

Formalities and how the affected the iliads plot

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In his immaculately detailed study comparing the narrative styles of Homer to those of the Bible, Erich Auerbach hits upon one of the most notable intrigues of reading Homer, namely his unrelenting sense of epic form and rhythm. The stories that unfold in the works of Homer are filled with passion and fury, but this never effects the meticulous regulation of his narrative. One of the chief questions regarding the works of Homer is to what effectual end he follows this formula so explicitly. In both *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*, the reader recognizes patterns and formulae that combine to make up the Homeric template.

The reader can first recognize Homer's formulaic style on a specific scale in the repetition of phrases and epithets. Odysseus, throughout both *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* is almost never mentioned without a reference to his cunning or "many designs". Likewise, throughout *The Iliad* the city of Troy is almost never mentioned without reference to it being "strong-walled" or "wide-wayed". As Richard Lattimore writes in the introduction to his translation, much of this particular kind of repetition was dictated by the metric needs of the poem. Above and beyond this strictly mechanical function however, recurring descriptions serve to ground the story in a cast of recognizable characters, thus creating a sense of familiarity for the reader.

Studying an example of Homer's form on a slightly grander scale, each individual death in *The Iliad* becomes discernible as a minor variation on an established sequential structure. To take the death of Phereklos as an illustration: first, we are told "Meriones in turn killed Phereklos..." (Bk V. In. 59). Then we are given a description of his death:

Although the deaths of major characters are more elaborate and detailed, the basic structural pattern remains the same. The death of Patroklos for example is much embellished, but the basic formula-approach, attack, wound, and finally 'the mist of death'-remains recognizable. The use of what is essentially a template for the description of death in battle could serve one of two purposes. The fact that the deaths in The Iliad and the final battle scene of The Odyssey become so many carbon copies of one another, predictable almost to the point of absurdity, perhaps reflects a poet's judgment of war. Homer goes to such elaborate lengths to depict the immensity of the enterprise and the sweat and hardship of battle, that one can't help but sense, hidden within this repeated formulaic expression of dying, a commentary upon death as the ultimate equalizer. Conversely, the methodical treatment of death could simply be an indication of Homer's duties and obligations as a poet in a spiritual society. Death was a sacred rite of passage to the Ancient Greeks, less of an ending than a gateway; perhaps it would have been considered sacrilege to write about death without this ritualistic formalism.

On the grandest scale, the reader recognizes Homer's slavery to epic form in his placement of the 'beginning' in relation to the story he is telling. In both The Iliad and The Odyssey, we pick up the story in medias res, on the upward crest towards the climacteric.

In The Iliad we enter, a year before the end of a ten year war, upon the scene of a fight between the two great leaders of the Achaians. Although we don't recognize it right away (we have to read the poem to appreciate the

beginning in relation to the rest of the story) this single event is the birth of The Iliad. Without Achilles' self-imposed sulking exile from the Achaians, there would be no dramatic tension around which to build a story. The ardor of battle, the supplication to gods, not to mention the only real humanity that enters into the poem, all stem from this break between Achilles and Agamemnon. It is not until Book Two that Homer gives the reader the history necessary to understand the argument. In this way, he elegantly frames the story of The Iliad against the backdrop of the Trojan War.

Similarly, The Odyssey ' begins' in the ninth year of Odysseus' ten year journey home, just before he is to be released from his captivity on the Isle of Kalypso. In the first Book, Athene visits Odysseus' son Telemachos, who is tormented by the crude and unruly army of suitors competing for the hand of his mother. Athene inspires a hopeless Telemachos to go out and search for his father, so that together, father and son might re-assert their rightful sovereignty on Ithaka. In Telemachos' absence, the suitors conspire to lie in wait and kill him on his return. Thus Homer sets the story well in motion, indeed he even suggests the resolution, before he gives us the full history of Odysseus' nine year journey.

Of all the scales on which the reader recognizes Homer's slavery to form, it is this impeccable shaping and framing of his story that is most relevant to his significance as a founder of narrative tradition as it suggests the relationship between narrator and audience. Both The Iliad and The Odyssey begin with an invocation of the Muses, and the unwavering consistency of atonality puts the narrator in the position of medium, rather than proprietor, of the story-

he is, therefore, infallible. This firm establishment of the reliable narrator is an intimation of the sacred importance these poems held for the people of Ancient Greece. Auerbach goes on to write of the lack of suspense in Homer; suspense as a device to lure the reader is unnecessary precisely because these poems were composed first and foremost as interpretation of the divine and not mere story-telling. Homer's aesthetic drive was towards purity and accuracy rather than thrill and entertainment.

To recognize and study Homer's methodical style is to address the question of the primary function of literature. For all his reserve and slavery to form, there remains discernible throughout the works of Homer a distinct human autograph; the aforementioned atonality itself becomes a tone that we recognize as singularly Homeric. In largely absenting himself from his own narrative, Homer was providing his readers with a more direct link to his subject material. In his rigorous employment of method in writing about phenomena such as the gods and mortality, Homer was interpreting the incomprehensible, providing a bridge between humanity and the divine. In the sense that writers ever since have been striving to do the same thing, the Homeric epics are truly outstanding as a model of literary function and as a reminder of the first quality of art.