what function and significance it will have. By not fulfilling these expectations Vergil systematically achieves original and meaningful effects.” Specifically, he displaces motifs, alters their function, changes their context, or deletes an
expected motif, much like the “transformations” we have discovered in biblical narrative. Virgil, no less than the biblical writers, practices an art of defamiliarization.

From our modern literary perspective, it will seem to some that I have exalted the art of biblical narrative at Homer’s expense, that I have made the latter into a “primitive” who practices a simplistic art regrettably constrained by tradition. While it is true that I consider Homer’s to be a more “natural” art—that is, relatively free of literary “artifice”—I nonetheless maintain that such an accusation would be false. As a parting thought, then, permit me to suggest what in Homer’s art is no longer within our reach.

Virginia Woolf, in her brief but remarkable essay, “Modern Fiction,” makes certain comments on literary history not unrelated to defamiliarization:

In making any survey . . . of modern fiction it is difficult not to take it for granted that the modern practice of the art is somehow an improvement upon the old. With their simple tools and primitive materials, it might be said, Fielding did well and Jane Austen even better, but compare their opportunities with ours! Their masterpieces certainly have a strange air of simplicity. And yet the analogy between literature and the process, to choose an example, of making motorcars scarcely holds good beyond the first glance. It is doubtful whether in the course of the centuries, though we have learnt much about making machines, we have learnt much about making literature. We do not come to write better; all that we can be said to do is to keep moving, now a little in this direction, now in that, but with a circular tendency should the whole course of the track be viewed from a sufficiently lofty pinnacle.19

What she resignedly concedes here is that our modern, post-traditional impulse to innovate, to defamiliarize, comes only at a price: with no overarching principle or goal spanning the generations, writing can only press forward in fits and starts, always from a new starting point, so that in the end its history traces an endlessly recapitulating circle.

Not so with the oral tradition. As Benjamin saw so clearly, if the storyteller’s craft is conservative, evolving only gradually over time, it is, by that same cumulative logic, capable of attaining to a perfection beyond the reach of the solitary writer. For the storyteller, like the craftsman Paul Valéry describes, imitates that “patient process of Nature,” that “long chain of causes similar to one another . . . [that] has its temporal limit only at perfection” (p. 92). Parry came to a very
similar conclusion when he recognized in the monumental perfection of Homer’s *Kunstsprache* “a work beyond the powers of a single man, or even of a single generation of poets.”20 In fact, repetition and perfection are but two aspects of the same patient process: “We have witnessed the evolution of the ‘short story,’ which has removed itself from oral tradition and no longer permits that slow piling one on top of the other of thin, transparent layers which constitutes the most appropriate picture of the way in which the perfect narrative is revealed through the layers of a variety of retellings.”21 *La longue durée* of oral tradition, in other words, is not only “iterative” or “habitual,” it is also, as the grammarians would say, “progressive.” For these retellings accumulate like thin layers. And so, as tradition recedes into the past, so too does the ideal of a perfected art.

I don’t mean to suggest that the writer cannot work to perfect his or her art. In an important sense, however, the art of writing, whether of the novel, the short story, or biblical narrative, is “abbreviated,” living and dying with the individual writer. The writer comes after tradition and therefore stands outside it. While he assumes his place in what we might call the “literary tradition,” this does not so much inspire him as constrain him. As Barthes observes in his discussion of the writer’s freedom: “True, I can today select such and such mode of writing, and in so doing assert my freedom, aspire to the freshness of novelty or to a tradition; but it is impossible to develop it within duration without gradually becoming a prisoner of someone else’s words and even of my own.”22 The fate of writing is the necessity of this freedom. And so writing keeps moving, now in this direction, now in that, but never with a telos in sight. Thus, if Ezra Pound’s comparison of Homer with Flaubert, James, and company is right, it is not, as he himself implies, entirely fair: “The indication of tone of voice and varying speeds of utterance. In that, Homer is never excelled by Flaubert or James or any of ’em. But it needs the technique of one or more life times.”23

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7. Quoted in Shklovsky, “*Art as Technique*,” p. 12.


