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I. The Language of Achilles

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I wish in this paper to explore some of the implications of the formulaic theory of Greek epic verse.¹ In doing so, I shall take the theory itself largely for granted.

Let us first consider a famous passage from the end of the 8th book of the *Iliad*, the one describing the Trojan watch-fires:

Οἱ δὲ μέγα φρονέοντες ἐπὶ πτολέμοιο γεφύρας
ἦτο παννύχιοι, πυρὰ δὲ σφισι καίετο πολλά.
ὥς δ' ὅτ' ἐν οὐρανῷ ἄστρα φαεινὴν ἀμφὶ σελήνην
φαίνεται ἄριπρεπέα, ὅτε τ' ἐπλετο νήνεμος αἰθήρ·
ἐκ τ' ἔφανεν πᾶσαι σκοπιαὶ καὶ πρόωνες ἄκροι
καὶ νάπαι· οὐρανόθεν δ' ἄρ' ὑπερράγῃ ἄσπετος αἰθήρ,
πάντα δὲ εἶδεται ἄστρα, γέγηθε δὲ τε φρένα ποιμήν·
τόσσα μεσηγὺ νεῶν· ἥ δὲ Ξάνθοιο ροάων
Τρώων καίωντων πυρὰ φαίετο Ἰλιόθι πρό.
Χίλ' ἄρ' ἐν πεδίῳ πυρὰ καίετο, πᾶρ δὲ ἐκάστω
ἦτο πεντήκοντα σέλαι πυρὸς αἰθομένοιο.
ἵπποι δὲ κρὶ λευκὸν ἐρεπτόμενοι καὶ δλύρας
ἐσταότες παρ' ὄχσεσφιν ἐύθρονον Ἥῳ μίμνον. (Il. 8.553–65)

¹ The theory is the work of Milman Parry, although it had been partly suggested by Heinrich Düntzer (*Homerische Abhandlungen* [Leipzig 1872] 508 ff.). It is substantially stated in *l'Épique Traditionnelle dans Homère* (Paris 1928), and is elaborated in a number of articles written in America. For an account of Milman Parry's work and a complete bibliography, see A. B. Lord, "Homer, Parry, and Huso," *AJA* 52 (1948) 34–44.

These lines could be shown, by an examination of parallel passages, to be almost entirely made up of formulaic elements.² That they are so amazingly beautiful is of course the consequence of Homer's art in arranging these formulae. But I wish to speak now of the quality of their beauty. Here is a straight English translation: "And they with high thoughts upon the bridges of war sat all night long, and they had fires burning in great number. As when in heaven the stars around the splendid moon shine out clear and brilliant, when the upper air is still; and all the lookout places are visible, and the steep promontories, and the mountain dells; and from the heaven downward the infinite air breaks open; and the shepherd is delighted in his heart: so many, between the ships and the streams of Xanthus, were the Trojans burning shining fires before the walls of Ilium. A thousand of them were burning in the plain, and by each one were sitting fifty men, in the light of the blazing fire. And the horses, munching white barley and wheat, stood by the chariots, awaiting the thronèd Dawn."

The feeling of this passage is that the multitude of Trojan watchfires is something marvellous and brilliant, that fills the heart with gladness. But this description, we remember, comes at the point in the story when the situation of the Achaeans is for the first time obviously perilous; and it is followed by the 9th book, where Agamemnon in desperation makes his extravagant and vain offer to Achilles, if he will save the army. The imminent disaster of the Achaeans is embodied in these very fires. Yet Homer pauses in the dramatic trajectory of his narrative to represent not the horror of the fires, but their glory. I suggest that this is due precisely to the formulaic language he employs. There is a single best way to describe a multitude of shining fires; there are established phrases, each with its special and economical purpose, to compose such a description. Homer may arrange these with consummate art; but the nature of his craft does not incline him, or even allow, him to change them, or in any way to present the particular dramatic significance of the fires in this situation.³ Instead, he presents the constant qualities of all such fires.

² Cf., e.g., (with 8.553) *Il.* 15.703, 14.421, 8.378; (554) 2.2, 3.149, 8.561, 8.562; (555) 4.422, 5.437, 17.367; (556) 4.278, 12.271; (557-8) 16.299-300; (559) 13.98, *Od.* 6.106; (560) *Il.* 6.4; (563) *Od.* 21.246, *Il.* 22.150; (564) 5.196; (565) 8.41, 12.367, *Od.* 18.318.

³ A comparison with Alexander Pope's translation makes this strikingly clear. Mr. Pope turns the bright and beautiful fires into a nightmare. The formulaic lines 562

The formulaic character of Homer's language means that everything in the world is regularly presented as all men (all men within the poem, that is) commonly perceive it. The style of Homer emphasizes constantly the accepted attitude toward each thing in the world, and this makes for a great unity of experience.

Moral standards and the values of life are essentially agreed on by everyone in the *Iliad*. The morality of the hero is set forth by Sarpedon in book 12 (310–28). Sarpedon's speech there to Glaucus is divided into two parts. The first expresses the strictly social aspect of the Homeric prince's life: his subjects pay him honour in palpable forms, and he must make himself worthy of this honour by deeds of valour. The second part expresses a more metaphysical aspect: it is the hero's awareness of the imminence of death that leads him to scorn death in action.

The second part of Sarpedon's speech is by far the more famous: perhaps no passage in the *Iliad* is better known.⁴ But the first part is equally important for an understanding of the poem. Its assumption is, first, that honour can be fully embodied in the tangible expressions of it (the best seat at the feast, the fullest cups of wine, the finest cuts of meat, and so forth⁵); for everyone agrees on the meaning of these tangible expressions; and second, that there is a perfect correspondence between individual prowess and social honour. For this too is universally agreed on. I need not add that most of Sarpedon's speech, particularly the first part, is made up of

and 563, for example, become:

A thousand piles the dusky horrors gild
And shoot a shady lustre o'er the field.
Full fifty guards each flaming pile attend,
Whose umber'd arms, by fits, thick flashes send.

Pope's lines are not to be despised; his turning the description to dramatic account is in full agreement with modern literary standards, and is very appropriate to an art that is unlike Homer's.

⁴ This is at least true of the English-speaking world. The handsomely theatrical quotation of the passage by Lord Granville is known to us from Robert Wood's *Essay on the Original Genius of Homer*. (The story is referred to by Matthew Arnold in *On Translating Homer*.) Milman Parry, in *Harvard Alumni Bulletin* 38 (1936) 779–80, criticises Lord Granville for lack of historical understanding of the passage. The criticism seems unfair: Granville probably understood the passage well when he made an identification between himself and the Homeric hero, an identification not so hard to make, considering how concrete were the rewards, and even how strenuous the obligations, of a successful 18th century English aristocrat.

⁵ *Il.* 12.311 = 8.162.

traditional formulae, and that the same thoughts, in the same words, appear in other places in the *Iliad*.⁶

The unity of experience is thus made manifest to us by a common language. Men say the same things about the same things, and so the world to them, from its most concrete to its most metaphysical parts, is one. There is no need, as there is in Plato's day, for a man to "define his terms." And accordingly, speech and reality need not be divided into two opposing realms of experience, as we find them divided in the 5th century by the analytic distinction of *logos* and *ergon*⁷; for the formulaic expressions which all men use are felt to be in perfect accordance with reality, to be an adequate representation of it.

Let us examine this last proposition. The epic heroes live a life of action. Speech, counsel and monologue are seen as a form of action. Phoenix tells in the 9th book of the *Iliad* how he was enjoined to bring up Achilles and *teach him all things*, all things, that is, a hero need know, *to be a speaker of words and a doer of deeds* (9.442–3). Phoenix here makes a practical separation, but no real distinction in kind: the hero must know how to do things — in the accepted manner; and how to talk about things — in the accepted manner. The two are complementary halves of a hero's abilities, and the obverse and reverse of his great purpose: to acquire prestige among his fellows.⁸

Speech is a form of action, and, since the economy of the formulaic style confines speech to accepted patterns which all men assume to be true, there need never be a fundamental distinction between speech and reality; or between thought and reality — for thought

⁶ Cf., e.g., (with 12.310) *Il.* 9.38; (310–11) 8.161–2; (312) *Od.* 8.173; (313–14) *Il.* 20.184–5; (315) 12.321, 12.324; (317) 7.300; (318) 22.304, *Od.* 1.241, *Il.* 5.332; (320) 11.668; etc.

A propos of *Il.* 12.313: that Homer's *τέμενος*, both the word and the institution, was known to historical Mycenaean society, is now demonstrated by the decipherments of Linear B script. See Ventris and Chadwick, "Evidence for Greek Dialect in the Mycenaean Archives," *JHS* 73 (1953) 84–103, esp. 99, top.

⁷ The distinction becomes a permanent feature of the thought of 5th century writers as diverse as Gorgias, Thucydides and Sophocles, part of the syntax of their speech. Cf. Gorgias, B3 Diels, s. 84; Thucydides 2.35 and *passim*; Sophocles, *Philoctetes* 96–99 and 307–13.

⁸ A good example of this is the word *κυδιάνειρα*, used regularly in a formula with *πόλεμος*. But when Achilles withdraws from action in book I, it is said of him:

οὔτε ποτ' εἰς ἀγορὴν πωλέσκετο κυδιάνειραν
οὔτε ποτ' ἐς πόλεμον . . . (1.490–1)

and speech are not distinguished; or between appearance and reality — for the language of society is the way society makes things seem.

If such a distinction did openly exist, we should know where to find it: it would be in the character of Odysseus, the hero who by the end of the 5th century has become the type of the Sophist, the man who substitutes an illusory speech for the realities of life.⁹ But in Homer, at least in the *Iliad*, Odysseus is a great and honourable warrior. His being a master of words is simply a manifestation of this. What words he speaks are felt as a clear reflection of reality, because, like those of Sarpedon, they are in harmony with the assumptions of all society.¹⁰

Only in the person of Achilles do we find so much as a hint that appearances may be misleading, and conception, in the form of words, a false and ruinous thing. When he answers Odysseus with his great speech in the 9th book, he says he will speak out exactly what he thinks, and what will come to pass.¹¹ "I hate that man like the gates of Hell who hides one thing in his heart, and says another," he continues. Achilles' words ostensibly refer to himself: "I will not mince words with you." But the reader feels that they apply with a different force to Odysseus. Odysseus' elaborate and eloquent speech, spoken just before in the naive confidence that Achilles, like himself, will consider the gifts as adequate symbols of honour, becomes a little hollow. Achilles' words here make it seem somehow dishonest at heart, and not in accordance with the essence of the situation.

Achilles' own speech that follows is of another sort. Passionate, confused, continually turning back on itself, it presents his own vision with a dreadful candour. And what this candour is concerned with is, precisely, the awful distance between appearance and reality; between what Achilles expected and what he got; be-

⁹ Particularly in Sophocles' *Philoctetes*. Cf. the lines referred to in note 7, also lines 13-14 and 431-2.

¹⁰ Cf., e.g., *Il.* 11.404-10. Observe the connection of the word *ἀριστεύειν* in this passage with *ἀριστεύς*, of the word for prowess with that for social rank.

¹¹ Such certainty is godlike (and Achilles does hold the fate of the Greeks in his hand); in the first book (204), Achilles had said more doubtfully:

ἀλλ' ἔκ τοι ἔρῳ, τὸ δὲ καὶ τελέεσθαι ὄλω,

but no action had followed on his words. Athene in her answer had said, like Achilles in book 9:

ὦδε γὰρ ἐξέρῳ, τὸ δὲ καὶ τετελεσμένον ἔσται. (212)

tween the truth that society imposes on men and what Achilles has seen to be true for himself.

I will not here discuss Achilles' speech in any detail. But few readers of it, I believe, would disagree that it is about such a cleavage between seeming and being as I have indicated. The disillusionment consequent on Achilles' awareness of this cleavage, the questions his awareness of it gives rise to, and the results of all this in the events of the war, are possibly the real plot of the second half of the *Iliad*.

Achilles is thus the one Homeric hero who does not accept the common language, and feels that it does not correspond to reality. But what is characteristic of the *Iliad*, and makes it unique as a tragedy, is that this otherness of Achilles is nowhere stated in clear and precise terms. Achilles can only say, "There was, after all, no grace in it," or ask questions that cannot really be answered: "But why should the Argives be fighting against the Trojans?" or make demands that can never be satisfied: "... until he pays back all my heart-rending grief."¹²

Homer in fact, has no language, no terms, in which to express this kind of basic disillusionment with society and the external world. The reason lies in the nature of epic verse. The poet does not make a language of his own; he draws from a common store of poetic diction. This store is a product of bards and a reflection of society: for epic song had a clear social function.¹³ Neither Homer, then, in his own person as narrator, nor the characters he dramatizes, can speak any language other than the one which reflects the assumptions of heroic society, those assumptions so beautifully and so serenely enunciated by Sarpedon in book 12.

Achilles has no language with which to express his disillusionment. Yet he expresses it, and in a remarkable way. He does it by misusing the language he disposes of. He asks questions that cannot be answered and makes demands that cannot be met. He uses conventional expressions where we least expect him to, as when

¹² *Il.* 9.316, 337-9, 387. The question in the second of these is answered by Achilles. But it seems, as we read the speech, of wider scope than the answer given. We feel that the justification of war itself is being called in question, as it is in 1.152-7.

¹³ The bard is held in great honour — witness Phemius' being spared in the Slaughter of the Suitors. But he is the servant of society. Both Phemius and Demodocus sing the songs they are asked to sing, and it is clear they sing in such a manner as to celebrate the kind of life their listeners lead. This is a great difference between the bard and the rhapsode.

he speaks to Patroclus in book 16 of a hope of being offered material gifts by the Greeks, when we know that he has been offered these gifts and that they are meaningless to him; or as when he says that he has won great glory by slaying Hector, when we know that he is really fighting to avenge his comrade, and that he sees no value in the glory that society can confer.¹⁴ All this is done with wonderful subtlety: most readers feel it when they read the *Iliad*; few understand how the poet is doing it. It is not a sign of artistic weakness: Homer profits by not availing himself of the intellectual terminology of the 5th century. Achilles' tragedy, his final isolation, is that he can in no sense, including that of language (unlike, say, Hamlet), leave the society which has become alien to him. And Homer uses the epic speech a long poetic tradition gave him to transcend the limits of that speech.

¹⁴ *Il.* 16.84–6 and 22.391–4. In the later passage, note how the conventional hymn of triumph follows upon the strange but passionate reference to Patroclus in 387–90. The passage from book 16 has long been a stumbling-block. Because Achilles appears to know nothing of Agamemnon's offer of gifts in book 9, it has been held that there is a hopeless inconsistency. Grote, following K. L. Kayser, was the first to discuss this alleged inconsistency. In his *History of Greece* (4th ed. London 1872, v. 2, pp. 112 ff.), he argued forcefully that the whole of book 9 is an interpolation, and his case finds its best support from 16.84–6. More recent critics have been unwilling to reject one of the finest books of the *Iliad* in order to maintain the coherence of an hypothetical *Uriliad*. But, unable to answer Grote's arguments, they instead deny the authenticity of 16.84–6. See Willy Theiler, "Die Dichter der Ilias" in *Festschrift für Edouard Tièche* (Bern 1947) p. 152, and Von der Mühl, *Kritisches Hypomnema zur Ilias* (Basel 1952) p. 242. Wolfgang Schadewaldt, in his *Iliasstudien* (*AbhLeipzig*, vol. 43, no. 6, 1938, 128–9) seems alone in defending the lines. Schadewaldt's intuitions, as so often, are right, but here they are hazy. He does not perceive the depth of Achilles' dilemma here in the beginning of book 16. He wants to make Achilles' words reasonable, but of course they are not reasonable. Neither are lines 97–100 in the same speech. They are the expression of an impossible situation. Achilles cannot forsake the action which manifests an insight that no available words will express directly. Lines 60–63 make that clear. On the particle γε in line 61, I am tempted to say, hangs the whole tragic decision.

In a discerning, though somewhat legalistic, article, "The Propitiation of Achilles" (*AJP* 74 [1953] 137–48), David E. Eichholz has defended the lines on grounds similar to Schadewaldt's: Achilles does want the gifts, but he "must have [them] on his own terms and in his own time" (p. 141). In view both of what Achilles says of the gifts in book 9, and of his supreme indifference to them when they are actually given him in book 19, it seems to me that the reader must coerce his imagination to believe that he really wants them here. A few lines further down, Achilles gives an entirely different reason for wanting Patroclus to restrain his attack.