The Art of Homer's Catalogue of Ships
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THE ART OF HOMER'S CATALOGUE OF SHIPS

The phrase "Catalogue of ships" has led generations of readers and critics to think of the passage (Iliad II.484–785) as being something detachable and lumpy—a long, boring mass of data (geography and personnel) that clogs the story and serves no dramatic function. As a matter of fact, the passage contains only some 300 lines, a very small fraction of the 15,693 lines in the Iliad. One reason for any failure to perceive the dramatic function of the catalogue lies in the way we question its use: too often we ask, "What is this list doing in the poem?" We should ask rather, "What is the catalogue doing where it is?" As I hope to show, there is good dramatic reason for its inclusion and its location, and lovers of Homer need not apologize for it by adducing historical or political or sociological or ethnographical reasons only. All these, however interesting or valid, are external; art ought to carry its own justification.

Homer seems to have regarded the catalogue as something so special as to require not one but two invocations, more than the whole poem receives. I shall discuss the two invocations later; first we must examine the reasons for the catalogue's textual disposition. For the first time in the poem battle is about to begin: while the Iliad is clearly a war poem, we ought to note that the first battle does not occur until book IV, one-sixth of the way through the poem. At the beginning of book II we are still concerned with the internal affairs of the Greek camp; thus far we have met no Trojans, either singly or in troops. After the council in book II, the Greeks march out to attack the Trojans, and the Trojans prepare to meet them. It would seem most natural that we get a description of the two armies as they march towards each other.

To describe the advance of the Greeks, Homer uses six consecutive similes, an unusual aggregation. As critics have regularly noted, the four major similes mark the progression in the reader's view from panorama to detail: the movement is like that of a movie camera "panning" into a scene. All six (or nine) similes contribute to this effect, and the analogy to camera technique is strikingly valid throughout. In lines 455–458, Homer compares the army to a fire blazing on a distant mountain; such phrases as "from afar" and "mounting to heaven" reflect the panoramic view. The picture of the mountain fire, however, precludes any intimation of flatness and lassitude; the fire and the glare of bronze are both elevated and conspicuous.

Next (459–466) Homer compares the troops to "flocks" of geese or cranes or swans. By specifying three kinds of birds Homer suggests the gathering of the various clans; the army is now coming closer

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1 So Paley in his edition. If we take the three comparisons of Agamemnon (478–479) to the gods as similes, we have a total of nine.
2 The word I have translated "flocks" is not nearly so metaphorical: it seems to mean "troops" or "companies" or "groups," and is used of men and animals equally. The later history of this word (ἴθηκα) seems to suggest that it refers primarily to men. In the fourth simile Homer uses it of flies.
to us; and we can begin to distinguish the various elements, though we are not yet sure of which is which. The one clear distinction is that between the men and the horses. The first simile concentrates on the glare of the armor, a visual effect; the second concentrates on the sound, an auditory effect. Both show motion, the fire slow, the birds faster. The birds display two motions, swift flight and slow settling, as Homer suggests the rush of the men toward a central spot followed by a halting.

In his third simile Homer shows us the army collected in one place: the set of six similes contains two large movements, a gathering and a march. The glare and the birds show us the troops gathering; now the men are compared to leaves and flowers (467–468). The image produces the effect of stasis: we see the beauty of the army before battle; but the beauty has an ironic coloring. Flowers and leaves are peaceful and beneficent, as soldiers, on the contrary, are not. We may, pondering the word “leaves,” think of the notion, recurrent in the poem, that the generations of men are like leaves. The phrase “in their season” adds one gentle touch of irony: war knows no season.

In the fourth simile (469–473) Homer compares the soldiers to “swarms” of flies; now the army begins its second movement. First the men had come together in a group; next they moved towards their goal, Troy. First they displayed the variety of their clans, like geese or cranes or swans; now they have the uniformity of flies. All are bent on one object, the full pail of rich milk that symbolizes the wealthy, walled city of Troy. The word for “swarms” is the same as that used for “flocks” above (εθνα), and the two similes, which both refer to flying creatures, are thus linked. Once again Homer brings the reader closer to the scene, for the picture of the milk pail, a small and symmetrical object, is one that the eye sees immediately and familiarly. The swarms of flies suggest the density of the soldiers. This buzzing density, moreover, creates an impression of disorder, which serves as a transition to the fifth simile (474–477).

Here Homer picks up the impression of disorder by singling out not the soldiers but the generals. The reader is now very close to the scene, on a level with the men: the “panning” process is over. The generals are compared to goatherds engaged in getting their flocks grouped correctly. So individual are the men that Homer, in a sixth simile, can even name one, Agamemnon. He compares him to a bull. In the opening similes he has his heroes develop gradually as tiny or domestic or almost insignificant images: first fire, then birds, then leaves, then flies. With the image of the goatherds he begins an enlarging movement and reverses the process of diminution; now his heroes begin to return to manful size. Agamemnon looms up the larger and more heroic for the disproportionate contrast between flies and goatherds. As if to prepare us for the contrast, and at the same time to heighten it, Homer enhances the picture of a lordly and powerful bull by means of his triple comparison of Agamemmon to Zeus, Ares, and Poseidon.

The purpose of the similes, then, has been analogous to that of a movie camera’s “panning”; a logical conclusion of this process is an understanding of the army’s organization. The contextual location of the catalogue of ships is most appropriate. There is, of course, historical interest, which cannot be severely separated from dramatic interest. Midway between the two is the interest evoked by the mere roll call of names, which produces a sense of the army’s size. While I would not defend Homer merely by invoking the imitative fallacy, I think the sonority of the list does does have such an effect. Homer is careful to avoid mere statistics, and, by means of vignettes or comments on various contingents and men, reminds us of his story and his theme. Several of these I wish to discuss in detail; for now we may note briefly
such touches as the digressions on Thamyris (584–600), a reminder of poetry and the poet; Meleager (641–643), whose myth figures so importantly in book IX; and Philoctetes (718–726), who is an Achilles type: a wounded sullen hero, whose aid the Greeks will soon come to need and for which they will beg. The three men I wish to discuss in detail form a cluster: Nireus, Achilles himself, and Protesilaus.

Homer mentions Nireus in a passage of five lines (671–675):

Nireus ἀδ Σήμηθεν ἄγε τρεῖς νήσας ἔλασα,
Nireus 'Αγλαίης υἱός Χαρδαιόν τ' ἄνακτος,
Nireus, ὃς κάλλιστος ἄνήρ ὑπὸ Ἄθλων ἠλθε
tῶν ἄλλων Δαναῶν μετ' ἀμύωνα Πηλείωνα·
Ἀλ' ἀκαπαθός ἦμι, παῦροι δὲ οἱ εἶπεν λαὸς.

The wit is at once apparent, as Homer, by his rhetorical flourish of the name "Nireus" at the start of three successive lines, intones for the leader a great and heroic prominence, only to undercut it completely in the last line. Comic relief, however, is not the only purpose of the passage. The Iliad is full of types, and in Nireus we see a Paris type. We shall meet his other Trojan counterpart later. As a Paris type, he recalls the war. He also allows Homer to mention Achilles, his hero, and to remind us, naturally and subtly, of his present position, sitting in solitary abstinence from battle with his great host, more useless to the Greeks than the worthless Nireus. Alike in beauty, they are unlike in every other way—and yet Achilles has made himself like Nireus in other ways, too. As we shall see, Homer keeps mentioning Achilles at intervals throughout the catalogue, always managing to remind us of the contrasts between his real nature, his present position, and his destiny.

To take another example of Homer's artfully significant cataloguing, we may for the moment skip Achilles and consider the lines on Protesilaus (695–710): here, in the tenth year of battle, Homer pauses to recall the first man killed in the war. It is a piece of tenderness and honor that marks the great poet. Yet the lines are not gratuitous; they have a dramatic function, for in the sad story of the young Protesilaus, and his half-completed marriage, we first see the horror of war. Both Greeks and Trojans feel the horror, as they show by their enthusiastic acceptance of its limitation to a duel between Paris and Menelaus. We see next in Protesilaus the type of Achilles, as well as of the Greek leaders in general. Though brave and eager, he dies; yet his death does not spell chaos, for another leaps to assume his place, and the war continues to its conclusion. His story recalls to us the awareness that, no matter how huge Achilles and his problems may loom in the poem, and in the reader's mind, they are only a small part of the Trojan war, which is, after all, at last won without him. It is Protesilaus' brother, younger and less strong and brave than the dead hero, who takes his place, just as Neoptolemus will take his father's place in time for the final victory.

One does not have to read these parallels into the text. I would argue that Homer places Achilles in the catalogue between Nireus and Protesilaus because he wishes us to see the typical resemblance. Observe the comment that Homer makes directly after mentioning the geography and number of Achilles' forces: ἀλλ' οἳ γ' οὐ πολέμου δυνηχέοι ἐμνώοντο·'οὐ γὰρ ἐν ὦ τίς σφιν ἐπὶ στίχας ἡγήσατο (686–687). Achilles, by his refusal to fight, has become as worthless a leader as Nireus. He also is contrasted with the most eager and patriotic of the Greek soldiers, Protesilaus. In the story of Protesilaus and his younger brother Podarces, we may see a foreshadowing of Achilles and Patroclus, for Patroclus, like Protesilaus, will die eagerly leading the Greek troops; and Achilles, younger than Patroclus, will have the responsibility for marshalling the leaderless troops—together with the knowledge that his failure to accept his responsibility in leadership led to his comrade's death.

At the end of the catalogue of Greeks,
Homer introduces a second invocation (761–762). Having enumerated the forces, he now asks the Muse to evaluate them. The evaluation implicit in the organization of the catalogue now become explicit: Τής τί' ἄρ' τῶν δὲ ἀριστοὺς ἦν.../αὐτῶν ἥδ' ἵππων, οἷς ἀρ' Ἀτρείδησιν ἐποντο[;] The last clause is ambiguous: the catalogue appears to be a listing of the ships at Aulis, and yet it is possible to construe it as a description of the army marching out to battle in the tenth year of war. The catalogue of ships is really the war in miniature, its whole history, so constructed as to prefigure the story of Achilles—and Homer’s theme. It mentions the first man killed in the war, and repeatedly looks to the end of the war. The answer that comes to Homer’s questioning of the Muse seems to imply that he has the present attack in mind, for it is not Achilles who is named as best, but Telaemonian Ajax—as long as Achilles is not fighting. Once again Homer converts his catalogue to dramatic ends, and we are reminded of the hero and his angry withdrawal. In his entry for Achilles, between Nireus and Protesilaus, Homer had mentioned anger, Briseis, and Achilles’ refusal to fight; here he mentions the angry withdrawal again, with more details. Achilles sits apart, idle, while his men, like Milton’s fallen angels, play at games of spear and bow—a parody of their real purpose—and wander about aimlessly (771–779).

Homer closes the catalogue of Greeks with the same simile with which he had opened it, comparing the army to fire. The unit is an artistic whole.

On turning to the Trojan catalogue, we find no separate invocation. Instead, a bit of narrative prepares us for the dramatic appropriateness of the second catalogue. Clearly Homer does not conceive of the catalogue as a detachable list, and those who would treat it as such must explain his constant interweaving of dramatic and narrative elements. Iris, disguised as a son of Priam, counsels Priam and Hector to marshal their own forces in order to repel the vast attack. The Trojan catalogue follows. It begins with Hector, continues to Aeneas, and then to Pandarus: three of the significant figures on the Trojan side. In Pandarus, the archer who causes the war to break out for a second time by stealthily inflicting a wound on Menelaus, we see another Paris type. Aeneas resembles Paris, for both are saved from battle repeatedly by Aphrodit. Hector, of course, leads the list appropriately, both because he is the leading Trojan warrior and because his name and activity remind us, once again, of Achilles’ present position and his destiny.

The Trojan catalogue is much shorter than the Greek; yet even here we may see prefiguring and art. Achilles is mentioned by name twice in the Trojan list. Twice in the list Trojan heroes are described as prophets whose prophetic ability does not enable them to avoid death (831–834 and 858–861). The second of these was slain by Achilles; the collocation recalls the prophecies of Achilles’ own death.3 By far the longest entry in the Trojan Catalogue is the next to last one, although it deals with men otherwise inconspicuous in the poem (867–875):

3 Achilles slays the prophet during his insane ἀφοστεία, in the battle at the river: at the moment of his greatest lack of self-awareness he kills the prophet.

4 The epithet δαίφρων (“foresighted”) for Achilles in the last line is ambiguous: it also means “warlike.” The irony is obvious, for Achilles shows little prudence and foresight throughout the book: he turns down the embassy in Book IX when honor and gifts would both be his; he lets Patroclus go into battle and thus take his armor, for which all other captured armor is an inadequate substitute. When he does regain
Nastes, as Seymour remarks, is the Trojan Nireus. He too is a Paris type, the elegant and worthless warrior. Homer singles out for mention his golden raiment, which Achilles strips. The Trojan warrior is thus a symbol for his city. By comparing Nastes to a girl, Homer looks forward to the great duel between Achilles and Hector, when Hector will compare himself to a girl and Achilles to a lover (XXII.124–128). Like the catalogue of Greeks, the Trojan catalogue ends with a reference to Achilles. Yet where in the first catalogue Homer reminded us of Achilles’ withdrawal from war, in the second he reminds us of Achilles’ prowess. Throughout, the reminders cut two ways: they show us what he will do, and they also show us what he is not doing.

The two last lines in the Trojan catalogue are devoted to Sarpedon and Glaucus. They are brief and spare, in contrast to the artful and lengthy passage describing Nastes. Yet Sarpedon and Glaucus are major figures in the poem. Homer, with quiet restraint, lets the names speak for themselves; he does not even remind us that Sarpedon is the son of Zeus. The reader who is familiar with this fact, as most Greeks probably were, sees even here a reminder of Achilles. Throughout the poem Sarpedon is a kind of foil to Achilles: he too is the son of a deity; he too is doomed to die in battle, despite his divine origin—he will be slain by Patroclus, who will be wearing Achilles’ armor—and he too has a special comrade, from whom he does not separate: Glaucus. In his famous speech in book XII (318–328), Sarpedon expresses to Glaucus the ethos of the Homeric warrior, an ethos which he lives up to, unlike Achilles. Sarpedon has no more stake in the war than Achilles, but he does not shirk his duty. His brave and resigned acceptance of the war is Homer’s means of keeping Achilles in our minds through all those middle books in which his hero sits on the sidelines. Sarpedon’s comrade, Glaucus, is a foil for Patroclus. When Glaucus meets Diomedes, who is serving as an alter Achilles in books V and VI, he neither slays nor is slain; instead the two renew an old family friendship. We see here a glimpse of what these men could be like outside the scenery of war. Their meeting contrasts with that of Patroclus and Sarpedon, when Patroclus, also serving as an alter Achilles, slays Sarpedon. In slaying Sarpedon, Patroclus sets in motion the events that will lead to the death of Achilles, of whom Sarpedon is the type.

The catalogue of ships ends with this bald entry, bald and yet strikingly meaningful. Homer has moved from a panoramic view of the armies and the war to a review of the troops and their leaders. The movement allows him to rehearse the war and at the same time to work his theme, the wrath of Achilles, into the interstices of his history.

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