

The Function of Digressions in the *Iliad*

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MODERN Homeric scholarship is characterized by a greater sympathy for Homer's style than was accorded it during the nineteenth century. An important result of the studies begun by Milman Parry on the nature of oral composition is that scholars are more cautious about imposing their own aesthetic bias on Homer and making anachronistic demands of him. There has been an attempt to measure Homer's achievements by his own standards, that is, by the standards of oral poetry, rather than by the standards which may be valid only for later literary productions. The charges of discursiveness, repetition, expansion and even incongruity no longer seem as damning as they were once considered to be.

A danger of this new receptive attitude, however, is that while Homer may be vindicated as an historical personage, as an artist he may be merely excused. Some modern studies, particularly those on the paratactic style of Homer, have not so much settled the question of unity in the Homeric poems as evaded the issue by denying the value of the search for unity, or at least any unity which we could recognize as such, in an oral poet. Far from disposing of the central problems of the Homeric Question this approach has only corroborated the misgivings of earlier Analysts. The suggestion implicit in the oral approach is that we must recognize that there is after all no artistic unity in Homer, just as many Analysts claimed; moreover, we must learn not to look for any. What was once seen as a pastiche by a collective body of poets, rhapsodes and diaskeuasts is now seen as a loosely tied collection of pastiches, all by the same poet. This denial of organic unity in Homer would appear to prove the Analysts right in their questions even if wrong in their methods of pursuing answers.¹

¹ Among scholars who deny, or seriously question, organic unity in Homer are: B. A. van Groningen, *Paratactische compositie in de oudste grieksche literatuur* [*Meded.Ak.Wet.Amst.*, Afd. Letterk, ser. A, 83.3] (1937); cf. also "Éléments inorganiques dans la composition de l'Illiade et de l'Odyssée," *Revue des Études Homériques* 5 (1935) 3-24, where van Groningen maintains (p.9) that the composition of oral poetry is subject only to the external control

The point of view which posits the primacy of the parts over the whole in Homer has been given wide currency by Erich Auerbach's explication of the digression on Odysseus' scar in *Odyssey* 19.² Auerbach's contention is that the Homeric style is so compulsively paratactic and explicative that when something such as the scar appears in the narrative, the poet abandons the main narrative entirely in order to bring that object forward and with it all temporal, spatial and causal relationships. According to Auerbach, this compulsion to 'externalize' overrides any other principle in Homer, whether rhetorical, dramatic or aesthetic.³

In recent times, the Homeric digression has achieved a certain respectability by virtue of its becoming the focus of much of the work devoted to the paratactic style. Once condemned by the Analysts as irrelevant insertions added by later poets to satisfy personal whims or demands for local tradition, the digressions have become the hallmark of the oral style, the example *par excellence* of the poet's *amor pleni*.⁴ But this modern view has not so much acquitted Homer of the

exerted by the demands or interest of the audience; J. Tate, who in his review of van Groningen's book (*CR* 51 [1937] 174-5) writes that "Homer's aim is the perfection of the parts rather than the integrity of the whole"; J. A. Notopoulos, "Parataxis in Homer: A New Approach to Homeric Literary Criticism," *TAPA* 80 (1949) 1-23, who states (p.6) that the digressions "are actually the substance of the narrative, strung paratactically like beads on a string"; B. E. Perry, "The Early Greek Capacity for Viewing Things Separately," *TAPA* 68 (1937) 403-27, who claims (p.416) that Homer needed no justification for a digression "other than the delight of his Greek audience in the story *per se*"; P. Mazon, who in discussing unity in Homer writes, *Introduction à l'Iliade* (Paris 1948) 237, "Il ne faut pas juger un Chant par rapporte au poème, il faut le juger en lui-même, comme s'il était isolé." All these repudiate the attempt to apply to Homer rhetorical principles based on the Platonic ideal of the living organism. A. B. Lord, *The Singer of Tales* (Cambridge [Mass.] 1960) shows some ambivalence. He admits (pp.88ff) that the length and presence of "ornamental" themes do not depend on the whim of the singer, but yet he says (p.148) that the poet is not concerned with the relevance of the ornament since the ornament has a value of its own. Among those who maintain Homeric unity of design is C. H. Whitman in his book, *Homer and the Heroic Tradition* (Cambridge [Mass.] 1958), cf. especially pp.181-182; see also J. T. Sheppard, *The Pattern of the Iliad* (London 1922) and S. E. Bassett, *The Poetry of Homer* (Berkeley 1938) ch. VII.

² E. Auerbach, *Mimesis* tr. W. Trask (Garden City [N.Y.] 1957) ch. I. I would not deny Auerbach's major thesis that the historicity of the Old Testament gives to its narrative a greater sense of perspective than we find in Homer. Auerbach has, however, based his argument on only one kind of style in Homer, and it is the purpose of this essay to show that Homer employs such a style for certain dramatic effects.

³ See Perry's similar conclusion on the scar, *op.cit.* (*supra* n.1) 412 n.10.

⁴ J. A. Notopoulos, "Homer and Geometric Art," *Athena* 61 (1957) 65-93, has used the term *amor pleni* to describe the impulse to decorate which he sees in both Geometric Art and Homer. Other scholars who have studied the relationship of Homer to Geometric Art have firmly repudiated the suggestion that Homeric digressions or expansions should be considered ornaments or mere "space-filler." See Whitman, *op.cit.* (*supra* n.1) esp.

charge of irrelevance or incongruity as it has accepted irrelevancy as a characteristic of the oral style and thereby made of it something close to a virtue. It is possible, however, to defend the digression on firmer grounds. I hope to show that the digressions of the *Iliad* are not haphazard accretions, but neither are they merely ornamental decorations subject to the whims of poet or his audience. There is a consistency in their themes, their occurrence and their degree of elaboration which indicates an ordering principle in their use. Both thematically and dramatically they are relevant to the structure of the whole poem.⁵

A justification of the integrity of the digressions must start with an appreciation of the two contrasting styles of narrative in Homer. The one is that which Auerbach has analyzed so well, in which all details, however trivial or incidental, are included and nothing is omitted or left unclarified. The other is a casual, allusive and elliptical way of presenting information.⁶ What is particularly curious in the *Iliad* is that for all the importance of the Trojan War as the essential milieu of the quarrel between Agamemnon and Achilleus, it is always referred to in the latter oblique style, while legends and myths which have nothing to do with the War are told in leisurely digressions of ample detail. It is hardly an exaggeration to say that we know from

pp.95–101, and R. Hampe, *Die Gleichnisse Homers und die Bildkunst seiner Zeit* (Tübingen 1952). A few representative analytic interpretations of the digressions may be cited: W. Leaf, *A Companion to the Iliad* (London 1892) 214, in discussing Nestor's stories says that "the character of the garrulous old man is obviously suitable for the interpolation of such inappropriate episodes." If all Nestor's supposed "interpolations" were removed, Nestor would of course no longer be garrulous. P. von der Mühl, *Kritisches Hypomnema zur Ilias* (Basel 1952) 24 n.29, 198, attributes all Nestor's digressions to a later poet. C. M. Bowra, *Tradition and Design in the Iliad* (Oxford 1930) 73ff, believes that the digressions are primitive elements injudiciously worked into the poem. G. S. Kirk, *The Songs of Homer* (Cambridge 1962) 178, writes that "where the elaboration becomes excessive there are often grounds for seeing the operation of declining singers or rhapsodes." The two assumptions basic to these theories are that the digressions are irrelevant and unnecessarily long. On the other hand, to say with Notopoulos (*supra* n.1) that "the digressions . . . are actually the substance of the narrative" is certainly erroneous for the *Iliad*.

⁵ In what follows I shall restrict my discussion almost exclusively to the *Iliad* because the structure of the *Odyssey* makes the question of its digressions somewhat more complex. In fact much of the analysis of Homer's appositional and paratactic style seems to be more valid for the *Odyssey* than for the *Iliad*.

⁶ The authenticity of the discursive or "Odyssean" passages in the *Iliad* has often been called in question. Wolfgang Schadewaldt, *Iliasstudien* [*AbhSächsAkWiss*, Phil.-Hist. Kl.43.6] (Leipzig 1938) 82, accepts such "lyric" passages as from the hand of the same poet as the rest of the *Iliad*, but argues that they would suggest a date for the *Iliad* close to that of the *Odyssey*.

the *Iliad* more about Nestor's youthful exploits in Pylos than we do about the cause and eventual outcome of the Trojan War.

The studies on the paratactic style of Homer have not, I think, taken sufficient cognizance of this fact, that most of the directly relevant background material is presented in the briefest allusions in a quite subordinate manner, often simply included in such indirect ways as part of a taunt by one character to another, while material which we might consider not directly relevant is narrated in the full appositional style. If we believe that Homer is led astray by his own mention of a person or object into a digressional anecdote, his remarkably laconic treatment of interesting stories which are vital to our knowledge of the Trojan War becomes even more inexplicable. Why are the border raids in Pylos so much more entertaining than, say, the judgement of Paris or the rape of Helen? Or conversely, if we are Analysts we must wonder why the later poets who inserted the digressions in the *Iliad* were so partial to Nestor, to women, and to lesser Trojan heroes, and how they could have so successfully suppressed those poets who might have been partial to the important Greek heroes.⁷

It is well to remind ourselves of how scanty the information on the War is. In Book 1, although most of the important heroes are brought on stage, there are only hints rather than facts about the War. We are hardly given the minimum of facts necessary to identify the characters and to establish the moment in the legend when the action of the poem takes place. The only specific reference to the War is Achilles' angry reminder that he had no quarrel with the Trojans, but that he had come to Troy on behalf of some undisclosed point of Menelaos' and Agamemnon's honor (vv.152-60). Book 2 is equally cryptic, although the Catalogue of Ships offers an excellent opportunity for a full digression on the purpose of the expedition. The Catalogue gives us much extraneous information, but of the War it has little to say. Menelaos is described as longing "to avenge the agonies and sorrows of Helen" (354-56), and the figures of Protesilaos and Philoktetes enter to allow brief allusions to the past and future. In Book 3, when Helen, Paris and Menelaos move into center stage,

⁷ For one discussion of Homer's suppression of detail see V. Magnien, "La discrétion homérique," *REG* 37 (1924) 141-63. Magnien does well to call attention to Homer's silence, but I am not sure that Homer's aesthetic forbade anything but the beautiful, magnificent or heroic. There is much that is brutal and unheroic in the *Iliad*, as critics from Plato to Simone Weil have amply observed.

we might expect a detailed account of their rôle in the War, but what facts are stated are presented obliquely. It is Hektor who first mentions the abduction of Helen when he taunts Paris by comparing his present pusillanimity with his past panache (39–57): “Is this the man you were when you sailed across the seas to carry off a foreign woman?” In the *Teichoscopeia* Helen and Antenor give some background information about the Greek leaders, and Antenor reveals quite incidentally that Menelaos and Odysseus had come to Troy to discuss Helen’s abduction before the War began. Even this interesting fact is left unelaborated; it is included only because its narration affords a chance to depict Odysseus’ abilities as orator.

The first books of the *Iliad* would seem to stand in refutation of Auerbach’s thesis when they show so little concern for externalization. Certainly the poem does not show the historical consciousness of the Old Testament, but the obliquity of its style with its gradual revelation of the past and future give a greater depth and perspective than Auerbach would allow.

In marked contrast to the meagre information given about important characters in Book 1, what digressional material the book contains refers to lesser characters or to almost entirely alien legends. Kalchas is given a four-line introduction (69–72); Nestor is introduced in seven lines and then proceeds to a fourteen-line description of how he fought with the heroes of old against the Centaurs (247–53, 260–73); Achilles reminds Thetis of the occasion when she called upon Briareus to help Zeus against the mutinous Olympians (396–406); Thetis informs Achilles that Zeus is away on a twelve-day sabbatical among the Ethiopians (423–25); and Hephaistos reminds Hera of the consequences of his having tried to protect her from Zeus’s anger in the past, when Zeus threw him from Olympos (590–94).

These digressional anecdotes are short, but yet we may wonder at the disparity between the information given in them and the almost total lack of information about Agamemnon, the other Greek leaders, and the course of the War itself.

The explanation for this disparity is that almost all the digressional material in Book 1 is there not for its historical interest but for its paradigmatic value. Here it is necessary to draw a distinction between digressions into the past and expansions of other kinds of episodes which are subordinate within the poem. The word ‘digression’ is inevitably controversial in poetic criticism and perhaps always a

misnomer. Certainly it is an error to apply it indiscriminately to the expanded description of any object, scene or person within a poem. The word, however, may be used with more justification to refer to anecdotes which describe action outside the time of the poem. By this definition, then, the *Teichoskopeia*, though not in itself a digression, has much digressional material in it, while Odysseus' embassy to Chryses in Book 1 is not a digression at all. By this definition four of the five 'digressional' anecdotes in Book 1 are true digressions, since they relate to the past. All four, Kalchas' introduction, Nestor's introduction, and the stories of Briareus' rescue of Zeus and Hephaistos' attempt to help Hera are told as paradigms.

The paradigmatic elements of many of the older myths in the *Iliad* have long been noticed, and the obvious instances of the paradigmatic stories which speakers in the *Iliad* use as protreptic arguments have been discussed by others, so that it is necessary only to call attention here to their salient features.⁸ The paradigmatic stories are drawn from personal experience, family history, or myths outside the Trojan legend. They are rhetorical devices whose intention is always persuasive; they are either hortatory (or dissuasive) or apologetic. That is, they are a form of argument directed by one person to another to encourage him to, or to deflect him from, some action, or they are offered by someone as self defence for his pursuing a certain course. Some may be both hortatory and apologetic.

The hortatory paradigms are: the story of Briareus against the Olympians (1.397–406);⁹ the story of Meleager (9.529ff); Tydeus' exploits against Thebes, told by Agamemnon to Diomedes (4.372–

⁸ For a collection of the major paradigms see R. Oehler, *Mythologische Exempla in der älteren griechischen Dichtung* (diss. Basel 1925); for a good discussion see H. Fraenkel's review of Oehler in *Gnomon* 3 (1927) 569–76. J. T. Kakridis, *Homeric Researches* (Lund 1949), suggests that in the stories of Niobe and Meleager Homer altered the facts of the old legends to make them more appropriate paradigms. M. M. Willcock, "Mythological Paradigma in the *Iliad*," *CQ* n.s. 14 (1964) 141–54, continues Kakridis' investigation to show some degree of invention in eight paradigmatic stories in the *Iliad*. See also Werner Jaeger's brief discussion of paradigms in Homer in his *Paideia*,² tr. G. Highet, I (New York 1945) 27–35.

⁹ This story is intended to be the hypomnesis of Thetis' prayer to Zeus. On hypomnesis as a formal part of prayers see H. Meyer, *Hymnische Stilelemente in der frühgriechischen Dichtung* (diss. Köln 1933). The hypomnesis reminds the god of past favors, whether rendered by the supplicant to the god or *vice versa*, expressed often in the conditional, "If ever I pleased you with sacrifices before," or "If ever you heard my prayer in the past." Chryses' two prayers to Apollo (1.39–41, 453–55) and Thetis' prayer to Zeus (1.503–4) give three examples of this formulaic statement. Hephaistos uses a hypomnetic story upon himself when Thetis comes to ask for arms (18.395ff). The point of his story is, "I must help you because you helped me once before." Hypomnesis in prayers is always an abbreviated form of paradigm.

400); the story of Hephaistos' rescue by Thetis (18.395–405); Phoinix's mythic conceit of the Prayers to whom gods and men must submit (9.502–12); Dione's catalogue of human assaults on deities, told as consolation (5.382ff); and all the personal digressions of Nestor (1.260–73; 7.124–60; 11.670–790; 23.629–43).

The important apologetic paradigms which justify a certain action, or defend a right, or offer a rationale for behavior are: the stories of the personal and ancestral kind, such as the story of Tydeus which Sthenelos tells as a sequel to Agamemnon's story of Tydeus (4.405–10), or Diomedes' story of Tydeus (14.113–25); the genealogical stories given by Glaukos (6.150ff) and by Aineias (20.208ff). All these paradigms defend the speaker's honor in war or establish his right to a voice in deliberative council. Other such paradigms are: the story of Lykourgos which Diomedes tells to explain why he will not fight until he knows Glaukos' genealogy (6.128ff); the story of how Atē was thrown down from Olympos, which Agamemnon tells to explain how delusion entered the world (19.86ff); the brief allusion to Herakles' death, which Achilles tells both as apology and as consolation (18.117–20); the story of Niobe, which is primarily hortatory but also apologetic (24.602–17). Achilles tells this story to urge Priam to eat, but he is also reassuring himself that he has not betrayed Patroklos by surrendering to his physical needs.¹⁰

The digressions of Nestor are both hortatory and apologetic. As apology they establish the legitimacy of his position in the Greek hierarchy as the wisest counsellor; as exhortation they offer a challenge to the younger men to live up to the heroic ideal as embodied in his person. His tales, verbose as they may seem to our more impetuous temper, are not senile meandering. We may find his advice inadequate or jejune, but that is not a judgement in which his peers would have concurred.¹¹

Nestor establishes the pattern in his first speech (1.254–84); the later speeches repeat and amplify his theme. When he intervenes in Book 1 between the two most powerful men in the army, he must

¹⁰ Fraenkel, *op.cit.* (*supra* n.8) 571–2, offers the interesting suggestion that paradigms drawn from myths outside the Trojan legend are the poet's personal *apologia* for allowing his characters to act in a manner inconsistent with the heroic ideal. This may be true of the Niobe story, but the Meleager story is given as warning, not as an apology.

¹¹ Kirk, *op.cit.* (*supra* n.4) 348: "Nestor also gives the oddest kinds of tactical advice." A. Severyns, *Homère* III (Brussels 1948) 50, typifies modern condescension when he says that we pardon Nestor in advance if he talks too much and too often. Nestor's associates never treated him with such indignity. Achilles in giving Nestor a prize in the athletic

make a strong appeal for a hearing; he appeals to his right as counselor, a right which is his due not by virtue of age alone but because he has actively participated in adventures with the heroes of the past and they have profited from his advice. The paradigmatic purpose of his reminiscence is made clear when Nestor concludes by saying (273–4): “These men of the past listened to me; so you too must follow my advice.” Nestor’s advice is critical in the *Iliad*, and the Greeks show their appreciation by following it, with this one notable exception in Book 1. Agamemnon and Achilles will not settle their quarrel as Nestor advises, and the whole poem is the story of the disastrous consequence. Thereafter the Greeks do not make the same mistake.

Even the long story which Nestor tells to Patroklos of the battles between the Pylians and the Eleians (11.670–761) is not simply a lament for his lost youth as Bowra suggests.¹² Achilles, not Nestor, is the real subject of the speech.¹³ The first part of the speech is structured thus: Achilles—Nestor—digression—Nestor—Achilles. The gist is: Achilles does nothing; if only I were as strong as when I fought the Eleians. Then follows the long story of the Eleians against the Pylians, concluded by Nestor’s boast “so they glorified Nestor among men.” Nestor immediately returns to Achilles: “but Achilles will enjoy his valor all alone, when all the Greeks are dead.” This leads Nestor into another hypomnetic story, the story of the recruiting mission undertaken by Nestor and Odysseus when Menoitios had sent his son to join the expedition with the command to be a wise counsellor to Achilles. Nestor concludes this story with a direct exhortation to Patroklos to persuade Achilles to enter the battle again or to allow Patroklos to enter as his substitute. Beneath Nestor’s vaunts on his own exploits he is giving an oblique diatribe on honor, how to achieve it and how to enjoy it. What might seem to be a hybristic boast is in reality a stern warning to Achilles and an

contests says that he does so because Nestor is past the age of contests (23.618–23), but this is the only occasion when Nestor cannot compete and show his prowess. In the War itself Nestor as counsellor is always an active participant. We are expressly reminded of his preeminence at 11.624–5 when we are told that the Greeks had given the girl Hekamede to him as recognition that he was the best of them all in counsel.

¹² Bowra, *op.cit.* (*supra* n.4) 86, writes that “the only point is that Nestor is not the man he once was, and that Peleus behaved better than his son.”

¹³ Schadewaldt, *op.cit.* (*supra* n.6) 74–94 has made a careful examination of the structure of this speech, and has discussed the paradigmatic intent of its two anecdotes. See also Willcock, *op.cit.* (*supra* n.8).

attempt to shame him into action while there is still a chance to win glory.

Nestor's last paradigmatic story (23.626–50) may seem to have the least hortatory necessity, but even here Nestor follows his usual themes. His paradigm first proves that he is worthy of the honor which Achilles has shown him and then gives the present application: "I have proved myself in funeral contests; now it is for you to compete and win in such contests." Again Nestor recalls his own achievements as the standard against which the younger heroes should measure themselves.

Nestor's constant claim is that he has lived a hero's life. Having already proved his worth in heroic encounters, he sets his life before the young heroes as paradigm. Now it is their turn to prove their character.¹⁴ As paradigms, then, his stories are never told for their antiquarian interest but because they are his most persuasive form of rhetoric.

The digressions, whether drawn from distant myths or family history or from the beginning of the Trojan War, are securely anchored to the present by their pragmatic intent. They reflect a pervasive need to justify an action in the present by an appeal to a past precedent. They go, however, far beyond simple justification of a present course of action. They are cogent examples of that mode of thinking which, as van Groningen has remarked, uses the past occurrence not merely as an edifying example but as the positive proof of a present possibility.¹⁵

Though the paradigmatic elements of the longer digressions in the *Iliad* have been noted since ancient times, it has not been sufficiently noted that even the brief digressions, and indeed almost every reference to the past, even those made by the poet as narrator, are prompted by the same impulse to find paradigm in the past. As historical clarification of the present they are often too allusive to be satisfactory, so that we must conclude that they are not the product

¹⁴ Whitman, *op.cit.* (*supra* n.1) 166, discusses Nestor as the repository and guardian of the heroic ideals, and Nestor's approval of Diomedes as his truest successor in the pursuit of those ideals.

¹⁵ See B. A. van Groningen, *In the Grip of the Past* (Leiden 1953) 13, ". . . an assertion which formally holds good only for the past, actually acquires a general purport; to state that something has not yet happened may also mean that it will never happen at all." The ancestral reminiscences of Diomedes and Aineias ("What our fathers have done we can also do") and the hypomnesis of prayers ("Since you helped me in the past you can do so again") are examples of this principle.

of a mind which is interested in historical completeness. The past intrudes into the present only when it can serve as paradigm.

In Book 1, for example, the poet's introduction of Kalchas is not an overt paradigm, yet its purpose is surely paradigmatic; by citing past precedent (Kalchas' seership which had brought the Greeks to Ilium) it is a guarantee of the reliability of Kalchas' following speech.¹⁶ In the same book the paradigmatic use of the past pervades Agamemnon's retort to Kalchas and the colloquy between Agamemnon and Achilleus. A single action in the past becomes indicative of a permanent *ēthos*. Agamemnon reacts to Kalchas' divination by attacking Kalchas' evil *ēthos* (106–9): "You have habitually given me bad oracles (*sc.* a reference to the sacrifice of Iphigeneia?) and now you are at your oracles again." Similarly, Achilleus reads Agamemnon's single outrageous act as proof of a consistent *ēthos*, with which he contrasts his own *ēthos* (163–9; 225–30): "You have always been a coward who prefers to stay behind and expropriate other men's prizes while I have always fought in the front ranks and have been content with a small prize." This paradigmatic mode of reasoning is fundamental to the quarrel between Agamemnon and Achilleus, and an understanding of its cogent appeal for Homer's heroes will help to explain Achilleus' adamant rejection of Agamemnon's offer in Book 9. How can Agamemnon change now into an honorable man when he is a man *consistently* lacking in honor and honesty?¹⁷

Paradigmatic logic appears in the hypomnesis of prayers on four occasions in Book 1 alone, three times with positive assertion (39–40, 394–406, 453–4), and once with negative when Hephaistos apologizes to Hera for his helplessness (586–94): "I could not help you in the past, so do not expect me to be able to help you now." In Book 3 the past is constantly introduced as paradigm. We may note Hektor's taunts of Paris, and the obvious examples in the *Teichoscopeia* when Helen and Antenor measure the present against the past as they identify the Greek heroes. In Helen's reminiscences the unhappy present is so at odds with the promise of the past that Helen can

¹⁶ Bowra's explanation, *op.cit.* (*supra* n.4) 2ff, for the introduction of Kalchas and Nestor in *Iliad* 1 seems questionable. It is hard to believe that Nestor was any less familiar a figure in the tradition than Agamemnon or Achilleus, and Kalchas is given the introduction which is regularly given to seers to establish their credentials; *cf.* Helenos at 6.76; Polydamas at 18.249ff, Theoklymenos at *Od.* 15.222ff. The introduction of Chryses at 1.11–15 is analogous; it explains his right to approach Agamemnon and is a warning of the consequence of disregarding his request.

¹⁷ On this point see L. A. MacKay, *The Wrath of Homer* (Toronto 1948) 116.

scarcely believe that she and the blithe young girl she remembers in Sparta are the same individual, and she is forced to exclaim (180), "If this ever happened."

The other digressions which delve into the background of the War mostly form a complex of stories around Achilleus and are also told as paradigm. The several allusions to Achilleus' raids on Eëtion's city, Thebe, serve first, as J. W. Zarker has shown, as exemplars of the future doom of Troy, and secondly as exemplars to contrast the former chivalry of Achilleus with his present intransigence.¹⁸ The story of the recruiting mission at Phthia likewise recalls incidents from Achilleus' past to serve as paradigmatic argument.

The reason for the scarcity and allusiveness of the references to the immediate background of the Trojan War becomes more apparent in the light of this Homeric attitude towards the past. Most of the historical digressions are taken from sources outside the Trojan legend because the Trojan War, being still in progress, offers only limited opportunities for paradigm. Notopoulos has suggested that retrospection is one of the devices of the oral poet to fill in essential background and to insure continuity.¹⁹ This is truer of the *Odyssey* than the *Iliad*, but in the *Odyssey* retrospection is the principal technique of narrative and indeed one of the major themes of the poem. In the *Iliad*, however, retrospection plays so little part, except when it can yield a paradigm, that those events which logically belong to the first years of the War are pushed into the present. It would be no structural problem to present the events of Books 2 through 7 in flashbacks, but the *Iliad*, always anticipatory in outlook, eschews the flashback. In the *Iliad* the heroes seem to have almost no past at all, unless the past can provide not just information for its own sake but a persuasive argument for some present action or behavior. In the *Odyssey*, where the heroes have only a past and virtually no present, the Trojan War, now part of the past, becomes the major preoccupation of its characters and a rich source of paradigm.

To explain the paradigmatic intention of the historical digressions is insufficient in itself; we may still question their length and detail. Nestor could say in a simple sentence, once and for all, "I fought with

¹⁸ J. W. Zarker, "King Eëtion and Thebe as Symbols in the *Iliad*," *CJ* 61 (1965) 110-4. See also Whitman, *op.cit.* (*supra* n.1) 189, 198.

¹⁹ J. A. Notopoulos, "Continuity and Interconnexion in Homeric Oral Composition," *TAPA* 82 (1951) 92.

the bravest heroes of the past and they used to follow my advice; so you too should follow my advice." Why a long story to affirm this every time Nestor speaks? We may find the paradigmatic intention relevant but the manner of execution inopportune. It is just the amount of detail, the discursiveness, which has made the digression the subject of such controversy. The length of the anecdote, however, is as relevant as its intent. The expansion of the anecdote is a form of *amplificatio*, or what later Greek rhetoricians called *αὐξήσις*, a heightening of the subject, and so itself a form of persuasion.²⁰

Homer may not have commanded a system of rhetoric as refined and ordered as that of the Sophists, but in this respect his practice is unequivocal. For it is a surprising fact in Homer that where the drama is most intense the digressions are the longest and the details the fullest. In paradigmatic digressions the length of the anecdote is in direct proportion to the necessity for persuasion at the moment. The more urgent the situation, the more expansive the speech and its illustrative paradigm. The two longest digressions, the story of Meleager in Book 9 and Nestor's story of the Pylians and Eleians in Book 11, mark the two most desperate stages in the deteriorating situation. The Greeks are helpless without Achilles, and only the persuasiveness of Phoinix and Nestor can prevent total catastrophe. In these situations words are the only weapons left; the fighters cannot win without Achilles, but their warrior skills are powerless to bring Achilles back into the War. Only the skills of the orator have any chance of success.²¹

It is a modern literary convention that the mode of expression proper to anxiety and desperation is incoherence. The opposite is often

²⁰ On *amplificatio* see G. Kennedy, *The Art of Persuasion in Greece* (Princeton 1963), index s.v. "amplification." Aristotle, *Rhet.* 1368a22ff, treats *αὐξήσις* and *παράδειγμα* as two kinds of logical proof, the one belonging to the sphere of epideictic rhetoric and the other to that of deliberative rhetoric. E. M. Cope in his *Commentary on 1368a26* (Cambridge 1877) I.187, notes that this division makes no pretension to a scientific character, since "*αὐξήσις* is not a logical kind of argument at all, and the . . . members of the division are not coordinate." It is true that *auxēsis* is not a mode of reasoning as paradigm is, but it is a manner of presentation which, by the weight it brings to bear upon a subject, operates as a rhetorical, i.e. a verbal, argument. Paradigm is a form of logic, while *auxēsis* is a means to increase the persuasiveness of the logic. Thus *auxēsis* need not be restricted to encomiastic rhetoric but can be effectively used in all branches.

²¹ As other moderns have denigrated Nestor, so J. A. Scott, "Phoenix in the *Iliad*," *AJP* 33 (1912) 75, is scornful of Phoinix, "as if that ineffectual and loquacious individual were the proper person to present the cause of the despairing Greeks." A comparison of Achilles' reply to Odysseus with his reply to Phoinix will show at once which ambassador was the more ineffectual.

true for Homer's heroes. Like the proverbial drowning man, faced with catastrophe they are gifted with total recall and the rhetoric to support that recall. Coherence, lucidity, prolixity, expansive reminiscences couched in a more elaborate, even Pindaric rhetoric of ring-composition, balance, antithesis—these can mark the moment of despair or consternation in the *Iliad* as effectively as those stark silences (as when Achilles hears the news of Patroklos' death) which strike us with such force.²²

Paradigmatic digressions, even though they may take us far into the past, function in this respect just as the descriptions of objects or the expansions of such stock oral themes as assembly, arming, sacrifice or battlefield encounters. The mere mention of an object often has a dramatic force, and the expanded description of the object lends an even greater emphasis.²³ Expansions are not ornaments but an essential part of the drama.

That an expanded description of an arming scene or a scepter exalts the character participating in the scene and emphasizes the dramatic situation may be obvious, since the objects described also become participants in the action. Every expanded description, however, whether a genealogy or a myth of by-gone days, follows the same principle. The oral poets of today may call these expansions ornaments, but their practice shows that they observe a careful propriety in the use of such 'ornamentation'. There is a hierarchical procedure in ornamentation; princes receive an amplification different in degree and kind from that given to squires. There is a similar hierarchy in the use of expansion to depict dramatic situations.²⁴

Thus we must recognize that behind the apparent parataxis of Homeric style is a scrupulous dramatic sense which calls attention to

²² Since the stories in the digressions are highly compressed and their construction complex, their leisurely style of narrative is deceptive. Their apparent lucidity hides much confusion and ellipse. On the 'Pindaric' construction of Nestor's speech in Book 11 see Schadewaldt, *op.cit.* (*supra* n.6) 84.

²³ F. M. Combellack, "Speakers and Scepters in Homer," *CJ* 43 (1948) 209-17, has shown that the scepter is always mentioned to indicate the importance of the speech. This is another device, like the poet's introduction of a character, to enhance the authority of the speaker. On the dramatic importance of the scepter see also Whitman *op.cit.* (*supra* n.1) 160-1.

²⁴ See Lord, *op.cit.* (*supra* n.1) 88ff, for his discussion of 'ornamental' themes in oral poetry; also his article, "Composition by Theme in Homer and Southslavic Epos," *TAPA* 82 (1951) 71-80, for the sense of propriety which oral singers maintain in their use of ornamentation. G. M. Calhoun, "Homeric Repetitions," *CPCP* 12.1 (1933) 1-26, has shown a fine appreciation of the dramatic significance of thematic amplification.

a particular situation or person by the multiplicity of peripheral details. There is in Homer a principle which might be called one of *oblique concentration*. To praise Achilles Homer describes his shield. No expansion of a stock theme is given for its own sake, nor is any story told for its own charm. Elaboration, whether of a scene in the present or of a story from Nestor's past, is a sign of crisis. Homer has too often been considered the exemplar of the clear assertion, the unambiguous statement. There is a certain direct simplicity in the narrative which hides the obliquity of the style, the style which marks the important by evading the explicit statement and glances instead on all the circumferential details.

The effect of this style is to put time into slow motion and to create a ritual out of the moment. A. B. Lord has suggested that the elaboration of certain oral themes may have a significance deriving from ritual.²⁵ He is referring particularly to those themes of arming and preparation which are greatly amplified when the hero of the poem is about to go to an important encounter. But the arming themes should not be treated as distinct from the other kinds of oral themes. All are subject to expansion and for the same dramatic reason. Though the Homeric poems may derive from mythic sources, the drama is what is important in Homer rather than mythic rites of initiation or sacrifice. It is not the survival of an ancient ritual which dictates the degree of elaboration of an oral theme but the dramatic sense which determines the need for ritual. Homer creates ritual by amplification whenever the moment is significant. Thus Helen's conversation with Priam in the *Teichoscopeia* becomes a ritual as much as the arming of Patroklos or Achilles. Ritual in Homer is ancillary to the drama.

We can see this kind of ritualizing in the description of important scenes of propitiation. The careful description of the mundane details of Odysseus' embassy to Chryses is the dramatic representation of the importance of the mission. The act of propitiation is not merely the return of Chryseis and the sacrifice but the total ceremony, the whole

²⁵ Lord, *op.cit* (*supra* n.1) 88ff. Lord agrees of course (p.91) that the arming theme in oral poetry has its artistic as well as 'ritualistic' significance. H. Fraenkel, "Die Zeitauffassung in der frühgriechischen Literatur," *Wege und Formen frühgriechischen Denkens* (München 1960) 4ff, says that the sacrifice is described in detail because it is a religious ritual. The stress, he claims, is on the spiritual replenishment rather than on the physical act of eating.

day's celebration.²⁶ In the reconciliation scene between Priam and Achilles there is the same attention to practical details, the same ritualizing of ordinary activity and for the same reason. This too is a scene of propitiation in which the chances of success remain to the end precarious. This is not an ordinary dinner, but a ceremony in which Priam and Achilles are officiants. Again the narrative moves slowly to make us experience the ritual, but, more important, the emotional maelstrom which necessitates such elaborate ritual.

Thetis' visit to Hephaistos to obtain arms for Achilles shows a similar ritualized intensity (18.369ff). All the preliminaries are related at length: Charis' welcome of Thetis, Charis' appeal to Hephaistos to receive Thetis graciously, the description of the workshop with its wheeled tripods and golden automaton handmaidens, Hephaistos' speech of welcome which includes the hypomnetic story of how Thetis had saved him when Hera had thrown him from Olympos, then Thetis' appeal for arms, Hephaistos' promise to provide them, and finally the making of the arms. The social amenities are played out at length, and their elaborate execution is Homer's stylized form of emphasis. When we hear the exchanges between Thetis, Charis and Hephaistos—a total of five speeches repeating the themes of hospitality and past indebtedness and slowly advancing to the present need—we know that the arms must be extraordinary to require such ceremony and the need for them will be proportionately extraordinary.

Bassett has called the Shield an epic hyporcheme inserted as an interlude between two outbursts of passion.²⁷ In spite of its pastoral tone, however, it is not comparable to the lyric interludes of tragedy, for it is an integral part of the scene in Hephaistos' workshop, a scene which can hardly be called an interlude. As the reason for, and the climax of, that scene it receives the same kind of elaboration as the rest of the scene but in even greater detail. Where the lyric choruses of tragedy telescope our vision to place the specific in its proper relation to the general, the Shield, like the other expansions in Homer, is a microscope to focus more intently on the minutest details of the specific. Though the field of both instruments may be equally varied,

²⁶ Note vv.472-4: "Throughout the day the sons of the Achaians continued to propitiate the god as they sang a beautiful paean." Calhoun, *op.cit.* (*supra* n.24) 16-7, has discussed the dramatic force of the expansion of this episode.

²⁷ Bassett, *op.cit.* (*supra* n.1) 98.

the one is cosmoramic while the other is panoramic; the difference in perspective is essential.

The ritualized character of these three scenes, all of a supplicatory nature, is obvious. The scenes are not themselves digressions, but two of the three contain paradigmatic digressions (even Odysseus' embassy scene contains its paradigmatic element in the hypomnesis of Chryses' prayer), and the digressions become elements in the ritual and so subject to the same ritualizing description. It is worth noting that the scenes which include the longest digressions are supplicatory and give great attention to details of hospitality. Hospitality is stressed in the *Nestoris* in Book 11, but it is particularly important in the embassy scene in Book 9. As in other important supplicatory scenes there is not the slightest indication of haste, but an unhurried observance of all the traditional courtesies. There is something of the Oriental habit which marks an important meeting by an extravagant display of the gestures of hospitality while postponing for as long as possible any mention of the topic which is uppermost in the minds of all participants.

A failure to appreciate the fact that the degree of expansion in a digression into the past is dictated by a sense of urgency in the speaker's mind or is an expression of the dramatic tension of the moment has led to a misunderstanding of Homeric style. Homer is not indiscriminate or compulsive about detail. He is quite able to contain himself; both the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* bear ample testimony to his ability to release background information sparingly, sometimes too sparingly for our curiosity, through the course of an extended narrative. The Homeric poems are not nearly as exhaustive historical source books as they might seem.

Since the digressions always have reference to something beyond themselves, we must look behind them for their real but implicit subject. The digression on Odysseus' scar, for example, is not really on the scar at all. The scar is but the vehicle for the explication of the real subject, which is the name and identity of Odysseus.²⁸ Even this digression into the past has a pronounced paradigmatic tone, although the paradigm is a highly sophisticated one and more indirect than similar digressions in the *Iliad*. The whole story is virtually

²⁸ G. Dimock, "The Name of Odysseus," *Hudson Review* 9 (1956) 52-70, in his understanding of the purpose of this scene to define further the character of Odysseus through his name, shows his appreciation of the paradigmatic and dramatic reason for the digression.

Eurykleia's remembrance of Odysseus. The details go beyond Eurykleia's actual memory to mingle with what only Odysseus could have known, but it is her character as nurse which dictates the nature of the digression. She, the nurse who now sees the grown man, projects him back into his childhood and tries to integrate her perception of the stranger with her knowledge of the youth. She is grappling with two separate identities, that of the young Odysseus whom she reared and that of the old and disreputable beggar before her. The scar is what binds the two disparities together and ultimately her assurance that this beggar is in fact Odysseus. The paradigmatic nature of Eurykleia's recollection is very similar to that of Helen's recollections of her own childhood in the *Teichoscopeia*.

Even the description of Odysseus' boar's tusk helmet in *Iliad* 10 has paradigmatic relevance. The helmet is not merely a curiosity fossilized in the poet's repertoire. Its circuitous line of descent is significant. Autolykos had gained it by devious means, and now his grandson, borrowing what the father had stolen, will use it for devious purposes. Thetis and Hephaistos show us a more civilized way to obtain arms befitting the heroic use to which the arms will be put. Then the physical appearance of the helmet has dramatic significance. The helmet contrasts with the plumes and glitter of heroic arms. The desperate situation here calls not for heroic gestures but for nocturnal skulduggery. The boar's tusk helmet in its history and its appearance thus reflects the urgency of the crisis and the character of its wearer, who can adapt himself to non-heroic behavior when heroic strategies prove futile.²⁹

Auerbach rightly rejects the theory of retardation to account for the digressions but is wrong to dismiss any dramatic intention in them.³⁰ The digressions do not create suspense in the modern sense but they do occur at dramatic moments. The Homeric compulsion to bring everything into the foreground operates most conspicuously at the high points of the drama. The digressions are not, then, a release from tension but a concentration of tension.

We are familiar with elaboration as a technique of dramatic

²⁹ The amplificatory and paradigmatic purpose of the genealogies given by heroes before engaging in battle has also been frequently misunderstood. If, as Bowra claims, *op.cit.* (*supra* n.4) 75, the genealogies were included to satisfy the demands of Homer's audiences for accounts of their own lineage, we might reasonably expect to learn more about Menelaos, Odysseus and Aias, and less about Andromache and Briseis.

³⁰ Auerbach, *op.cit.* (*supra* n.2).

emphasis, but our modern tastes are not accustomed to the use of digressions into the past in this same way. If we criticize the incongruity of Nestor's long reminiscence in Book 11 when Patroklos is in too much of a hurry even to sit down, we betray the difficulty we have in freeing ourselves from our conception of the purpose of a digression. Nestor's anecdote is long precisely because the situation is desperate. Nestor's prolixity is prompted by the same urgency which will not allow Patroklos to sit down. It is the same dramatic urgency which manifests itself in the slow methodical gathering of the leaders in Book 10, the same urgency which prompts the leisurely hospitable exchanges between Thetis and Hephaistos in Book 18. In the *Iliad* urgency always gives rise to rhetoric whether by the poet or by one of the *dramatis personae*.

It is our differing sense of the proper means to depict dramatic urgency which has led us to reject Homeric digressions as interpolations or, at best, moments of weakness in a great poet, as evidence of slight loss of control. Yet the digressions occur where the dramatic and psychological concentration is the most intense. Had he thought about it in critical terms, Homer would perhaps have considered his digressions as his most forceful passages.³¹ Nestor, that primitive rhetorician, though not a fighter, is still one of the effective leaders in the *Iliad*. The digressions are but one kind of dramatic amplification, the relevance of which to the whole poem lies first in their rhetorical argument and secondly in their weight of detail. We think of the digression as a device to introduce new information, or to show passing of time, or to create suspense by diversionary tactics at critical moments. The Iliadic digression runs in a completely contrary direction. It is little interested in adding information, it is not a narrative trick to gloss over a time lapse, and it is not a diversion of attention. It brings time to a complete standstill and locks our attention unremittingly on the celebration of the present moment.

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³¹ Kirk, *op.cit.* (*supra* n.4) 163ff, seems to echo what is a common modern prejudice when he rates the succinct narrative of the first books of the Homeric poems as superior to the diffuse narrative of the later books.