

#### IV.—The Generic and Oral Composition in Homer

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This paper assumes well-known facts about Homer's art and thought and attempts to illuminate their meaning through a comparative study with early Greek art. It will be shown that the generic typology found in Homer and early Greek art is but the cognate expression of a creative mind which shows in its creation a similar generic, formulaic, and schematic refraction of the world of man and of nature. As a consequence of this relationship early Greek art may be used to throw light on certain aspects of Homer's art and thought. Finally the origin of certain aspects of the generic typology in Homer will be shown to have an intimate connection with the technique of oral composition. The ultimate purpose of such an investigation is to acquire certain insights which will be of help in establishing principles of criticism to understand Homer as an oral poet.<sup>1</sup>

The word generic as used in this paper calls for an explanation and illustration. By generic is meant the expression of a mentality which works through the formulaic and schematic typology which pervades Homer's style and thought. This formulaic typology extends through many phases of Homer's technique and art. First, the language is formulaic and the flexible schematization of Homer's word-groups<sup>2</sup> when contrasted with later written literature brings out the pervasive typology in Homeric style. This typology extends not only from noun-epithet formulas or whole lines but, as Arend<sup>3</sup> has shown, extends to entire scenes and actions which are "typed," that is, they are told with the same details and the same words. For example, the poet describes scenes of arrival, sacrificing and eating, the dressing of a hero for war, over and over again with the same words and same details until these scenes, like the formulas, become generic types and are used extensively throughout

<sup>1</sup> Cf. J. A. Notopoulos, "Parataxis in Homer: A New Approach to Homeric Literary Criticism," *TAPA* 80 (1949) 1-23.

<sup>2</sup> This aspect of Homer's language was first adequately treated by Parry; for a bibliography of his writings see *AJA* 52 (1948) 43-44.

<sup>3</sup> See below, note 22.

the poems. The generic, furthermore, extends from language to the poet's thought, called *γνώμη* by Aristotle (*Rhet.* 1394A.20). Such gnomic lines as *ὥς οὐκ αἰνότερον καὶ κύντερον ἄλλο γυναικός* (*Od.* 11.427) illustrate another phase of generic typology in Homer. Even as the poet uses generic typology in the expression of a fact like "it is dawn" so does he in expressing underlying common denominators observable in human actions. The study of this generic typology in Homer by Stickney<sup>4</sup> shows that the crystallization of the experiences of mankind into generic formulas is another manifestation of the generic in Homer, applied now to thought as well as language.

Homer, furthermore, as in the case of the *γνώμη*, distills from the passing world of men types of human beings rather than realistic individuals. When T. E. Shaw, speaking of Nausikaa, says,<sup>5</sup> "she shapes up like a woman and fades unused," he is giving expression to the disappointment of the modern mind in the absence of individual realism in Homer's characters. We have none of the immortal individual characters such as Falstaff, Hamlet or the vast gallery of characters in Dickens. Instead we have generic types representing the whole gamut of possible relationships, such as Achilles, Andromache, Ajax, Odysseus and others. Theophrastus' generic characters are but the codification of a typology of generic characterization found in Homer and carried down from the heroic plane to the agora. What is true of men is also true of the gods who are types, often assuming the form of men. Calhoun's study of the generic treatment of the gods by Homer<sup>6</sup> extends the range of the generic from men to gods. We shall examine later the origins of Homer's generic characterization but here we need only state the universally acknowledged truth that Homer's characters are generic types rather than unique individuals as found in later European literature.

We now come to myth and the generic as illustrated by the Phoenix episode in the *Iliad*. As has been so well expressed by Jaeger,<sup>7</sup> Phoenix in his attempt to instruct Achilles in the disastrous consequences of wrath uses myth as a means of education through

<sup>4</sup> T. Stickney, *Les Sentences dans la Poésie Grecque d'Homère à Euripide* (Paris 1903).

<sup>5</sup> T. E. Shaw, *The Odyssey of Homer* (New York 1932), Translator's Note.

<sup>6</sup> G. Calhoun, "Homer's Gods: Prolegomena," *TAPA* 68 (1937) 11-25.

<sup>7</sup> W. Jaeger, *Paideia: the Ideals of Greek Culture*, tr. G. Highet (Oxford 1939) 1.23-27.

the universal and generic. Horace's father, a more practical Roman, taught his son ethics by pointing out to his son in the marketplace individual men for imitation or avoidance.<sup>8</sup> Phoenix, however, used the myth which embodies for Homer, as well as the Greek dramatists, the generic as a means for clarifying experience in universal terms and for ethical teaching. This use of the myth is closely associated with the generic in the *γνώμη* as may well be seen in Sophocles' *Ajax*. Odysseus at the sight of his foe, tells Athena,

"I pity him

In his misery, albeit he is my foe,  
Since he is yoked fast to an evil doom.  
My own lot I regard no less than his.  
For I see well, nought else are we but mere  
Phantoms, all we that live, mere fleeting shadows."<sup>9</sup>

The myth, whether compounded with *γνώμη* or not, belongs to the realm of the generic presented through the vividness of *dramatis personae*.

Yet with all this pervasive manifestation of the generic in all phases of Homer's art Homer is not abstract. His generic is more in the nature of Aristotle's *γνώμη* which is used with objects of human actions and not with abstractions such as "the straight is the opposite of the crooked."<sup>10</sup> All who read Homer are very much aware of the individual in the context of the generic and schematic. His art and charm consist of the individualized details that his formulas express; his generic thoughts are tied by gossamer-like threads to human beings; his similes give the reader glimpses of the details of nature and man's activities; the details of sleeping and eating, as Bassett has pointed out,<sup>11</sup> create the illusion of continuous time. Homer's art of the linear, his paratactic style, his capacity for seeing things separately<sup>12</sup> are admirably fitted for concentration in the detail and in the moment. These characteristics in Homer contrast him with Plato for whom the generic and the universal swallow up the individual or use it merely for illustrative purposes.

<sup>8</sup> *Serm.* 1.4.105-129.

<sup>9</sup> *Soph. Aj.* 121-126, tr. R. C. Trevelyan.

<sup>10</sup> *Rhet.* 1394A.24 f.

<sup>11</sup> S. E. Bassett, *The Poetry of Homer* (Berkeley 1938) 44-47.

<sup>12</sup> B. E. Perry, "The Early Greek Capacity for Viewing Things Separately," *TAPA* 68 (1937) 410-412.

We are thus constantly reminded by Homer's art that the generic and the individual are magically fused. Yet this fusion is sufficiently diaphanous so that we can see both the generic and the individual. If we are to understand Homer's art, however, we must realize that the individual is not presented to the reader with the customary connotation of realism. The individual in Homer is always saved from such a realism by its constant association with the generic. The unique beauty of Helen remains a part of her generic character and the poet saves us from an Elizabethan catalogue of the details of beauty by simply describing her beauty solely through the effect her presence had on the Trojan elders on the top of the towers of Ilium. This divorce between individualism and realism makes the reader of Homer feel less tension in the harmonious adjustment of the generic and the individual. Yet the relation of the two is such that the generic element predominates in the expression and mentality of Homer. One can readily see the predominance of the generic in Homer by contrasting his art with the non-generic art of some modern literature in which individual details, never subsumed or controlled by the generic, achieve their effect in a linear or a stream of consciousness style.

Before attempting to discover the origins of the generic in Homer's art it is necessary to make a comparative study of Homer and early Greek art with respect to the generic. Both geometric and archaic art show in marked degree generic typology to be the distinctive characteristic of their styles. Geometric art, like Homer, does not copy nature but refracts it through a formulaic typology.<sup>13</sup> In contrast to the Minoan vases with their strong sense of naturalism the geometric Dipylon vases contain an abstract style of ornamentation completely dissociated from any meaning; their formulaic designs and schemes of bands strongly remind us of Homeric typology even to the extent of seeing, as Myres does,<sup>14</sup> in the rhythmical flow of bands the visual counterpart of the verbal quantitative music of the verse. This relationship between Homer and geometric art extends from formulaic decoration to the depiction of human beings. When the Geometric artist makes a transition from a vase of pure ornamentation to one with a central panel

<sup>13</sup> Cf. E. Loewy, *The Rendering of Nature in Early Greek Art*, tr. J. Fothergill (London 1907); R. Carpenter, *The Esthetic Basis of Greek Art* (Bryn Mawr 1921) 114 ff.; M. H. Swindler, *Ancient Painting* (New Haven 1929) 162.

<sup>14</sup> J. L. Myres, *Who Were the Greeks?* (Berkeley 1930) 511-525.

depicting the painter's interest in human concerns, such as dances, races, funeral processions etc., he continues to use generic representation, highly formulaic and typological, as all the pictorial contents of the geometric panels show. Thus we see in these panels generic pictures of men even as we see in Homer's characters generic pictures of *aretê*.

The ripe Geometric figurines<sup>15</sup> and the succeeding stage of development known as Dedalic reveal the same use of generic and schematic typology. In his study of Dedalic art, whose date is roughly the seventh century, Jenkins points out that the Dedalic head is an Idea, a formula. "The beauty of a Dedalic head," says Jenkins, "is akin to the beauty of a mathematical figure, in its symmetry and economy of outline, and the face is a pattern or scheme, simple yet controlled by rigid laws, a pattern in whose elements there is nothing superfluous or affected. It is interesting to notice this typically Greek 'idealist' conception emerging so early in this branch of their creative activity . . . the head and face of Man, formal, perfect, sexless, a mathematical abstraction; becoming, as the style develops, fuller and more finely modelled, but always actuated by the same conception of Ideal perfection."<sup>16</sup> The generic carried thus to such a degree of perfection in the Dedalic head offers us a close parallel to the generic men and women of Homer.

Archaic sculpture in the seventh and sixth centuries continues to exhibit the same formulaic typology. The sculptor in his attempt to represent the variations and individuations of nature with their complex elements of color and curvilinear irregularities works through schematic formulas and typologies which range all the way from frontal pose to schemata for the various parts of the body. These schemata are used paratactically rather than related to an organic whole, a problem which is solved in the later development of Greek sculpture. The charm of archaic sculpture lies in the refraction of nature through these intellectualized generic schemata. The inability of the archaic sculptor to see form except through formulaic stylization, the substitution of set schemata for the irregular and variegated appearances of the world of nature,<sup>17</sup> and their unvarying repetition reveal that archaic art, though later than

<sup>15</sup> G. Karo, *Greek Personality In Archaic Sculpture* (Cambridge 1948) 19 ff.

<sup>16</sup> R. J. H. Jenkins, *Dedolica* (Cambridge 1936) 14-15.

<sup>17</sup> Carpenter (above, note 13) 114.

Homer, has a deep kinship with the art of Homer which similarly interprets the world of men through generic typology.

This typology continues in Greek art and thought in its later phases of development. The Greek choral lyric revealing the group-mind through generic thoughts; the Greek drama, developing out of this choral lyric and inheriting from Homer the generic in myth and characterization; the presence in Thucydides of the generic in the speeches,<sup>18</sup> are all phases of a development which commences with Homer and ultimately leads to Plato's generic essences, the forms, which are translated from the world of men to the eternal world in a transcendent transfiguration. It is obvious that Plato's ideal forms did not appear full-blown from philosophical origins but rather they are the *ne plus ultra* development in philosophy of a mentality and technique in which the Greek mind felt at home by reason of a long tradition from Homer and Greek art. Plato inherited a generic tradition which made his contemporaries feel at home in the realm of the generic. This continuity of the generic tradition from Homer to Plato is delineated, though with only a few of its interstices, in order to furnish us with the framework of our immediate problem which is (1) to recognize more fully the cognate mentality and technique of the generic in all phases of expression by the early Greek mind, and (2) to try to understand some factors which account for the growth and development of the generic in Homer.

The necessity for recognition of this cognate mentality is seen in the valuable light which Greek art can throw on the understanding of Homer's technique and mentality and the ensuing purgation of false interpretations of Homer which have clung to Homer as a result of the Homeric question. The divorce between Homeric studies and early Greek art, which is being narrowed down by recent studies,<sup>19</sup> has obscured certain intimate relationships between Homer and early Greek art. For example, the parataxis in early Greek art can be used to show that the pervasive parataxis found in Homer is not the result of "stitchings" but rather the presence in Homer of the paratactical mentality and technique which characterize early Greek art. The addition now of the generic mentality and technique which are found *pari passu* in

<sup>18</sup> Cf. J. Finley, Jr., *Thucydides* (Cambridge, Mass. 1942) 61-73.

<sup>19</sup> Cf. Myres (above, note 14) 511-525; Karo (above, note 15) 35.

Homer and early Greek art strengthens the bonds of this kinship and provides us, in the absence of literary material contemporary with Homer, with a rich source which we can utilize for the understanding of Homer's mind and technique.

The origins of the generic in early Greek art have been sought in schemata based on memory images which the artist gradually perfects so that they approximate actual appearances.<sup>20</sup> Instead of these schemata the oral poet uses verbal formulas as the origin of his style and art. It is the immediate object of this study to suggest that the origins and development of the generic in Homer must be found in oral composition from which epic poetry originates not only in Greece but elsewhere.<sup>21</sup> It will be shown that the technique of oral composition, which is generic in character, leaves its imprint on the mind of the oral poet and accounts in large measure for the growth of generic typology and mentality. Despite the separation caused by philosophical or literary analysis there is in actuality a very deep and intimate association between the mind and words. It is this very close relationship which constitutes the basis of the belief that the generic in Homer originates with the technique of oral composition. Even as the artist can only express ideas for which he has techniques, so the verbal artist can only express ideas in proportion to the formulas that he acquires from tradition or adds to his tradition. Thus by constantly working with a formulaic style the poet develops a formulaic mentality which in turn repeats the formulaic in other patterns of his creation. It is but an easy step from the formulaic diction of a line to the development of typical scenes with their formulaic schematization, as noted by Arend and Parry,<sup>22</sup> extending to entire scenes. Likewise when Homer came to create more full-bodied characters than the technique of the noun-epithet characterization permits the very foundations of his training in the formulaic resulted in the extension of the same technique into the creation of a generic typology in human characterization. The same phenomenon occurs in early Geometric vases when the artist transfers to the representation of men the same technique of generic stylization used in the decora-

<sup>20</sup> Carpenter (above, note 13) 129-132.

<sup>21</sup> C. M. Bowra, "The Comparative Study of Homer," *AJA* 54 (1950) 185.

<sup>22</sup> W. Arend, *Die typischen Szenen bei Homer* (Berlin 1933) and Parry's review, *CP* 31 (1936) 357-360.

tion of the surface of the vase.<sup>23</sup> The same technique is thus carried, *pari passu*, with every phase of his development.

Finally the generic is one of the important ways by which the oral poet attracts and holds the attention of the audience which plays an important silent role in the process of oral recitation.<sup>24</sup> The artistic illusion created solely by the winged words of the poet can best be attained when the oral poet does not tax the listener. By devices like repetition, pleasant as recurrent motifs in music, the Homeric *hysteron proteron*, and other means the oral poet, as Bassett has shown, achieves economy in the listener's attention and exercises unceasing care to keep it from straying. To the devices mentioned by Bassett we must add now the generic which, like the simplicity of the very limited number of actors in the Greek drama, extends through its simplicity the range of intelligibility to every member of the oral audience. Like the lowest common denominator the simplicity of the generic art in all its manifestations is calculated to embrace the widest range of interest on the part of the audience. The popularity of the generic in Greek literature can only be accounted for by the oral context. The simplicity of the generic therefore is of prime importance in oral recitation and accounts in large measure for the persistence of the generic in post-Homeric literature which was intended for oral presentation to Athenian audiences.

If such a conception of the origin of the generic in Homer be true the implications for Homeric criticism are such that in the future we must seek the answer for some problems in a more intimate understanding of oral composition and how it affects Homer's art. Thus we must no longer be content to seek the origin of the generic in Homer in the statement that it is the function of the poet to interpret life through the generic. True though this is it is not the whole explanation. We must go deeper and realize that the poet also created generic types because of the grounding of his technique in formulaic typology and that, to paraphrase a dictum of Bacon, *verba abeunt in mores*; his ways of thinking are strongly rooted in the linguistic formulaic typology. Such a study of the intimate connection between verbal and mental processes is one

<sup>23</sup> For the development of Geometric vases see P. Kahane, "Die Entwicklungsphasen der Attisch-Geometrischen Keramik," *AJA* 44 (1940) 464-482.

<sup>24</sup> Bassett (above, note 11) 114-140.



of the ways in which the nature of oral composition can enrich our understanding of Homer. Though we should rightly hesitate in making this explanation an absolute principle of explanation for all the generic manifestation in Homer's art, yet this approach because it finds parallel illustration and illumination in early Greek art constitutes a new approach, a new beachhead, as it were, in our understanding of Homer, and of the origins of the generic which plays so important a role in subsequent Greek literature. The development of the generic in Greek literature shows that the Greeks found in the generic, which had such an origin, the true essence of their philosophic genius and developed it in an unparalleled manner beyond all other people, whose literature, as comparative oral literature shows, also contains generic elements. Whereas in the early phase of the development of the generic the verbal influences the mental, in its later phase the generic mentality of the Greeks transcends its verbal origins and then style, as Buffon puts it, is the man.