Apollo travels from Pytho to Olympus, and the other gods greet his arrival (186–93):

ἔνθεν δὲ πρὸς Ὀλυμπον ἀπὸ χθόνος ὡς τε νόμιμα
eἰς Διὸς πρὸς δόμα θεῶν μεθ’ ομήγηριν ἄλλων-
αὐτίκα δ’ ἀθανάτοις μέλει κιθαρίς καὶ ὄσιδή.
Μοῦσαι μὲν θ’ ἄμα πᾶσαι ἀμετίβδομαι ὅπι καλὴ
ὑμνεύσων ὑπὸ θεῶν δῷρ’ ὀμβροτα ἢ δ’ ἀνθρώπων
τλημοῦναι, δ’ ἔχοντες ὑπ’ ἀθανάτοις θεοῖς
ζώους’ ἀφφαδέοιι καὶ ἀμήχανοι, οὐδὲ δύνανται
eὑρέμεναι θεαντοῦ τ’ ἄkos καὶ γήραος ἀλκαρ.

From there he goes quick as a thought from the earth to Olympus, to the house of Zeus, in order to join the gathering of the other gods. Immediately the immortals concern themselves with lyre music and song. All the Muses together, responding with their beautiful voice, hymn the divine gifts of the gods and the endurance of men, all that they have from the immortal gods and yet live ignorant and helpless, unable to find a remedy for death and a defence against old age.

Lines 189–93 describe a song of the Muses that expresses a divine view on the human condition. Scholars uniformly hold that the Olympians rejoice in hearing about how they themselves inflict pain on mankind. Thus Förstel, for example, writes that this passage presents the gods as, in a certain general sense, the source of human sorrows and finds here ‘ein einzigartiges Zeugnis des griechischen Pessimismus’.1 But such an interpretation depends on a number of debatable philological premises. This article advocates a new reading which better accords with usage, syntax and thematic context. I first treat interrelated semantic and grammatical difficulties in lines 189–93 and then situate the Muses’ song within the Homeric Hymn to Apollo as a whole. At stake here is nothing less than the theological outlook of the poem.2

Most scholars have understood θεῶν δῷρ’ ὀμβροτα (190) to mean the privileges that the gods themselves enjoy, in particular immortality;3 some recent scholars instead

* For helpful discussion and feedback on earlier versions I am most grateful to Felix Budelmann, Joshua Curk, James Diggle, Renaud Gagné, Richard Hunter, Lucia Prauscello, Philomen Probert and William H. Race.

1 K. Förstel, Untersuchungen zum Homerischen Apollonhymnos (Bochum, 1979): ‘ein einzigartiges Zeugnis des griechischen Pessimismus’ (228); ‘in einem gewissen allgemeinen Sinn … Urheber dieser Leiden’ (230). Throughout I refer to the Homeric Hymn to Apollo as we have it. My arguments would be compatible with a range of theories about the genesis of this text.


understand this to mean the gifts which the gods give to mortals. The latter sense is preferable. In early Greek epic, ‘the gifts of the gods’ _uel sim._ often describes gifts which the gods give to men, and never describes gifts which the gods themselves receive. If _θε_ ον _δ_ ωρ’ (190) had that unparalleled sense here, then one would be faced with an awkward question: from whom did the gods receive these gifts? Personified Fate, one might be tempted to reply, but the question itself is strange. Finally, if _θε_ ον _δ_ ωρ’ _όμβρος_ (190) is included within the larger category of _όμ_ _δις_ _έροντες_ τι’ _όμονάστικε_ _θεοί_ (191), as I will argue that it is, then these must certainly be gifts which men receive from the gods. If _θε_ ον _δ_ ωρ’ _όμβρος_ (190) describes gifts that gods give to men, are these gifts good or bad or a mixture of both good and bad? In early Greek epic, the gifts of the gods can be good or bad or a mixture of both good and bad. Context is decisive in each case. The gifts of our passage have been interpreted as bad or as a mixture of both good and bad. But these gifts are qualified with the significant adjective _όμβρος_ (190). In early Greek epic, this is standardly an honorific word applied to things associated with the gods. In the numerous instances when it describes things given from the gods to mortals, these are invariably desirable things. The gifts of the gods are probably desirable here too.

Scholars have long translated _τλημοςύναϲ_ (191) along the lines of ‘sufferings’, but Heitsch makes a powerful case for instead taking it to mean ‘endurance’. Nowhere

_Hymnes_ (Paris, 1936), 87; F. Cássola, _Inni omerici_ (Milan, 1975), 123, 498–9; Förstel (n. 1), 228; A. Miller, _From Delos to Delphi: A Literary Study of the Homeric Hymn to Apollo_ (Leiden, 1986), 69.


8 Heitsch (n. 4), 263.

9 Richardson (n. 4), 112.


13 Heitsch (n. 4). Cf. P. Smith and L.T. Pearcy, _The Homeric Hymn to Apollo_ (Bryn Mawr, 1981), 15; De Martino (n. 4), 42; Thalmann (n. 4), 80; Richardson (n. 4), 112.
else in extant ancient Greek literature does the noun mean ‘suffering’. The forthcoming Cambridge Greek Lexicon s.v. recognizes ‘endurance’ as the sole attested meaning of the noun, and with good reason. We expect τλήμοςσή (at Hom. Hymn. 3.191 and not in the Iliad or the Odyssey) to relate to τλήμων (at II. 5.670 and elsewhere) much as φροδμοςσή (at Hom. Hymn. 3.99 and not in the Iliad or the Odyssey) relates to φρόδιμων (at II. 16.638) or much as ξημοςσή (at Hom. Hymn. 3.100 and not in the Iliad or the Odyssey) relates to ζηηλήμων (at Od. 5.118). Before the fifth century, τλήμων and related words convey an idea of endurance or daring rather than suffering, although this last sense comes to predominate in later texts. Wilson writes that ‘only in Bacchylides [5.153] does τλήμων first collapse into the sense of “wretched”, “miserable”’. We should hesitate to attribute to τλήμοςσήν (Hom. Hymn. 3.191) a meaning which is certainly not attested anywhere else and which would probably be anachronistic for our passage.

ός’ (191) does not agree with τλήμοςσήν (191), although it is often translated as if it did. It will not do to take ὁς’ (191) as the equivalent of ὁς. The passages which Heitsch adduces as ‘distant analogies’ are not convincing. One might instead understand an omitted genitive: ‘endurance [of all those things], as many as men have …’. The grammatical phenomenon is common enough, but it would be harsh here. Words from the τλη— stem do not take a genitive of the thing endured, and so it would be difficult for ancient audiences to supply a missing genitive in our passage.

Two simpler solutions also deserve consideration. First, the antecedent of the neuter plural ὁς’ (191) may be the neuter plural δώρ’ (190; cf. II. 3.65–6). On this reading, the genitives θεών (190) and ἀνθρώπων (190) mark a polar contrast reflecting the two separate topics of the Muses’ song: gifts that come from the gods and acts of endurance that belong exclusively to men. The plural τλήμοςσήν (191) makes the abstract noun concrete and refers to specific instances of endurance. The Muses here, like the Deliades earlier in the poem (158–61) or the Muses in Hesiod’s Theogony (36–52), sing first of the gods and then of men. The bipartite subject of their song is reflected in the separation of the Muses’ song: gifts that come from the gods and acts of endurance [of all those things], as many as men have …’.


W. Porzig, Die Namen für Satzinhalt im griechischen und im indogermanischen (Berlin, 1942), 223–4 observes that Archilochus’ τλήμοςσήν (13.6 W²; discussed below) means what we would expect it to mean (‘regelrecht’) but writes of our passage that ‘es liegt also schon die jüngere Bedeutung von τλήμον zugrunde, der wir erst in der Tragödie begegnen’. This formulation calls suspicion upon itself.


Heitsch (n. 4), 263; cf. Thalmann (n. 4), 80.


E. Kemmer, Die polare Ausdrucksweise in der griechischen Literatur (Würzburg, 1903), 77–90.

So Heitsch (n. 4), 263; cf. the works cited in note 27 below and B.L. Gildersleeve, Syntax of Classical Greek from Homer to Demosthenes, 2 vols. (New York, 1900–10), 1.22: ‘pluralizing abstract nouns makes them concrete’.

in the bipartite structure of the following relative clause: ὃς’ ἐχοντες ὡς’ ὀνθανντοις θεοῖς (191) looks back to the gifts of the gods, while the ensuing description of mortal weakness (from ζώον’, 192, to the end of the sentence) looks back to what men must endure.

Despite the merits of this reading, I prefer to construe somewhat differently. The inherently inclusive ὃς’ (191) (‘all that, as many as’) may be most naturally taken to include as its antecedent both the feminine plural τλημοῦνας (191) and the neuter plural δῶρ’ (190). On this reading, τλημοῦνας (191) is a different part of what men have from the gods. Thematic parallels support this interpretation. In Archilochus, the gods granted men the same noun in the singular: ἄλλα θεοὶ γὰρ ἀνηκέστοις κακοίσιν | ὡς φιλ’ ἐπὶ κρατερὴν τλημοῦνην ἔθεσαν | φάρμακον … τλήτε (13.5–10 W⁵), ’but since, my friend, the gods have established mighty endurance as a palliative for incurable ills … endure’. In Iliad Book 24 the Fates, according to Apollo, gave men an enduring heart (τλητὸν γὰρ Μοῖραι θυμὸν θέσαν ἄνθρωποισιν, 49). In our passage, too, human endurance is a gift from on high. τλημοῦνας (191) would either be a ’distributive’ plural, reflecting the fact that the gods give endurance to many men,²⁷ or the plural would be more or less equivalent to the singular.²⁸

On the interpretation advocated here, δῶρ’ ἄμβροσα (190) describes positive gifts, while τλημοῦνας (191) describes a positive capacity for enduring negative things, which are not said to be bestowed by the gods. If either of these instead referred to bad things, then one would expect the rest of the sentence, which describes human suffering, to depict these divinely apportioned evils as the source of that suffering.²⁹ But this is not what we get. Men are ’ignorant’ (ἄφροδέες, 192) not because of what the gods give to them but just because of how human beings are.³⁰ Death and old age (193) are not gifts from the gods; human mortality, like divine immortality, is not a gift from anyone but simply a given.³¹

Since lines 190–1 refer to two sorts of good things, we should follow West in taking the participle ἐχοντες (191) as concessive: ’all that they have from the immortal gods and yet live witless and helpless’ (my emphasis).³² Here men are ’helpless’ (192) not because of, but rather despite, all that they have from the gods.³³ Rather than stressing

²⁶ As a variation on this interpretation, one could also, perhaps less naturally, understand ὃς’ (191) as part of a ’lilies of the field’ construction (also commonly known as prolepsis: K–G 2.577–9) in apposition; cf. λήν γάρ κατὰ κόσμον Ἀχαίων οίτων ἄειδες, | ὃς’ ἐρέξαν τ’ ἐπαθόν τε καὶ ὃς’ ἐμόγησαν Ἀχαιοί (Od. 8.489–90); μνήμαι μενούσα φλόγητος ἐνηθές, ὡς σαμυκτής (Hes. Theog. 651).
²⁷ Cf. K–G 2.16; J.B. Hainsworth, ’The plural of abstract nouns in the Greek epic’, BICS 4 (1957), 1–9; V. Bers, Greek Poetic Syntax in the Classical Age (New Haven, 1984), 34–8, 52–4; G.L. Cooper, Greek Syntax. Volume 3: Early Greek Poetic and Herodotean Syntax (Ann Arbor, 2002), 1931–3. For abstract nouns as the gifts of the gods, see e.g. Il. 1.72, 6.156–7, 24.30; Od. 5.437, 6.181, 13.45–6; Hom. Hymn 15.8, 20.8.
²⁹ Cf. Förstel (n. 1), 230: ’Die Menschen haben so viele Leiden [= τλημοῦνας (191)], weil sie unverständlich und hilflos sind’ (my emphasis).
³⁰ See Richardson (n. 5), 243–4 (on Hom. Hymn 2.256–8).
³¹ Cf. e.g. Il. 16.441–2; Od. 3.236–8. Greek literature in general, and Homeric poetry in particular, is notably uninterested in aetiological explanations of why human beings die: M. Davies, ’The ancient Greeks on why mankind does not live forever’, MH 44 (1987), 65–75.
³² West (n. 12), 84.
³³ R.P. Martin, Healing, Sacrifice and Battle: Amechania and Related Concepts in Early Greek Poetry (Innsbruck, 1983), 26 observes that here ἀμήχανοι (192) ’is glossed by’ σφέδε δύνατα | εὑρέμενα θανάτοι τ’ ἄκος καὶ γήραςος ἄλκαρ (192–3). As δὲ often has the force of γάρ, so
the extent of the evils that the gods give to men, ὡς’ (191) stresses the extent of their aid. Here the Olympians are presented as ‘the givers of good things’ (δοτήρες ἐὖων, Od. 8.325).\textsuperscript{34} It is not necessarily that, in the world of the Homeric Hymn to Apollo, the gods are never responsible for giving anything bad to mortals,\textsuperscript{35} but rather that the Muses’ song of celebration,\textsuperscript{36} like the framing hymn itself, focusses on divine benefactions rather than malefactions. Here encomiastic rhetoric is as important as cosmology.

On the usual reading of our passage, the gods enjoy hearing about the sufferings which they themselves inflict on men. This might strike us as grotesque,\textsuperscript{37} but it is easy to imagine how, with some historicizing, our modern sentiment might turn out to be an argument for, rather than against, this reading. Yet, it is not easy to provide such historicizing arguments. The disconcerting thing about the standard interpretation of our passage is not that the gods give bad things to men, but rather that they blithely rejoice in recounting how they do so (cf. παιζόντα, 201; παιζόντας, 206). One would want a convincing parallel not for the gods taking pleasure in inflicting suffering on some particular mortal(s) for some particular reason(s), however capricious those reasons might be, but rather for the gods taking pleasure in perpetually inflicting suffering on mankind for no particular reason at all. The closest thing to such a parallel would seem to be the embittered words of Achilles in Iliad Book 24: ὡς γὰρ ἐπεκλώσαντο θεοί δειλοὶ βροτοί, ἵνα δὲ τ’ ἀκφῆς εἰς ἐйπι, ‘for thus the gods spun the thread of fate for wretched mortals, to live in grief; they themselves are without sorrow’ (525–6). It is questionable whether such a bleak world-view is appropriate to the hymnic genre in general and to this hymn in particular. We expect hymns not only to please divine addressees but also to present deities who are not highly unsympathetic to their mortal worshippers.\textsuperscript{38} Certainly the rest of the Homeric Hymn to Apollo does so.

The unusual and difficult language of the Muses’ song in lines 189–93, I suggest, expresses the same theological vision that is expressed more clearly and at greater length throughout the rest of the hymn. We need not necessarily assume that the theology of the Muses’ song is consistent with that of the framing poem,\textsuperscript{39} but the structure of the text encourages one to look for congruity. The Muses’ performance on Olympus,
as scholars have not failed to observe, has obvious connections with the performance of the Deliades (156–64) and also with the performance of the bard of this very hymn (165–78). Like the Muses’ singing in Hesiod’s Theogony (11–21, 36–52, 65–79) or in Pindar (Nem. 5.22–5, Isthm. 8.56a–60, fr. 31) or in Theognis (15–18) or like other divine performances elsewhere in the Homeric Hymns (4.418–33, 19.27–31, 27.16–20), here too the Muses’ song serves as an inset parallel for the framing song (cf. ὑμνεύσει, 190, of the Muses; ὑμνήσον, 158, of the Deliades; ὑμνήσο, 19; ὑμνέων, 178; ὑμνήσο, 207, all of the hymnic speaker).

Like the Muses, the blind bard of Chios sings about the relationship between men and gods. Like the Muses, the blind bard of Chios focusses on divine benefactions. Leto gave birth to Apollo as ‘a delight to mortals’ (χάρμα βροτοίϲ, 25), and this description proves to be programmatic. In this poem Apollo features as a lover—quite literally—of mortals, and a serial one at that (ἐνι μνήϲτηϲ … φιλότηϲ, 208). The god, ‘a delight to mortals’ (25), also slays an inhuman monster who was ‘an evil bane to living mortals’ (Ζωοῖϲ κακῶϲ δήµηµα βροτοίϲ, 364; cf. πήµα βροτοίϲ, 306) and ‘did many evils to men on the earth’ (κακὰ πολλὰ | ἀνθρώ̄που ἔρεθεκεν ἐπὶ χρόνιϲ, 302–3; cf. 355). The deity of this hymn is not an avatar of love for mankind or their sufferings, but benefactions to mankind repeatedly feature in his own explicitly stated and honour-driven motivations (ἀνθρώ̄ποϲ, 248; πᾶϲ, 253; ἀνθρώ̄ποϲ, 288; πᾶϲτ, 293; βροτοίϲ, 364). Both the Delian and the Pythian sections of this hymn emphasize, in different ways, how the divine gifts of Apollo benefit mankind.

Apollo’s birth transforms the uninhabited Delos into a scene of collective human joy (146–55). There mortals who cannot ‘find a remedy for death and a defence against old age’ (οὐδὲ δύνανται | εὑρέµεναι θεανάτωµα τ’ ἄκος καὶ γῆρας ἀλκαρ, 192–3) transitively approach the intransitive state of the gods through their worship of him: φαίη κ’ ἀθανάτωϲ καὶ ἀγήρας ἐµεµναί αἰεί | ὃ τ’ ἐπανταξάϲει ’ότ’ ἱσσος ἄθροι εἰεί, ‘who encountered the Ionians then, when they are gathered together, would say that they are immortal and ageless forever’ (151–2). Apollo is not responsible for human mortality, but he is responsible for an enduring cultic institution through which that human frailty is nearly, if only for a moment (τὸ τ’ … ’ότ’, 152), transcended.

Apollo also establishes an oracle in Delphi through which he discloses the will of Zeus to men (132, 252–3, 292–3; cf. 393–6, 484). He thus alleviates, if only partially, the inherent ignorance of mankind (ἀφραδεϲϲ, 192). Apollo is not responsible for human ignorance, but he is responsible for an enduring cultic institution through which men attain knowledge otherwise unavailable to them. In this hymn, the gifts of the gods are good and work to mitigate, not exacerbate, mortal frailties.

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43 Cf. Förstel (n. 1), 233; Clay (n. 12), 55–6; Richardson (n. 4), 113.
When asked by the Cretans how they will live off the infertile land of Delphi, Apollo, with a smile (ἦπιμεθέδησας, 531), addresses them with language that recalls the Muses’ song: νῦντιοι ἀνθρωποι, δυστλήμονες, οἱ μελεθόνων | βούλεχθ’ ἄργαλέους τε πόνους καὶ στεινεά θυμῶ, ‘ignorant mortals of misplaced endurance, you who want anxieties, hard labours and difficulties for the heart’ (532–3). As their unfounded concerns for their livelihood show, the Cretans share in the ignorance common to mankind (νῦντιοι, 532; cf. ἀφραδέες, 192). The god cures this common ignorance by disclosing the uncommonly blessed future which they will enjoy through their service to him (535–43).

As νῦντιοι (532) looks back to ἀφραδέες (192), so δυστλήμονες (532) recalls τλημοϲύναϲ (191). Scholars generally translate δυστλήμονες (532) along the lines of ‘suffering hard things’ (LSJ), but this interpretation is questionable. The –τλήμον stem is, before the fifth century, unlikely to convey the idea of suffering by itself (see pages 2–3 above). Perhaps the δυ– prefix here adds the notion of suffering (‘enduring bad things’), but it seems more probable that the following relative clause helps to explain this rare word.45 The Cretans are δυστλήμονες (532) not because of what they suffer—they are not suffering anything at the moment—but rather because, as Apollo ironically alleges, they act as if they want (βούλεχθ’), 533 to endure ‘anxieties, hard labours and difficulties for the heart’ (532–3). Their ritual office entails that they will not have to undertake the common human hardships of making a living off of the land (528–30, 535–7). δυστλήμονες (532) may thus be translated as ‘of misplaced endurance’.

Apollo does not inflict suffering on his Cretan officiants or act with malicious intent towards them (οὗ τι κακά φρονέων, 482); he makes them honoured and prosperous (478–85, 521–2, 536–9). If they some day fall under the power of others (542–3), then this will be because they disregard the god’s prophetic warning and succumb to vices inherent to mankind: they will have other men as their masters if ‘there will be any rash word or deed or hybris, as is the way of mortal men’ (ἢ τι τῆς φάνη ἔσσεται ἢ τι ἔργον, | ὣρις θ’, ἢ θέμες ἐκτατοθητῶν ἀνθρώπων, 540–1).46 These particular mortal men will suffer not because of, but rather despite, all that they have from the gods.

Among the gifts of the gods is song (δῶρα θεάων, Hes. Theog. 103; cf. 93), the realm of the Muses and of Apollo himself (cf. Hom. Hymn 3.131, Hom. Hymn 25). The Homeric Hymn to Apollo hints self-reflexively at how this gift too may palliate

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45 C. Brügger, Homer’s Iliad: The Basel Commentary. Book XXIV (transl. B.W. Millis and S. Strack) (Berlin, 2017), 179 (on ll. 24.479): ‘explanatory relative clauses are used inter alia with rare words that apparently require explanation … or they serve to amplify/clarify the significance of a word in context’.

human suffering. The blind bard imagines a visitor to Delos conversing with the Deliades (166–70):

Remember me in the future, whenever some mortal man, a stranger who has endured trials, comes here and asks, ‘o maidens, which singer who visits here is most pleasing to you, and whom do you most enjoy?’ Someone who has endured trials (ταλαπείριοϲ, 168) seeks a beautiful song that will draw his mind away from his cares. The faceless portrait of this stranger invites audiences to reflect on the nature of their own pleasure in the hymn of the blind bard from Chios. Like Apollo’s Delian festival and his Delphic oracle, this song in celebration of the god may also help to alleviate, but not erase, human pain.

In this hymn the gods too take pleasure in song but not as a relief from pain. On the usual reading of lines 189–93, the Olympians rejoice in hearing about how they themselves make human beings miserable. On the interpretation of the Muses’ song advanced here, the nature of their pleasure is less malevolent and more complex. The Olympians celebrate their own power to give good things to men, but the Muses’ song also includes humans bearing those pains which none the less define mortal existence. As the Phaeacians enjoy poetry about war in Odyssey Book 8, so for the gods human pain, transmuted through poetry, becomes a source of pleasure. As in Pindar’s Isthmian 4 Ajax’s deadly serious exploits in battle and suicide become, through Homer, a theme for later men to ‘play with’ (λοιποῖϲ ἄθροιϲ, 39), so for the gods of the Homeric Hymn to Apollo a song about mortal suffering becomes a source of sport (παίζοντα, 206). So far from feeling that human sorrow is cheapened by providing entertainment for the gods, one might feel that it is instead dignified by becoming the object of their attention. The immortals on Olympus, in a scene of supreme happiness, are not wholly absorbed in their own magnificence but turn their minds to mortal hardships on earth.


50 See H.L. Spelman, Pindar and the Poetics of Permanence (Oxford, 2018), 56–7, who notes the ‘ludic connotations’ (at 56) of the infinitive.

This passage may indeed deserve a special place among the evidence for ‘Greek pessimism’, but the pessimism at issue pertains to human beings, not to the gods. The Muses’ song combines a view of divine benefactions that is profoundly optimistic with a view of the human condition that is profoundly pessimistic—or, we might prefer to say, realistic. Within their performance, the spectacle of human pain serves to enhance, by contrast, the beatitude of the immortals. Within the *Homeric Hymn to Apollo* as a whole, this dark view of human life provides a foil that brings out the brilliance of Apollo and his ‘divine gifts’ (190) to wretched mortals. The Muses’ song about the relationship between men and gods expresses a different perspective on the same world that is depicted throughout the rest of this hymn. By allowing its audiences to glimpse the world as the gods see it, the *Homeric Hymn to Apollo* may help some mortals to understand a little bit better their own very different place within that shared world.

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52 Förstel (n. 1), 228.
53 Clay (n. 12), 55: ‘the gods’ celebration … is enhanced or at least remains incomplete without a reminder of the afflictions of mankind’.