Introduction: from Pindar to Pound

O bright Apollo,
Τίν' ἄνδρα, τίν' ἥρωα, τίνα θεόν,
What god, man, or hero
Shall I place a tin wreath upon!

In these lines from his poem *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley*, Ezra Pound cites words taken from the opening of the second Olympian Ode by Pindar: 'What God, what hero, aye, and what man shall we loudly praise?'[1] Pindar's ode addresses its praise to a Sicilian lord, Theron, on the occasion of his victory in an Olympic chariot race run in 476 BC; and the following lines couple Theron's name with those of a god, Zeus, and a hero, Hercules. As a model of encomiastic writing, the poem was imitated by many successors, among them Horace in an ode praising Augustus (I.xii, 'Quem virum aut heroa . . .'). Neither Pindar nor Horace displays any doubt that there was indeed a great man to be celebrated, as well as gods and heroes with whom he might appropriately be coupled. By contrast, Ezra Pound's questions clearly expect no positive answers. There are no gods or heroes any more; and the most a contemporary might deserve would be a victor's wreath of base metal. The epithet 'tin', derived from the interrogative adjectives (Τίν', 'what') in Pindar's line, lowers the Greek to what

[1] *The Odes of Pindar*, ed. and trans. Sir John Sandys, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, Mass., 1915), Olympian Ode ii. Pound's Greek quotation alters Pindar's order, putting man (*andra*) first and god (*theon*) last.

Pound, in the same poem, characterises as the 'tawdry cheapness' of modern times: tin gods, tin heroes, tin men.

Pindar's Odes belong to that class of writings which bring poetry closest to the workings of praise as a speech-act in everyday life, with the authors addressing themselves directly to a contemporary – man or woman or god – in such forms as panegyric, love-song and hymn. But in narrative texts, too, older poets commonly speak in the language of praise, though more indirectly. They celebrate their heroes and heroines, both in their own voice and in the voices of characters in the story; and they portray worlds in which people generally, in addition to many other creatures and things, quite exceed normal expectations, as in the 'golden' world of poetry that Philip Sidney spoke of.[2] This is the superlative and magnifying manner known to Greek rhetoricians as 'auxetic', and familiar to them from the epics of Homer. The remoteness of such a manner from modern taste and practice can be appreciated in Marcel Proust's parody of Homeric auxesis, in the pretentious 'neo-Homeric manner' cultivated by Marcel's young friend Bloch. Introducing an aristocratic soldier to his sisters, Bloch says: 'I present to you the cavalier Saint-Loup, hurler of javelins, who is come for a few days from Doncières to the dwellings of polished stone, fruitful in heroes.'[3] Just so, in Homer as in much ancient and medieval epic and romance, eulogistic epithets, commonly conventional or formulaic, serve to magnify such

[2] 'Nature never set forth the earth in so rich tapestry as divers Poets have done, neither with plesant rivers, fruitful trees, sweet smelling flowers . . . Her world is brasen, the Poets only deliver a golden. But let those things alone and goe to man . . . and knowe whether shee have brought foorth so true a lover as *Theagines*, so constant a friende as *Pilades*', *An Apology for Poetry*, ed. G. Gregory Smith, in *Elizabethan Critical Essays*, 2 vols. (Oxford, 1904), Vol. I, pp. 156–7.

[3] *Within a Budding Grove: Part Two*, trans. C. K. Scott Moncrieff (London, 1949), p. 94. James Joyce has many auxetic parodies in *Ulysses*, as in his journalistic account of a public execution: 'Hard by the block stood the grim figure of the executioner . . . As he awaited the fatal signal he tested the edge of his horrible weapon by honing it upon his brawny forearm or decapitated in rapid succession a flock of sheep', *Ulysses* (London, 1937), p. 293.

things as buildings and regions, as well as brave heroes and beautiful heroines.

Homer and Pindar were early masters of the poetry of praise, many varieties of which were to flourish throughout the Middle Ages and Renaissance, in panegyrics, hymns, epics, romances, love lyrics, elegies, saints' lives, allegories and the like. Since that time – since the seventeenth century – the poetry of praise has generally been on the retreat in England as elsewhere. It has followed a course rather similar to that plotted for European fiction by Northrop Frye in his *Anatomy of Criticism*. Frye distinguished five fictional 'modes' according to 'the hero's power of action, which may be greater than ours, less, or roughly the same', proposing that 'European fiction, during the last fifteen centuries, has steadily moved its centre of gravity down the list.'[4] His list starts with myth, followed by romance and 'high mimetic', followed in turn by the low mimetic, which 'predominates in English literature from Defoe's time to the end of the eighteenth century', and finally by the 'ironic mode'. The decline of praise in English poetry maps quite well on to this schema, with Ezra Pound belonging to the last, ironic, phase. And ours is still, a century later, an age of irony. Many deepseated changes in society, politics, economics and religious belief have contributed to a culture more at home with tin men than with heroes. Readers of popular fiction, it is true, as well as filmgoers, can still very happily accept superheroes and superheroines; but literary taste generally rejects them. In poetry as in the higher fiction, what Frye calls the 'centre of gravity' has shifted. Praise is no longer a prime function of poetic activity.

I shall touch again upon these very large issues in my last chapters; but perhaps enough has been said for now to suggest why it is that many readers and critics nowadays have difficulty in coming to terms

[4] Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism* (Princeton, N.J., 1957), pp. 33–5.

with laudatory writing when they encounter it in premodern poems, looking back at them as we do across such a wide modal gap. Critics often respond to this embarrassment by averting their eyes. So a recent scholar, after conceding that 'the first thing to be said about Pindar's *epinikia* [odes] is that they are poems of praise', remarks that 'praise is not an activity we rate very highly' and hurries on to look for more interesting things in the poems – more interesting than mere 'mercenary flattery'.[5] A similar bias or prejudice against praise can be detected, I believe, in many readings of medieval English poems. So it is a prime intention of the present study to pay more sympathetic attention to the auxetic character of their poetic idiom and to the laudatory function that such idiom commonly serves.

I also have a second and rather more controversial intention, directed against a current predilection for depreciatory or ironic readings of laudatory writing. It is true that the very prevalence of the language of praise in premodern times made it available for a variety of purposes, not all of them simple; and although the Latin critical tradition, as we shall see, made a sharp binary distinction between praise and blame, *laus* and *vituperatio*, it recognised that one could blame while pretending to praise ('laudis simulatione detrahere').[6] So there can be no question of doubting the existence of 'simulated' or ironic praise – which is indeed often signalled quite blatantly, as when Chaucer's Friar describes the summoner in his tale:

> He was, if I shal yeven hym his laude,
> A theef, and eek a somnour, and a baude.[7]

[5] William Fitzgerald, *Agonistic Poetry: The Pindaric Mode in Pindar, Horace, Hölderlin, and the English Ode* (Berkeley, Calif., 1987), p. 19. See, however, on an 'exchange economy of praise' in Pindar, Leslie Kurke, *The Traffic in Praise: Pindar and the Poetics of Social Economy* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1991). I refer to this book again in my last chapter.

[6] See below, pp. 24–5, 67.

[7] *Canterbury Tales*, III 1353–4. All citations of Chaucer are from *The Riverside Chaucer*, 3rd edn, general editor Larry D. Benson (Boston, Mass., 1987).

Here the *laus* is unmistakeably *vituperatio*. But the issue is not always as clear as that; and I shall draw attention to occasions where, in my opinion, modern critics can be found reading their own ironies and reservations into the text – as if, finding pure praise unpalatable, they add their own salt. At its worst, critics as well as students fall victim to a taste for debunking, and display what Northrop Frye called an 'ironic provincialism'.[8]

In what follows, before considering some selected areas of Old and Middle English poetry, I shall give an account of the old critical tradition that treated praise, *laus*, as chief among a poet's functions. The sheer strangeness of that idea, passed down from Antiquity to the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, serves as one reminder of how much times changed in the centuries between Pindar and Pound.

[8] Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism*, p. 62.

CHAPTER 1

The poetics of praise

At one point in his *Poetics*, Aristotle takes occasion to give a brief account of the history of Greek poetry up to the time of writing, in the fourth century BC. He distinguishes two types of poet, according to their differing characteristics. Of these, 'the more dignified represented noble actions and those of noble men, the less serious those of low-class people; the one group produced at first invectives, the others songs praising gods and men'.[1] This first stage was followed, says Aristotle, by the narrative poems of Homer, among which he included the comic *Margites*, a now lost poem about a fool-hero. The *Margites* belongs to the low tradition of 'invective', while the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* belong with 'songs praising gods and men'. This schematic bit of literary history has failed to impress most readers of the *Poetics*, but it possesses a double interest for the present discussion. Aristotle sorts poems out according to a single criterion: whether they look upwards at high subjects or downwards at low ones. There is no room in his scheme for what would now seem a requisite third type, where the poet shares with his audience a horizontal view of their subject, neither up nor down.[2] Everything falls

[1] *Poetics*, 1448^{b}–1449^{a}, translated by D. A. Russell and M. Winterbottom in *Classical Literary Criticism* (Oxford, 1989), p. 55. In their note (p. 224), Russell and Winterbottom condemn as unhistorical both the series hymns-Homer-tragedy and the series invectives-Homer-comedy. But see n. 4 below.

[2] In this respect, Aristotle's scheme differs from that of Northrop Frye referred to in the Introduction, for in Frye's fourth mode 'the hero is one of us; we respond to a sense of

under one or other of the two original rubrics, praise or invective. This omission of a third type, however, remains characteristic of older thinking about poetry, medieval as well as ancient; nor do most of the actual poems produced in these periods seem to cry out against the omission. It is as if critics and poets alike were subject to some law of the missing middle.

Another noteworthy feature of Aristotle's historical sketch is his coupling of the two Homeric epics with 'songs praising gods and men', that is, with hymns and panegyrics. In an essay about early Greek views of poetry, the Classical scholar Gregory Nagy observes that 'all Greek literature – songs, poetry, prose – originates in *kleos*, the act of praising famous deeds'.[3] Epic and praise poetry have this *kleos* in common, though it takes different forms in each, as Nagy observes:

> In the epic poetry of Homer just as in the praise poetry of Pindar, *kleos* denotes the act of praising, but in epic the praise takes place by the very process of narrating the deeds of heroes, predominantly in the third person. In praise poetry, the praise is more direct: here too *kleos* denotes that act of praising, but the praise in this case applies to the here-and-now, narrated generally in the second person.[4]

'Praise' can take many forms.

Aristotle's *Poetics* remained almost unknown in the medieval West until the thirteenth century, when a Latin translation was made from

his common humanity' (*Anatomy of Criticism*, p. 34). A little earlier in the *Poetics* (1448[a]), Aristotle remarks that characters in poems 'must be better than are found in the world or worse or just the same' (trans. Russell and Winterbottom, p. 52); but this third possibility plays no part in his subsequent discussions.

[3] Gregory Nagy, 'Early Greek Views of Poets and Poetry', in George A. Kennedy (ed.), *The Cambridge History of Literary Criticism*, Vol. 1: *Classical Criticism* (Cambridge, 1989), pp. 1–77, citing from p. 9.

[4] *Ibid*., p. 12. Nagy comments on Aristotle's scheme more sympathetically than Russell and Winterbottom: 'It is as if praise poetry were the primordial form of epic. This is in fact what Aristotle says, that epic is descended from poetry praising gods and men' (p. 18).

an Arabic version of the Greek – a version in which, as we shall shortly see, praise figures much more prominently than it did in the original. In the meantime, however, there is another of Aristotle's writings that stands at the beginning of a more continuous intellectual tradition, his *Rhetoric*. This treatise, like the *Poetics*, became available to the West only in the thirteenth century; but it set out the main lines on which Aristotle's successors treated the subject, including the subject of praise, right up to modern times. Rhetoric taught the art of public speaking, and Aristotle distinguished three species according to how hearers were called upon to respond.[5] Two of them can be clearly distinguished by the occasions of their use: in courts of law a speaker will employ 'judicial' rhetoric to persuade judges of the guilt or innocence of the defendant, and in a political assembly he will use 'deliberative' rhetoric to support or oppose some future course of action. There remain, however, other occasions of a more miscellaneous kind where public speech has no such practical ends in view and requires no decisions of its hearers. Examples are funeral orations and speeches to greet a returning leader. It is such as these that Aristotle classes together under the heading *epideiktikon*, or 'demonstrative'.[6] Praise and blame (*epainos* and *psogos*), and especially praise, are above all the business of this particular branch of rhetoric, the epideictic.

The Romans took over this threefold classification from Greek rhetoricians, employing the equivalent Latin terms, *judicialis*,

[5] *Rhetoric*, 1.3 (1358^a–1359^a). For translation and commentary, see George A. Kennedy, *Aristotle on Rhetoric: A Theory of Civic Discourse* (Oxford, 1991).

[6] Aristotle's main discussion is in chapter 9 of Book 1. On epideictic rhetoric in Antiquity, see Theodore C. Burgess, *Epideictic Literature* (New York, 1987), originally published in *University of Chicago Studies in Classical Philology*, 3 (1902), 89–261; D. A. Russell and N. G. Wilson (eds.), *Menander Rhetor: Edited with Translation and Commentary* (Oxford, 1981), pp. xviii–xxix; George A. Kennedy, 'The Genres of Rhetoric', in Stanley E. Porter (ed.), *Handbook of Classical Rhetoric in the Hellenistic Period, 330 B.C.–A.D. 400* (Leiden, 1997), pp. 43–50. For a more general account, see Brian Vickers, *In Defence of Rhetoric* (Oxford, 1988), pp. 53–62.

deliberativus and, for epideictic, *demonstrativus*. Medieval readers would have encountered it in the early Latin handbooks of rhetoric most widely studied in the schools, the anonymous *Rhetorica ad Herennium* and the *De Inventione* of Cicero. Thus: 'Tria genera sunt causarum quae recipere debet orator: demonstrativum, deliberativum, iudiciale. Demonstrativum est quod tribuitur in alicuius personae laudem vel vituperationem' ('There are three kinds of causes which the speaker must treat: Epideictic, Deliberative, and Judicial. The epideictic kind is devoted to the praise or censure of some particular person').[7] The two terms *laus* and *vituperatio* recur constantly in other Latin discussions of epideictic. In his intelligent account of the threefold classification, Quintilian observes that the epideictic has no monopoly of *laus* or *vituperatio*, but he is content with that traditional characterisation nonetheless, even preferring to speak of *laudativum* rather than *demonstrativum*.[8] The latter continued to be the regular term, however. In his *Etymologiae*, Isidore of Seville explained that 'demonstrative' oratory is so called 'because it "demonstrates" each thing either by praising or censuring it' ('quod unamquamque rem aut laudando aut vituperando demonstrat').[9] Alcuin cites Cicero's *De Inventione*: 'Demonstrativum genus est, quod tribuitur in alicuius certae personae laudem vel vituperium' ('The demonstrative kind is devoted to the praise or censure of some particular

[7] *Ad C. Herennium De Ratione Dicendi*, ed. and trans. Harry Caplan, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, Mass., 1964), I.ii.2. Almost the same in *De Inventione*, ed. and trans. H. M. Hubbell, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, Mass., 1949), I.v.7.

[8] Quintilian, *Institutio Oratoria*, III.iv.12: 'Est igitur, ut dixi, unum genus, quo laus ac vituperatio continentur, sed est appellatum a parte meliore laudativum. (Idem alii demonstrativum vocant)' ('There is then, as I have said, one kind concerned with praise and blame, but it is called "laudative" after its better side. (Others call it "demonstrative")'). Cited from Quintilian, *The Orator's Education, Books 3–5*, ed. and trans. Donald A. Russell, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, Mass., 2001). Quintilian goes on to explain the term *demonstrativum*: 'praise and blame demonstrate the nature of anything' (III.iv.14). I cite Quintilian, an author largely unavailable in the Middle Ages, for his statements of common Latin rhetorical teachings.

[9] Isidore of Seville, *Etymologies, Book II*, ed. and trans. Peter K. Marshall (Paris, 1983), II.4.5.

person').[10] The tradition continued throughout the Middle Ages and beyond. In the first vernacular English rhetoric treatise (1553), Thomas Wilson has a lengthy exposition of the 'Oracion demonstrative', which 'standeth either in praise, or dispraise of some one man, or of some one thyng, or of some one deede doen'.[11] Even as late as the 1920s, James Joyce incorporated specimens of all three types of oratory into the Aeolus episode of *Ulysses*. Epideictic is represented by passages from a newspaper report of a speech in praise of Ireland: 'in the peerless panorama of Ireland's portfolio, unmatched, despite their wellpraised prototypes in other vaunted prize regions, for very beauty . . .' etc.[12] The company assembled in the newspaper office takes a very twentieth-century view of such windy praise: 'High falutin stuff. Bladderbags', thinks Leopold Bloom, and Simon Dedalus exclaims 'Shite and onions!'

Though the rhetoricians regularly couple *vituperatio* with *laus*, they devote almost all their attention to the latter, commonly contenting themselves with remarking, as Aristotle does, that methods of dispraise can easily be inferred from what has been said about its opposite.[13] Their discussions of praise extend over a wide range of occasions and objects. Praise of individual persons or gods naturally takes pride of place. Aristotle gives quite a detailed summary of the virtues and other honourable qualities that an epideictic orator may

[10] Alcuin, *Dialogus de Rhetorica et Virtutibus*, in *Patrologia Latina*, Vol. 101, col. 922.

[11] Thomas Wilson, *Arte of Rhetorique*, ed. Thomas J. Derrick (New York, 1982), pp. 42–76, citing from p. 42. On Renaissance epideictic, see O. B. Hardison Jr, *The Enduring Monument: A Study of the Idea of Praise in Renaissance Literary Theory and Practice* (Westport, Conn., 1962).

[12] James Joyce, *Ulysses* (London, 1937), pp. 114–17, citing from p. 117. Judicial rhetoric is represented by a defending lawyer's speech (p. 130) and deliberative by a speech on the Irish Language movement (pp. 131–3). See Vickers, *In Defence of Rhetoric*, pp. 391–3, noting Joyce's consultation of rhetorical manuals (pp. 388–9).

[13] *Rhetoric*, 1.9.41 (1368[a]). Similarly *Ad Herennium*, III.vi.10: 'The topics on which praise is founded will, by their contraries, serve us as the bases for censure.' Also Cicero, *De Inventione*, II.lix.177; Quintilian, *Institutio Oratoria*, IV.vii.19–23.