

Blind Poet and “Sight Acts” in the Second Song of Demodocus

The second song of Demodocus (the illicit affair of Ares and Aphrodite, *Od.* 8.266-366) has attracted wide attention for reasons ranging from its atypical sexual content to its function within the structure of Book 8 and the poem as a whole. In this paper I draw attention to a salient–yet largely unrecognized–element, namely, the unprecedented concentration of ocular vocabulary (one occurrence in every 6.3 lines), an element further intensified by the presence of a spectacle within the spectacle. I suggest that this extraordinary emphasis on “sight acts” should be understood in the context of Demodocus’ blindness (*Od.* 8.64). Within the paradigm of the divine nature of inspiration (*enthousiasmos*) and the psychological function of the Muses not as simply recreating the past but as transporting the poet into mythical times, the answer is obvious: the performer’s human sight is irrelevant, since the Muses have made him an eye-witness to the distant events he sings for his audience. But the poetic process is more complex, with the internal evidence from the epics suggesting that the singer, far from being a passive mouthpiece of the Muses, is, to a great extent, an active and conscious creator who displays poetic initiative and discretion in the use and arrangement of the traditional material. Thus the epic bard, even within the strict constraints of his art, leaves on his song his individual imprint. The emphasis of Demodocus on ocular vocabulary may appear paradoxical, but poetry by other blind poets reveals similar tendency towards the visual: “Sightless Milton dreamed visions no one else could see. Radiant with an inward light, he sent forth rays by which mankind beholds the realms of Paradise” notes none other than Helen Keller (Brown 130), while Jorge Luis Borges, in his essay “Blindness” (*Seven Nights* 107-21), relates his own nostalgic use of visual imagery in his years of darkness. In fact, in his “Poem of the Gifts”, Borges seems to be echoing the bittersweet gift of the Muses to Demodocus, when he invokes God’s “splendid irony” that granted him “books

and blindness at once.” The length of Demodocus’ song does not allow for extended visual imagery (although one could claim two miniature *ekphrases*), the emphasis falling squarely on the phenomenology of “seeing.” The bard practices here what is called “inverse transposition”, by which an agent transfers his traits, whether physical or otherwise, to a third person in an inverted form: Demodocus transforms his blindness into a profusion of ocular acts, as if to neutralize it through an apotropaic gesture. Being a fictional figure, he is not, of course, the author of his song. What about Homer, then, who almost universally in antiquity was considered blind? Could we claim that he tries to exorcize his blindness by making his bard exorcize his own? Or is this another case in which Homer emphasizes his closeness to the all-seeing/knowing Muses by adopting an encompassing gaze produced through the totality of partial/individual “sight acts”? It may be both, as for a short moment (the duration of Demodocus’ song) the poet dreams of both his mortal sight and that of the Muses.

Bibliography

Borges, J. L. 1984. *Seven Nights*. Translated by E. Weinberger. New York.

Brown, E. G. 1934. *Milton’s Blindness*. New York.