One hundred and eight men are competing for a woman. It’s an archery contest. One by one, they fail: they aren’t strong enough even to string the great bow of her husband, a man who is missing, presumed dead. In reality, of course, Odysseus is secretly among them, disguised as an old beggar. He asks if he can have a go, and, reluctantly, they agree.

And Odysseus strung the bow easily. With as little effort as a poet strings his lyre, Looping the soft sheep’s gut at either end. Then, with his right hand, he tested the string, And it sang out with the note of a swallow

(Odyssey 21.406–11).

It’s one of the great similes in any literature. At this climactic moment of the Odyssey, the hero cocks, as it were, the gun that he will use to massacre his enemies, and the poet compares his action to the quintessential act of peace, the preparation of a musical instrument to amuse an audience. On one level, it’s brilliantly descriptive of Odysseus’ heroic ease. While his enemies couldn’t

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string the bow, he does so without effort. But at the same time, there’s more going on here. The question is: how much more?

No one knows who wrote the Odyssey, and ‘wrote’ is in any case the wrong word for a work of oral poetry, which was developed over the centuries through a form of collective creativity: via recitation and elaboration by different poets in a society that had lost the skill of writing. There may have been an originator poet. There was most probably a finalizer poet, who was to the Odyssey poem as the Mesopotamian scholar Šā-ni-lēqiunninni was to the older Gilgamesh poem, expanding it and honing it into something like the director’s cut with which we’re familiar.

What we know is that this is a poem steeped in, and in some sense about, poetry. It begins and ends in Odysseus’ palace at Ithaca, which is presented as a place of music and dancing. The first thing of any significance said by a human character is Odysseus’ son, Telemachus, observing that the so-called suitors – the Bullingdon louts who have invaded his house – are preoccupied with poetry. They are sitting around listening to Phemius, the palace poet, who is singing of the return of the Greeks from the Trojan War. Immediately, we wonder why Phemius picked this theme, which inevitably distresses Odysseus’ wife, Penelope. Worse, it seems he often does so, since she says it ‘always’ saddens her to hear it.

Phemius’ theme is also the theme of the Odyssey. The finalizer poet – let’s call him Homer – uses the device to materialize like a ghost within the action (while singing of the return of the Greeks, Phemius is Homer). In the process, he turns us, his audience, into the unsuitable suitors. There’s a joke there, as there is in the remark that he performs ‘reluctantly’.

Phemius will return, but before he does, we meet another poet, Demodocus. At the court of the Phaeacians, where Odysseus lands up, the blind palace poet also sings about Troy, but he goes even further. He happens to sing of a quarrel between Achilles and Odysseus, having no idea that Odysseus is in the audience, incognito. Hearing him, the hero weeps, covering his face with his cloak so that no one will see.

Whenever the godlike poet paused, Odysseus wiped his tears and uncovered his head And made an offering to the gods from his two-handled cup. But when the poet began again, and the Phaeacian noblemen Urged him to continue with his entrancing story, Again Odysseus covered his head and wept (Odyssey 8.87–92).

According to this literary GIF of the paradoxical relationship between artist and audience, the emotion evoked by the artist simultaneously identifies you and strips you of your identity. The blind singer picks up his lyre and the silent listener covers his face and eyes, whose vision is already obscured by tears. When the first action is reversed, the second action is reversed. This intimate thread between creator and consumer is like that between a puppet and puppeteer.

Odysseus comments that Demodocus sings as if he had been at Troy – as if, that is, he were Odysseus himself. It’s an instance of the typically Homeric device of paired similes that are loosely the inverse of each other. A warrior, comparing a poet to a warrior, reverses the simile we began with, when a poet compared a warrior to a poet.

The link continues, with Odysseus as puppeteer. After telling Demodocus he admires him more than any man, he asks him to sing of the Wooden Horse and how Odysseus used it to sack Troy. In effect, he says: ‘let’s talk about me’. Demodocus sings and Odysseus weeps. How does he weep? Like a woman cradling her husband, who has fought to defend his city and been fatally wounded. That’s to say, he weeps like a character in the story just told: a woman who has been widowed by Odysseus himself.

What Homer is presenting us with here is a corridor of mirrors, a mise en abyme in which the faces of poet and warrior alternate. Noticing the warrior weeping, the Phaeacian king calls a halt, instead asking Odysseus to tell them who he is, becoming the storyteller instead of Demodocus. Odysseus obliges, after a final tribute to the poet, in which he remarks that life doesn’t get better than listening to such extraordinary poetry.

Which brings us to the salient moment when Odysseus literally becomes the author of his own story. The 24 books of the Odyssey are not autobiography, or not straightforwardly. ‘Tell me, Muse, about the man’, the poem begins (ἴνδρα μοι Ἐννετε, μοῦσα, Odyssey 1.1), drawing an instant distinction between the poet (me) and his subject (man). Yet the fact is, most of the Odyssey’s best-known episodes – Cyclops, Circe, Scylla, etc – are narrated by Odysseus himself.

He isn’t telling his story in verse. Yet he is, because he speaks in the metre of the poem. He’s not accompanying his story with a lyre. Yet equally he is, because in books 9, 10 and 11, he’s being portrayed by whoever is performing the poem. The Odyssey is not a book, or it didn’t develop as one. It’s a verse drama, an improvisatory one-man show.

It is Homer improvising Odysseus, who is improvising his memoirs. And when the hero pauses, as Demodocus did and Homer would have done, the Phaeacian king observes that he has told his story as skilfully as a poet, narrating ‘both the sufferings of the Greeks in general, and his own in particular’. That latter phrase (πάντων τ᾽ Ἀργείων σέο τ᾽ αὐτοῦ κήδεα λυγρά, Odyssey 11.369) serves as a thumbnail diptych of the Iliad and the Odyssey themselves. As a storyteller, Odysseus displays the talent of Homer.
At this point, though, I need to pause, too. I must wipe my tears and uncover my head. I’ve written a novel and a screenplay, both based on the idea that the Odyssey’s originator poet was Odysseus himself. So I’m a crank, but a crank with a degree of self-awareness. I know I won’t persuade many of my theory, or not in full.

So I won’t make reference to the ancient tradition that the Odyssey was composed, if not by Odysseus, then by one of his descendants: an intriguing idea that would explain the poem’s consistently propagandist tone, which seems designed to defend its protagonist against the charge of responsibility for any of the many misfortunes that befall him and his men.

I won’t note that the first words of the poem are ‘man’ and ‘me’, and that, notwithstanding the misaligned cases, that proximity creates an association between poet and protagonist from the get-go. I won’t observe that the Gilgamesh poem, whose influence on the Odyssey has been documented, provides a precedent by naming Gilgamesh as its author. I won’t draw attention to the scene in book 9 of the Iliad when Odysseus reaches the tent of Achilles to find the murderous truant passing his time playing a lyre and singing of the deeds of great men—a fine paradigm, delivered casually, of a warrior-king with the skill and inclination to perform self-referential poetry.

I know it’s tantamount to an admission of pure derangement to speak of messages concealed within the text. So I won’t mention that, at what is structurally the hinge-point of the story, when the returning hero sets foot on his native Ithaca after 20 years away, the word ‘Homer’ (Ὅμηρος) is embedded in the syllables. Athena shrouds the landscape in mist, so he can’t recognize where he is, and in his despair, he groans and strikes his thigh (πεπλήγετο μηρὼ, Odyssey 13.198).

I won’t say any of these things—only that the Odyssey is a story of concealment, studded with moments of self-revelation that link hero and poet. More tentatively, I will speculate that these amplified, ambiguous moments bear traces of an earlier version of the Odyssey, which may have identified Odysseus as the originator poet.

One was the arrival on the beach. Another comes when, with the swineherd, he reaches the palace, and recognizes it not by sight but from the sounds of Phemius performing in the hall. Or again, when he enters, the overbearing Antinous asks why the swineherd has dragged in a beggar off the street. The swineherd replies indignantly:

Who goes out of his way
To invite a stranger into his house
Unless he happens to have a special skill,
Like a prophet, say, or a doctor or carpenter,
Or a poet who enchants with his song?

(Odyssey 17.382–85)
In an exchange that drips with irony, we’re conscious that Odysseus, who alone knows what the future holds, is a kind of prophet. The man who has come to cure the house of its plague of suitors is also like a doctor (the Greek phrase is ἰητῆρα κακῶν, which could as well refer to an exorcist as a physician). He is a carpenter, too, who conceived the Wooden Horse, whittled a stake to blind the Cyclops, made a raft to escape Calypso and even rebuilt his bed and bedroom during an extensive palace refurbishment.

If the first three elements of our ascending tetracolon have formed inadvertently fitting descriptions of Odysseus, what should we expect from the fourth? Is Odysseus, then, a ‘poet who enchants with his song’? From the fourth? Is Odysseus, then, what should we expect from god. Maybe. But the attribution, even if later, of the Odyssey to a poet by the name of Homer seems like counter-evidence. And if we sift the bloodbath in the hall, there’s more. Phemius begs Odysseus for mercy on the grounds that he is ‘self-taught’. The Greek word is αὐτοδίδακτος, a Homeric hapax whose exact meaning in the context is obscure. But what seems clear is that the poet is taking some credit for the quality of his work, maybe staking a claim for its originality.

Ultimately, Odysseus spares him. Not only that, he then deploys him as a means of controlling the story about what has happened in the palace. He tells him to strike up music. The survivors dance, celebrating the defeat of the suitors. As Odysseus intended, passers-by hearing the sound assume this is the wedding feast for Penelope, who has agreed to remarry. In a sense, they’re right.

After some resistance, Penelope tearfully accepts that Odysseus is her husband. Two decades apart end in emotional reunion.

And dawn would have found them still weeping
If grey-eyed Athena hadn’t had other ideas.
She held back the night at the world’s edges
And restrained the golden sun in the sea.

(Alexander 23.241–44)