Balanced and Climactic Progression in Homeric Poetry

West's treatment of poetic figures in Indo-European poetry begins by suggesting that "bipolarity (not trifunctionality) is the fundamental structuring principle of Indo-European thought" (West 100, cf. 79, 99–105). Polar expressions or merisms are also prominently examined in Watkins' introductory sketch of Indo-European poetics (Watkins 42–49). Both scholars observe, however, that a basic bipartite phrase may sometimes be artistically elaborated to produce a tripartite figure (West 108; Watkins 47–48). In fact, skillful manipulation of balanced pairs and rising sets of three is evident throughout Homeric poetry. To support this contention my paper, drawing evidence primarily from the *Iliad,* will survey various poetic devices with Indo-European reflexes and finally investigate rhetorically charged speech.

Before proceeding, we should recognize that Homeric style may be characterized as paratactic, cumulative, or adding (e.g., Bakker 35–42). Composition proceeds at two interdependent levels: formally, one metrical colon follows another, and one hexameter verse follows another; semantically, words, phrases, and clauses are juxtaposed one to another. For the purposes of this paper, I shall focus on two basic modes of semantic progression, balanced and climactic, observing their artful interaction with the metrical structure, and with one another. (i) Coordinated pairings are often expressed in phrases or clauses of relatively balanced length and weight. While any number of items may be arranged into such *isocola,* parallelism appears inherently appropriate for pairs. Such groupings are often carefully made to occupy fitting portions of a verse, such as one or two hemistichs; or they may even cover a suitable number of successive lines (e.g., *Il.* 1.7, 320–21). (ii) A common alternative to balanced *isocola* is crescendo, where items are arranged climactically, in increasing size and significance, or at least emphasizing the final item. Although a climaxing or focusing expression, whether negative or

positive, may involve only one or two items (1.198, 299), crescendo begins to gain distinctive momentum when it involves at least three elements. Such triads are sometimes carefully integrated into the metrical structure, as in a particular kind of tri-colon crescendo where all items are named in one verse, with the only adjective emphatically applied to the last item; or where they occupy three verses (24.249–51. For the augmented triad and Indo-European parallels, see West 117–19).

Pairs of opposing or complementary items, including merisms, are indeed characteristic of Homeric thought and expression. While such polarities typically stand for all-inclusive extremes (e.g., "past and future," *Il.* 1.343), the poet may occasionally include a third aspect, presenting a more inclusive whole ("present and future and past," 1.70; also 24.5 with 10–11). Comparable patterning is found in other traditional devices, also apparently inherited from Indo-European poetry, including that form of anaphora which typically repeats two compound words of similar meaning ("without fight and without might," 2.201), but which may for emphasis involve threefold repetition ("clanless, lawless, hearthless," 9.63; also 20.326 with 9.466–69). Along similar lines, the Homeric simile occasionally amplifies a comparison by mentioning two subjects ("like leaves and flowers," 2.468) or even three ("like geese or cranes or long-throated swans," 2.459; also 478–79). Dismissal of two items to focus on a third, represents the smallest recognizable form of the priamel (22.262–67), which more typically involves three dismissed items (17.19–23, 14.394–401). (For general discussion of merisms, see West and Watkins *supra*; for anaphora, West 108–110; for compound similes, Edwards 37; for priamels, Richardson ad *Il.* 24.149–52, 262–67; Edwards 28–29, 65; Janko 211–12.)

Dyads are intermingled with triads in an especially artful way in Nestor's first speech, which is explicitly presented as a model of eloquence. The speech's first section establishes an

underlying form with a quantitative aspect—two items capped by a third—which is repeated for rhetorical effect and then recurs with variation in the following catalogue of Lapiths (*Il.* 1.248–64). After describing his own participation in the Battle against Centaurs, Nestor closes with a sentence of two verses addressed to Agamemnon, and one of three to Achilles; then a sentence of two verses to Achilles, and one of three to Agamemnon (275–84). Nestor tactfully begins and ends with Agamemnon, but dedicates just as many lines to Achilles.

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