

Truth and Society

In our scientific civilization, the idea of "truth" immediately summons up notions of objectivity, communicability, and unity.¹ *Truth* is defined at two levels: conformity with logical principles and conformity with reality.² Accordingly, truth is inseparable from concepts of demonstration, verification, and experimentation. Of all our commonsense notions, truth probably above all seems nowadays to have always existed, static as well as relatively simple. However, to undermine such impressions, we only have to recall that experimentation, for example, one of the underpinnings of our conception of what is true, only became mandatory in a society where it had become a traditional technique, that is, after physics and chemistry had already acquired an important place.

We may therefore wonder whether truth, as a mental category, cannot be dissociated from a whole system of thought as well as from material and social life.³ By contrast, the Indo-Iranian word usually translated as *truth*, *Rta*, also means liturgical prayer, the power ensuring the continual return of the dawn, the order established by the cult of the gods, and law – in short, it comprises a collection of meanings that shatters our own image of truth.⁴ What seems simple is replaced by complexity, and, moreover, complexity organized quite differently from our own.

If the Indo-Iranian world is so different from ours, what about the world of Greece? Is the place of "truth" the same as it is in our own conceptual system, and does it embrace the same semantic content? This question is not asked simply out of curiosity. Greece claims our attention for two interconnected reasons. First, the Western concept of objective and rational truth emerged historically from Greek thought. As is well known, in the wealth of thinking on truth produced by contemporary philosophers, Parmenides, Plato, and Aristotle are constantly invoked, studied, and challenged.⁵ Second, in the Greek construction of reason from the sixth century B.C. on, a particular image of "truth" is fundamental. When philosophic thought discovered its own particular subject of inquiry, disentangled itself from the bases of mythological thought that still anchored Ionian cosmology, and deliberately set out to address the problems that would thereafter retain its attention, it became organized around a central concept that from then on would define a particular aspect of first philosophy (or metaphysics) and one aspect of a first philosopher (or metaphysician): that concept was *Alētheia*, or "truth."

When *Alētheia* appeared in the prelude to Parmenides' poem, it did not spring, fully developed, from the philosopher's brain. To judge by our historical documentation, it began with Homer. Although this fact may seem to suggest that the chronological development of the successive sources of evidence between Homer and Parmenides is required to illuminate "truth," the problem must be posed differently.⁶ For many years, scholars have drawn attention to the strange features of Parmenides' setting: a chariot journey guided by the daughters of the Sun, a way reserved for the man who knows, a path that leads to the gates of Day and Night, a goddess who reveals true knowledge. In short, this mythical and religious imagery is singularly at odds with abstract philosophical thought focusing, for example, on Being itself. All

these features, whose religious character is undeniable, definitely point us toward certain philosophicoreligious circles in which a philosopher was still just a wise man, even a magus. And in these circles we find a type of man and thought directed toward *Alētheia*. Epimenides of Crete had the privilege of seeing *Alētheia* with his own eyes; it was the "plain of *Alētheia*" that the soul of the initiate aspired to contemplate.⁷ Through Epimenides and the philosophicoreligious sects, the prehistory of the rational *Alētheia* is definitely oriented toward certain forms of religious thought in which this same "power" played a fundamental role.

The prehistory of the philosophical *Alētheia* leads us to the system of thought of the diviner, the poet, and the king of justice, three figures for whom a certain type of speech is defined by *Alētheia*. Defining the prerational meaning of "truth" involves answering a number of important questions.⁸ How is *Alētheia* represented in mythical thought?⁹ How and why was a type of efficacious speech replaced by another type of speech with its own specific problems, such as the relation of speech to reality and the relation between speech and other people? What is the relation between certain innovations in the social practice of the sixth century B.C. and the development of thinking organized around *logos*? Which values, even while undergoing a change in meaning, remain important throughout the transition from one system of thought (the mythical) to the other (that of reason)?¹⁰ From the opposite perspective, what constitutes the fundamental separation of religious and rational thought? The aim of this book is not simply to examine the mental, social, and historical context to define the prerational meaning of "truth" within the mythical system of thought and the beginnings of rational thought.¹¹ The history of *Alētheia* provides us with an ideal field for two further objectives. First, it allows us to consider the problem of the religious origins of certain concepts in metaphysical philos-

ophy and thereby reveal one aspect of the type of man introduced through philosophy into the city. Second, this field allows us to pinpoint, in the very fabric of continuity between religious and philosophical thinking, the changes in meaning and the logical breaks that radically differentiate these two forms of thought.

CHAPTER TWO

The Memory of the Poet

At the beginning of a poem, the poet invokes the Muse whose task is to make past events known:¹

Tell me now, you Muses who have your homes on Olympus. For you, who are goddesses, are there, and you know all things, and we have heard only the rumour of it and know nothing. Who then of those were the chief men and the lords of the Danaans? I could not tell over the multitude of them nor name them, not if I had ten tongues and ten mouths, not if I had a voice never to be broken and a heart of bronze within me, not unless the Muses of Olympia, daughters of the aegis, remembered (*mnēsaiath'*) all those who came beneath Ilion.²

The poet's speech, as developed in the poetic tradition, is inseparable from two complementary concepts: the Muse and memory.³ Together, these religious powers constitute the general configuration that confers on the *Alētheia* of poetry its true, deep meaning.

What is the meaning of the Muse and the function of memory? Scholars have noted the presence of deities in the Greek pantheon bearing the names of feelings, passions, mental attitudes, intellectual qualities, and so on. *Moūsa* is one of these religious

powers that are outside man “even when he feels their presence within him.”⁴ Just as *mētis*, an intellectual faculty, is represented by Mētis, a wife of Zeus, and *thēmis*, a social concept, is represented by the great Thēmis, another of Zeus’s wives, a common noun, *mousa*, is represented at the secular level by the Muse of the Greek pantheon. A number of classical texts suggest that *mousa* as a common noun means speech that is sung, or rhythmic speech.⁵ This double significance of *mousa* (the common noun and the divine power) can be grasped particularly well from an “ancient discourse” (*palaios logos*) recorded by Philo of Alexandria:

An old story is sometimes sung that was imagined by sages and, like so many others, committed to memory from one generation to the next. . . . It runs as follows: “When the creator had completed the whole world, he asked one of the prophets if there was anything that he wished did not exist amongst all the things that had been born on earth. The prophet replied that all things were absolutely perfect and complete, but there was just one thing lacking, laudatory speech (*ton epainetēn . . . logon*).” . . . The Father of All listened to what he had to say and, approving of his words, forthwith produced the lineage of singers full of harmonies, all born from one of the powers by whom he was surrounded, the Virgin Memory (*Mnēmē*) whose name the common people changed, calling her *Mnēmosynē*.⁶

In this context, a close link exists between the Muses and “sung speech,” here described as “laudatory speech.” This link is confirmed even more clearly by the extremely explicit names borne by the daughters of Memory, names that reflect a whole theology of “sung speech.”⁷ Clio, for example, denotes fame (*kleos*), the fame of the great exploits transmitted by the poet to future generations. Thalia alludes to festivity (*thallein*), the social condition for poetic creativity. Melpomene and Terpsichora both con-

jure up images of music and dancing. Others, such as Polymnia and Calliope, express the rich diversity of sung speech and the powerful voice that endows poems with life. The oldest invocations to the Muses are also revealing. Long before Hesiod, there were three Muses, Meletē, Mnēmē, and Aoidē, who were revered in an ancient sanctuary on the Helicon.⁸ Each name referred to an essential aspect of the poetic function. *Meletē* designated the discipline indispensable to any bardic apprentice: attention, concentration, and mental exercise.⁹ *Mnēmē* names the psychological function enabling recitation and improvisation. *Aoidē* is the product, the epic recitation, the completed poem, the end result of *meletē* and *mnēmē*.¹⁰

However, other nomenclatures are also cited. Cicero records one in which four Muses exist: Archē, Meletē, Aoidē, and Thelxinoē.¹¹ Two of these represent entirely new aspects: *archē* is the beginning, what is original; the poet’s speech strives to discover the origins of things, primordial reality.¹² *Thelxinoē* is the seduction of the mind, the spell cast by sung speech on the listener.¹³ These epithets for the Muse, through which a veritable theology of speech is developed, testify to the importance of the equivalence between the Muse and the notion of sung speech in circles of inspired bards and poets.¹⁴

However, sung speech is also inseparable from memory. In the Hesiodic tradition, the Muses are the daughters of *Mnēmosynē*.¹⁵ In Chios they were called the “remembrances” (*mneiai*), since they made the poet “remember.”¹⁶ What is the meaning of memory, and how is it related to sung speech? First, the religious status of memory, its cult in bardic circles, and its importance in poetic thought can only be understood if one remembers that Greek civilization from the twelfth to the ninth centuries B.C. was based not on written, but on oral traditions:¹⁷ “In those days men had to have a memory for many things. For many things were

communicated to them, such as signs for recognizing places, favorable times for activities, sacrifices to be made to gods, and the secret burial places of heroes, hard to find for men setting forth on a distant voyage from Greece."¹⁸ Memory is essential in an oral civilization, and specific mnemonic techniques must be perfected.¹⁹ To understand the phenomenon of oral poetry, of which the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* represent the culmination, we must postulate a veritable "mnemotechnique."²⁰ By analyzing formulaic technique, Milman Parry and his followers shed much light on the composition procedures of these poets.²¹ The bards created their poems as they recited them, "not with *words* but with *formulae*, groups of words ready made to be incorporated into the dactylic hexameter."²² One senses that poetic inspiration is backed by long years of memory training. The Homeric poems provide a number of examples of these mnemotechnique exercises, which were designed to help young bards master the difficult skill of composing poetry.²³ One example occurs in the passages known as catalogs. A catalog exists of the best Achaean warriors and one of the best horses; the catalog of the Greek and Trojan armies takes up half of the second book of the *Iliad*, four hundred lines in all, and must have been a true feat of recitation for the bard.

But was the memory of these poets a psychological function like our own? Jean-Pierre Vernant's studies show that the ends achieved by the deified memory of the Greeks were, in fact, quite different from our own.²⁴ It did not aim to reconstruct the past according to a temporal perspective. Above all, sacralized memory was a privilege reserved for groups of men in fraternal orders. As such, it radically differs from the recollection of other individuals. Like mantic knowledge, the knowledge of these inspired poets was a form of divinatory omniscience. The formula defining their powers was the same; it was knowledge of "all things

that were, things to come and things past."²⁵ For the poet, remembrance came through a personal vision that ensured direct access to the events his memory evoked. His privilege was to enter into contact with the other world, and his memory granted him the power to "decipher the invisible." Thus, memory was not simply the material basis for sung speech or the psychological function on which the formulaic technique depended. It was also, and above all, a religious power that gave poetic pronouncements their status of magicoreligious speech.²⁶ Sung speech, delivered by a poet with the gift of second sight, was efficacious speech. Its peculiar power instituted a symbolicoreligious world that was indeed reality itself. In this context, what then was the function of the poet? What ends did his gift of second sight serve? On which scales did sung speech, rooted in memory, play? Finally, within these registers, what was the place and meaning of *Alētheia*?

Traditionally, the poet served two functions: "to hymn the immortals and the glorious deeds of heroes."²⁷ The example of Hermes illustrates the former: "While he played shrilly on his lyre, he lifted up his voice and sang. He sang (*krainōn*) [literally: through his praise he made real] the story of the deathless gods and of the dark earth, how at the first they came to be, and how each one received his portion."²⁸ This speech exists on the level of myths of emergence and order, cosmogonies and theogonies. However, alongside stories about the gods, we also find in the Greek tradition speech celebrating the individual exploits of warriors. The first important fact here, then, is the duality of poetry: it both celebrates human exploits and narrates the history of the gods. In turn, this double register of sung speech illuminates the fundamental characteristic of Mycenaean social organization. The palace system was apparently dominated by a royal figure in charge of religious, economic, and political functions.²⁹ Alongside this all-powerful king, however, was a "leader of the *laos*," who com-

manded the military.³⁰ In this centralized state, warriors constituted a privileged caste with a special status.³¹

The second register of poetry corresponds perfectly with this specialized warrior group. Nonetheless, we must still ask the question: What relation existed between theogonies and the figure of the king? An answer is offered in studies on the prehistory of Greek theogonies.³² Although Hesiod was once viewed as the earliest author of theogonic literature, his work is now recognized as simply the last in a long line of accounts clarified through Eastern, Hittite, and Phoenician theogonies. F.M. Cornford, for example, saw in Zeus's battles against the Titans and Typhoeus important comparisons with Babylonian theogonies, in particular the battle between Marduk and Tiamat.³³ These comparisons proved most instructive, since story telling was still alive and was closely connected with ritual in Babylon. Every year, on the fourth day of the royal festival of the Creation of the New Year, the king mimed a ritual battle enacting Marduk's exploit against Tiamat. During this ritual, the *Enuma Eliš*, the poem of the creation, was recited. Vernant has since shown that the ordering of the world in the Greek cosmogonies and theogonies was inseparable from myths of sovereignty.³⁴ Furthermore, the myths of emergence, while recounting the story of the successive generations of the gods, foregrounded the determining role of a divine king who, after many struggles, triumphed over his enemies and once and for all established order in the cosmos. Hesiod's poem, the principal Greek example of this kind of account, marks the decline of the genre, for it was a written or dictated work and no longer an oral recitation pronounced on the occasion of a ritual festival. Nevertheless, Hesiod does appear to provide the final remaining example of sung speech praising the figure of the king, in a society centered on the type of sovereignty seemingly exemplified by Mycenaean civilization. In Hesiod's case, the royal figure is simply

represented by Zeus.³⁵ At this level the poet's function was above all to "serve sovereignty":³⁶ by reciting the myth of emergence, he collaborated directly in setting the world in order.³⁷

In Hesiod's poem we find the most ancient representation of a poetic and religious *Alētheia*. What is the Muses' function according to the theology of speech deployed in the *Theogony*? The Muses proudly claim the privilege of "speaking the truth" (*alēthea gērusasthai*).³⁸ The meaning of this *Alētheia* is revealed by its relation to the Muses and to memory, for the Muses are those who "tell of what is, and what is to be, and what was before now";³⁹ they are the words of memory. The very context of the *Theogony* thus already indicates a close connection between *Alētheia* and memory and even suggests that one should understand these two religious powers as a single representation. However, Hesiod's *Alētheia* achieves its full significance only when we locate the concepts dominating the poet's second register.

The second register of poetic speech is devoted entirely to praising the warriors' exploits. Though no direct evidence of the use of this type of sung speech in the Mycenaean civilization exists, it is possible to imagine its presence in an archaic Greek society such as ancient Sparta, where a group of warriors utterly devoted to warfare dominated. In ancient Sparta, society was ruled by two redoubtable powers, praise and blame.⁴⁰ This society, which established the principle of equality between all citizens, recognized only differences stemming from praise and criticism. At every level of society, individuals exercised the right to observe and be observed by others.⁴¹ For example, in some festivals, such as the *Partheneia*, girls had the right to jeer at young men who had committed some misdeed; if, on the contrary, the young men had proved themselves worthy, the girls would sing their praises at length for everyone to hear.⁴² On the strength of their authority in a society organized along age groups, the elders, who spent

much of the day in the "speaking chamber," devoted most of their time to praising good actions and censuring bad ones.⁴³ In an agonistic society, which so highly valued a warrior's excellence, no domain was subjected more to praise or blame than military feats. In this domain, the poet was the supreme arbiter. His function, in this case, was no longer to serve sovereignty; instead, he was at the service of the community of "similar" and "equal" ones, those privileged to exercise the military profession.⁴⁴

In a warrior society such as ancient Sparta, the Muses thus rightly occupied an important position. They were honored for two reasons. First, they were the protectresses of the players of flutes, lyres, and kitharas, since music was part of Spartan education and military marches and charges were accompanied by flutes and lyres.⁴⁵ However, their second function was of far greater importance. Kings offered a sacrifice to the Muses before each combat in order to remind the "equal ones" of the judgments they would receive, thus encouraging them to defy danger and accomplish feats "worthy of celebration,"⁴⁶ feats that would afford them a "glorious memory" (*mnēmē euklēēs*).⁴⁷

It may seem paradoxical that, in such an agonistic society, recognition did not directly result from action. However, in warfare, the aristocratic warrior seems to have been obsessed by two essential values, *kleos* and *kudos*, both of them aspects of glory.⁴⁸ *Kudos* was the glory that shone on the victor, a kind of divine, instantaneous grace. The gods granted it to some and denied it to others.⁴⁹ *Kleos*, by contrast, was a glory that flourished as it passed by word of mouth, from generation to generation. *Kudos* came from the gods; *kleos* rose up to the gods. At no time could the warrior feel himself to be the agent, the source, of his actions: his victory was a pure favor from the gods and his feats, once completed, took form only through words of praise. A man was thus worth only as much as his *logos*.⁵⁰ A warrior's worth was decided

by the masters of praise, the servants of the Muses.⁵¹ They granted or denied him "memory."⁵²

What was the status of praise? In aristocratic society, to praise another was, in principle, an obligation: "To be just," said the Sea's Ancient, "praise even a foe when he deserves it."⁵³ The poems of Pindar and Bacchylides demonstrate the impact of the injunction: they abound in praise for the strength of men's arms, the wealth of kings, and the courage of noble people.⁵⁴ However, a poet did not lavish praise indiscriminately. Praise was aristocratic: "We know of Nestor and of Lykian Sarpedon from resonant words, such as skilled craftsmen of songs have melded together. Radiant poetry makes virtue long-lived, but for few is the making easy."⁵⁵ Through the power of his speech, a poet made an ordinary mortal "equal in destiny to a king,"⁵⁶ conferring on him being and reality. His praise was called *etumos*.⁵⁷ However, like the Indian ideal of *samsa*, the poet's speech was double-edged, both good and bad.⁵⁸ As Pindar puts it: "Praise touches on Blame."⁵⁹ There is a negative aspect: "bitter speech" has a "crowding bite" and the face of *Mōmos*.⁶⁰ The field of poetic speech is polarized by these two religious powers. Between praise and blame stands the poet, the supreme arbiter: "I will praise the man I love, warding away lurid blame and bringing him true glory, like a stream of water."⁶¹

While in certain traditions blame is malevolent speech or positive criticism, it can also be defined as a lack of praise. In the most ancient religious thought, *Mōmos*, described as "shadowy," is one of the children of Night and a brother to *Lēthē*, oblivion.⁶² Through its affinities with oblivion, blame is the negative aspect of praise; used simply as a doublet to *Lēthē*, its meaning is silence.⁶³ Oblivion, or silence, represents the rearing up of the power of death in the face of the power of life, Memory, the mother of the Muses.⁶⁴ Behind praise and blame is the fundamental pair of anti-

thetical powers, *Mnēmosynē* and *Lēthē*.⁶⁵ A warrior's life is played out between these two poles. The master of praise decides whether a man "should not be hidden beneath the black veil of darkness"⁶⁶ or, on the contrary, that silence and oblivion should be his lot;⁶⁷ whether his name should shine in dazzling light⁶⁸ or instead be consigned forever to darkness.⁶⁹

The field of poetic speech is balanced by the tension between these two groups of powers. Each power is matched by another in the opposite group: in one group night, silence, and oblivion; in the other light, praise, and memory. Exploits that go unremarked die: "Mortal men forget whatever has not intermingled in the glorious streams of verses, and come to flower through a poet's skill."⁷⁰ Only through the bard's speech can silence and death be eluded. The positive values, the very existence of efficacious speech are manifested in the voice of this special man, the poet, and in the harmonious vibration in which his praise floats aloft, in this living speech that is the power of life.⁷¹ A poet bestows through his praise a "memory" on man, who is not naturally endowed with it. Theocritus put the point bluntly: many wealthy people would have remained "without a memory" (*amnastoi*) had it not been for Simonides.⁷² This does not mean they would have lacked the faculty of reconstructing their temporal past, but they would have never received the precious gift that Pindar calls a "memory" or a "memorial" (*mnamēion*).⁷³ Nor does it mean they would have lacked the vague, secular remembrance human beings always keep of the dead. Pindar's kind of "memory" is a privilege that a poet may confer even on the living.⁷⁴ The "memory" of a man is precisely "the eternal monument of the Muses," that is, the same religious reality as the speech of the poet, grafted on memory and actualized in praise.⁷⁵ At the level of sung speech, memory thus has two meanings. First, it is a gift of second sight allowing the poet to produce efficacious speech, to formulate

sung speech. Second, memory is sung speech itself, speech that will never cease to be and that is identified with the being of the man whom the speech celebrates.

What place does *Alētheia* have in this system of thought whose balance depends on the tension between these antithetical powers? The triple opposition between memory and oblivion, praise and blame, and light and night neatly lays out the configuration wherein *Alētheia* finds its meaning. For Pindar, *Alētheia* is a power he calls "Zeus' daughter," one that he invokes, together with the Muse, when he is "remembering."⁷⁶ For Bacchylides, *Alētheia* is the "fellow citizen of the gods, the only one allowed to share the life of the Immortals."⁷⁷ *Alētheia* can conquer even the redoubtable *Mōmos*: "To be sure, the Blame of mortals attaches to all works, but *Alētheia* always triumphs."⁷⁸ Given the inseparability of praise and *Alētheia*, its function is identical to memory:⁷⁹ "The stone of Lydia condemns gold; amongst human beings, virtue has as its witness the Wisdom (of poets) and the omnipotence of *Alētheia*."⁸⁰ *Alētheia* is formally opposed to *Lēthē*, just as it is to *Mōmos*.⁸¹ On the side of light, *Alētheia* brings brightness and brilliance; "it sheds luster on all things."⁸² When the poet gives praise, he does so through *Alētheia* and in its name;⁸³ his speech is *alēthēs*, as is his mind (*nous*).⁸⁴ The poet has the power to see *Alētheia*;⁸⁵ he is a "master of Truth."

+	—
{ Praise (Epainos) Speech Light Memory <i>Alētheia</i>	{ Blame (Mōmos) Silence Darkness Oblivion <i>Lēthē</i>

In all likelihood this same relation between *Alētheia* and *Lēthē* organizes the representations of sung speech in cosmogonies. The affinities of *Alētheia* (of whom the Muses sing) and *Mnēmosynē* (who gave birth to them) lead one to postulate the second term in this basic pair, namely, *Lēthē*. Hesiod's *Works and Days*, different in subject from the *Theogony* but similar in spirit, partially compensates for the *Theogony*'s silence on this matter. The *Works and Days* obeys the same poetic ideology as the earlier *Theogony*. The Muses still inspire the poet; his poem is a marvelous hymn those goddesses cause him to hear.⁸⁶ Like the prophet-diviner, Hesiod claims the ability to reveal "the thought of aegis-bearing Zeus."⁸⁷ His words, described as *etētuma*, are religious in nature on two counts: both through the religious nature of Hesiod's own poetic function and also through the sacred character of the labors on the land that the poet explains to the farmer of Ascrā.⁸⁸ In Hesiod's thought, to labor the land is an absolutely religious occupation. The gods have allotted these labors to men, and the days that divide these labors up over the year are those of "the counselor Zeus."⁸⁹ One who understands the ritual succession of labors and *remembers* each rite flawlessly, without any trace of forgetfulness, is a "divine man." Hesiod explicitly names the distribution of working and proscribed days *Alētheia*.⁹⁰

In the *Works and Days*, we thus find a double instantiation of *Alētheia*. First, there is the *Alētheia* pronounced by the poet in the name of the Muses, which is manifested in his magico-religious speech, and interacts with poetic memory. Second, we find the *Alētheia* possessed by the farmer of Ascrā himself. In the latter case, "truth" is explicitly defined as a "nonforgetfulness" of the poet's precepts.⁹¹ But no fundamental difference exists between these two cases of *Alētheia*. They are simply *Alētheia* considered from two different perspectives – in one case in its relation to the poet, in the other in relation to the farmer who listens.

The former possesses *Alētheia* purely through the privilege of his poetic functions; the latter can only acquire *Alētheia* by exerting his memory. In other words, knowledge of *Alētheia* is available to the peasant of Ascrā only through exercising a memory prone to forgetfulness, which may suddenly darken his mind and deprive him of the "revelation" afforded by the *Works and Days*.

The complementarity between *Alētheia* and *Lēthē* thus becomes particularly obvious in the peasant-disciple relation. However, in addition to the partly "etymological" relation of the peasant's *Alētheia* to *Lēthē*, a second, similar, relation between *Alētheia* and *Lēthē* can be found vis-à-vis the master of truth. This second case is based not on *lēthē* in the sense of human forgetfulness but on *Lēthē*, the daughter of Night. Of these two relations between *Alētheia* and *Lēthē*, one religious, the other linguistic, the former is fundamental. In fact, this relation structures the representation of a sung speech that praises the figure of the king, just as it organizes the field of speech devoted to celebrating warrior's feats.

While the poet's religious function is attested to only in the last echoes of theogonical literature, his function of praising and blaming continued until the classical period. Pindar and Bacchylides exercised this function for the benefit of aristocratic minorities, fulfilling the role previously assumed by their predecessors. By the classical period, however, the system of thought that privileged sung speech as a religious power had become no more than an anachronism; its persistence simply reflected the tenacity of a particular elite. In reality, the poet's job now was to exalt the nobility and praise the rich landowners who were developing a luxury economy, spending large sums, glorying in their matrimonial alliances, and priding themselves on their horse-drawn chariots and athletic prowess.⁹² The poet, serving a nobility all the more avid for praise now that its political prerogatives were challenged, reaffirmed all the more vigorously the essential

values of his own function, since poets were beginning to seem old-fashioned and the place in the Greek city for this type of magicoreligious speech no longer existed.⁹³ Classical democracy rejected this system of values once and for all. In the last analysis, the poet was now no more than a parasite whose task was to gratify the elite on whom he depended with an embellished image of its own past.

The contrast between this role and the poet's omnipotence in Greek society from the Mycenaean age to the end of the archaic period is striking. In Mycenaean society the poet seems to have played the role of an officiating priest or acolyte of the sovereign who collaborated in imposing order on the world. In the archaic period, even after this liturgical function disappeared along with the function of sovereignty, the poet remained an all-powerful figure for the warrior and aristocratic nobility. He alone could confer or withhold memory. It was in his speech that men could recognize themselves.

But whether as an official of the sovereign or as one who praised the warrior nobility, the poet was always a master of truth. His "truth" was a performative truth, never challenged or demonstrated, and fundamentally different from our own traditional concept of truth. Early *Alētheia* meant neither agreement between a proposition and its object nor agreement between judgments. It was not the opposite of "lies" or "falsehood." The only meaningful opposition involved *Alētheia* and *Lēthē*. If the poet was truly inspired, if what he had to say was based on his gift of second sight, then his speech tended to be identified with "truth."⁹⁴

CHAPTER THREE

The Old Man of the Sea

Hesiod describes the negative powers of the children of Night, and then lists the descendants of Pontus, beginning with the eldest and most venerable, Nereus, the Sea's Ancient or the Old Man of the Sea:¹ "But Pontos, the great Sea, was Father of truthful (*apseudēs*) Nereus, who tells no lies (*alēthēs*), eldest of his sons. They call him the old Gentleman because he is trustworthy (*nēmertēs*), and gentle, and never forgetful of what is right (*oude themisteōn lēthetai*), but the thoughts of his mind are mild and righteous (*dikaia kai ēpia*)."² Three epithets, *alēthēs*, *apseudēs*, and *nēmertēs*, confer exceptional importance on Nereus. The association of these three epithets is in all likelihood traditional, since we also find them linked in this way in the description of the highest form of mantic speech, that of Apollo. In the *Homeric Hymn to Hermes*, when Hermes speaks before the gods, he claims in an *ad hominem* argument addressed to Apollo that he has the same virtues as those usually associated with his rival.³ He declares that he will speak *Alētheia* and that he is *nēmertēs* and *apseudēs*.⁴ The "truth" of the Old Man of the Sea thus seems to cover two domains: prophecy and justice. To understand the nature of this truth, we must first decipher the relations between *Alētheia* and both mantic speech and justice and then specify the modalities of