Perspectivism and the Homeric Simile
(The 2nd Martin West Memorial Lecture, Oxford, March 1st 2019)

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> 'Les hommes et les affaires ont leur point de perspective. Il y en a qu'il faut voir de près pour en bien juger; et d'autres dont on ne juge jamais si bien que quand on en est éloigné.' (La Rochefoucauld)

While I am very grateful to the organising committee for the invitation to deliver this lecture, it is rather daunting to face the expectation of presenting something that might fittingly celebrate the memory of one of the most brilliant and prolific of all classical scholars. This audience certainly does not need me to rehearse the prodigious nature of Martin West's achievements. I shall just content myself with saying that his extraordinary body of work will surely remain a major monument on the landscape of the discipline for as long as the discipline survives. So I can hardly hope to offer anything this evening which would have merited West's own interest or approval, though he did generously humour some of my views – I think that is the right verb – in a number of our personal encounters over the years. I trust, nonetheless, that a lecture on the greatest of Greek poets (or perhaps that should be two of them) will be an appropriate gesture of *hommage* to a scholar who, among so much else, is Homer's most important modern editor.

I have chosen to develop some thoughts on a very familiar but also much-debated and even controversial feature of Homeric poetry, the extended simile – a feature whose prominence (in terms, that is, of frequency of use and degree of elaboration) finds no clear precedent or parallel in either Near-Eastern or Indo-European traditions, as West himself actually observed in his magisterial works of comparative scholarship *The East Face of Helicon* and *Indo-European Poetry and Myth*. The status of extended similes confronts all readers of Homeric epic with testing questions of meaning and value. The history of their interpretation, about which I will later be making some concise remarks, shows that what critics (as would-be representative readers) make of similes is, in some respects, an index of their attitude to epic more generally. Moreover, as a figure of speech or thought (or, for some, a trope) extended similes pose a specific challenge to poetic and rhetorical theory: a challenge, I would say, which revolves around the complex relationship between what might be called their formal syntax (or, alternatively, their surface logic) and their expressive semantics. My necessarily selective treatment of the subject in this lecture will adapt the concept of perspectivism, a term most familiar in the domain of epistemology, to some of the distinctive ways in which the juxtaposition of images in Homeric similes opens up imaginative space for the interplay of something much more than given or fixed correspondences. I will, indeed, be concerned for the most part with examples which include discernible cues to the idea of appraising a scene or situation from a standpoint of separation, whether physical or mental (if not both), between the perceiver and the objects of perception.

With that minimal hint to the direction in which I will be heading, I am going to begin from a slightly oblique but I hope thought-provoking angle by considering a simile not from Homeric epic itself but from a modern philosopher. (To the oralists among you, I can at least offer the consolation that it is an *oral* simile.) I was first struck by this example many years ago and it has often encroached on my thoughts when reflecting on the intricate workings of Homeric similes. It comes from a passage of the family memoir written by Hermine Wittgenstein in the 1940s where she recalls a conversation she had had with her younger brother, Ludwig, early in 1919. At this date, in a state of some existential turmoil after his military experiences in the first World War, Ludwig was planning to abandon his philosophical ambitions and become an elementary schoolteacher. Hermine tried to convey her bafflement and dismay at these plans by using a simile – something she states (and the information is revealing in more ways than one) was a family habit among the Wittgenstein siblings, eight of them in all. She told her brother that for someone with a philosophically trained mind to live as a schoolteacher was like using a precision instrument to open crates. Ludwig, unimpressed, responded with a far more subtle simile of his own – one which, Hermine tells us, reduced her to silence. 'You remind me', he said, 'of somebody who is looking out through a closed window and cannot explain to himself the strange movements of a passer-by. He cannot tell what sort of storm is raging out there or that this person might only be managing with difficulty to stay on his feet.'

In this intriguing exchange, a short, one-to-one comparison is capped by a more elaborate instance of the kind that would most aptly be described in Greek as a παραβολή – something like the difference, as German scholars of Homer would put it, between a single-point *Vergleich* and a multi-part *Gleichnis* (though in fact Hermine herself employs the generic term, *Vergleich*, for both utterances). Although Ludwig's figure of speech is not a precise formal match for the paradigmatic type of longer Homeric simile, I would like to use it as a preliminary test-case of some of the special issues raised by similes which entail an expansion of thought and imagination beyond a single point of contact. The first thing one might notice is that Wittgenstein's comparison (in this respect, not accidentally, like his sister's) is entirely hypothetical, a point only thinly disguised by the locution 'you remind me ...' ('Du erinnerst mich'), a locution which artfully but disingenuously contrives to suggest that what is being pictured is an experience of a familiar kind. Now, any particular simile may or may not draw on observable domains of actuality, but it is at least equally important that it can purport to do so even when the impression of familiarity is an (artful) illusion. More specifically, even when individual components of the source of a simile *are* familiar (a window, the view of someone in the street, the weather outside), it does not follow that the perspective embodied in the simile as a whole merits that description. On the contrary, in the present instance (and often, I believe, in Homer) the ostensibly familiar serves a sort of *de*familiarisation, a provocation to ordinary habits of thought and perception. I am adapting here Viktor Shklovsky's famous concept of *ostranenie,* often, of course, translated as 'estrangement'. But the estrangement I am positing is two-way, operating on both sides of a comparison, though asymmetrically. Anyone who claimed that Wittgenstein's simile draws on an 'everyday' world, on the grounds that people do indeed frequently stand and look out of windows (and occasionally misconstrue what they see outside), would be sadly wide of the

mark. Likewise, the tenet, both ancient and modern (and one which appears, sometimes problematically, in both descriptive and normative modes), that similes are designed to illuminate what is less well known with the help of what is better known, is, at most, a partial and contingent truth. It should be treated with caution, even when advanced, explicitly *à propos* Homer, by ancient critics from Aristotle via Aristarchus to Eustathius.

Wittgenstein's imagined scenario is, in fact, not only hypothetical but unrealistic, yet in an expressively crafted manner: it would be very peculiar to stand at a window and be unable to recognise that there is a storm raging outside and impinging on those in the street below. This is a creatively fictional scenario, something that a longer simile has the intrinsic potential to develop. It is also, in the sense I wish to employ, perspectival: it frames an imagined situation for focussed attention from a certain vantage-point, though it is crucial to notice that the simile's perspective is not that of the Hermine-figure herself, positioned at the window, but that of an 'eye' which observes both her and the street scene, looking over her shoulder, as it were, though also able to comprehend the entire visual field, outside as well as inside, in a way she herself cannot do. Finally, Wittgenstein's simile, whose illocutionary force is evidently didactic, achieves its purposes by one kind of cross-modal matching, here almost to the point of allegory: the *physical* components of the image (the window, the street, the storm) have to be understood as carriers of *psychological* meaning, even though those meanings are not already present in the components as such but are creatively brought into being by the simile itself. To suppose, however, that all extended similes lead in the direction of allegory (the παραβολή as 'parable', if you like), or that they bring with them a systematically decodable symbolism, would be a dangerous demand to make, and it is no part of my intention to go down that road.

The points I have made about the exchange between Wittgenstein and his sister have tried obliquely to broach a number of issues germane to extended Homeric similes as well, though, needless to say, the analysis I have sketched does not profess to provide a model that can be transferred directly to the interpretation of the Greek material itself. It is not my aim, in any case, to propose anything as ambitious (or misguided) as a unitary poetics of the longer Homeric simile, only to offer some selective reflections which will bypass numerous questions relating to the ancestry, distribution, thematic typology, and formal construction of the similes. But before proceeding to discuss some individual examples, I want to draw attention – albeit with extreme brevity – to a triad of critical presuppositions to which this lecture will constitute a small act of resistance. Attitudes to Homeric similes have a long and tangled history, but three particular phases of that history – in antiquity itself, in the early modern period, and in the twentieth century – have been especially influential in shaping prevailing critical paradigms. My first point is that in the mainstream ancient tradition of criticism (Roman as well as Greek), the evaluation of similes became caught up in a tension between poetic and rhetorical standards of judgement, resulting in a great deal of both terminological and conceptual instability regarding figures of comparison. The pressure of rhetorically inflected criticism was directed towards the containment of similes within the logic of transparent likeness, but with an accompanying if somewhat uncomfortable recognition (found, for instance, in Aristotle, Demetrius, and Quintilian) that elaborate poetic

similes in the Homeric tradition operate in less easily containable or codifiable ways. That recognition was partially if inconsistently attached to the term παραβολή (to which the Latin *collatio* is sometimes equivalent), a term which signals the fact that a multi-component simile may juxtapose ideas or images for more dialectical purposes than appeal to fixed resemblance or the strict correlation of matching elements.

So that is my first historical reference-point: the contamination of the poetics of Homeric similes by the pragmatics of rhetorical considerations. The bias of rhetorical criticism continued, or was revived, in the early modern period, encouraging the application of rigidly conceived standards of 'relevance'. But something else was now added to it. The status of Homeric similes became a specific bone of contention in the Quarrel of the Ancients and Moderns, a quarrel to whose cultural antagonisms we are still heirs. For Charles Perrault, one of the leading 'moderns', longer similes such as Paris's comparison of Hector's heart to the hardness of a shipwright's axe in *Iliad* book 3, or the narrator's comparison of Menelaus's bloodied leg to the exquisite workmanship of a stained ivory cheek-piece for a horse in book 4, seemed ridiculously inept – not for their starting-points (because those could be justified, Perrault thought, by the rational logic of likeness: a heart as hard as an axe; blood like dark purple dye), but for their 'long tails', as Perrault famously made his spokesman call them (in the third volume of the *Parallèle des anciens et des modernes*). Perrault was trenchantly answered by Nicolas Boileau and in turn by Joseph Addison in his *Spectator* essays on Milton, both of whom rejected the narrowness of Perrault's criteria of poetic understanding. These are merely token references to what expanded into an extraordinarily sustained 18th century literature on the nature of similes. The essential point for my purposes is that the *Querelle* did lasting damage by creating a prejudice that Homeric similes, for all their occasional beauties, were the product of a primitive stage of human culture, a supposition which played a larger role in 18th century discussions of Homer. Primitivism, admittedly, is a double-edged movement of thought in this period. On the positive side, it could be harnessed to the idea of Homer as an original, sublime genius. But its implications for similes (and not for those alone) can also be limiting, tending towards the view that they manifest an unruly crudity, as even Vico sometimes claimed. Traces of primitivist prejudice have a long, lingering afterlife. They can still be seen even in Hermann Fränkel's book of 1921 on the similes, where explicit appeal is made to the putative mental peculiarities of 'der primitive Mensch', as well as, less surprisingly, in Bruno Snell's discussion of similes in *The Discovery of the Mind*. I say 'less surprisingly', but Fränkel was one of Snell's teachers: there is a connection here.

The final layer in this very condensed stratigraphy of critical attitudes to Homeric similes is the most recent. Similes have inevitably been a topic of some salience in the ongoing debates generated by the wave of oralist scholarship which has followed in the wake of Milman Parry's work. My concern here is not with the general axioms of oral theory as the basis for producing either historical hypotheses or analytical models for the processes of composition and transmission by which the Homeric epics came into being. But the critical issues raised by extended similes (though not by these alone) make it essential for me to state a position on the question: can oral theory yield a full-blown oral *poetics*, in the sense of a set of regulative

principles of interpretation and evaluation? My view is that it cannot, for two fundamental reasons: first, because it is a version of the genetic fallacy to suppose that the way in which poetry is composed predetermines or forecloses the range of ways in which poetic meaning and value are constituted; secondly, because attempts to construct an oral poetics in the sense defined (i.e., an oral hermeneutics) are themselves filtered through processes of *reading* on the part of their proponents and thereby succumb to a kind of circularity. I remain sceptical, therefore, about a number of recent oralist claims to the effect that Homeric similes encode, and need to be understood in the light of, distinctively oral operations of memory, cognition, or imagination. Such claims run the (unconscious) risk of turning into a kind of neo-primitivism.

Having explained, then, that this lecture incorporates an act of resistance to three types of critical attitude – a rhetorical bias which tries to impose a strict logic of likeness on the simile; the primitivism promoted by the 17th- and 18th-century Moderns and some of their successors; and attempts to subject similes to a distinctively oral hermeneutics – it is time to turn now to some Homeric examples in their own right. Central to my approach is what I am calling the perspectivist capacity of the extended simile to achieve something more than the orthodox idea (anchored in ancient rhetoric, reinforced by the Moderns' demand for transparent resemblance, and recently restated by some oralists) of helping audiences to mentally visualise certain narrative contexts. Rather than limiting similes to a clarificatory function, we can discover in them more complex schemata of poetic thought and imagination. The framing of a double image within the παραβολή does not automatically elucidate a given narrative moment but opens up a special angle or direction of contemplation. Similes have their own aesthetic, and it is one in which comparison can contain within it a sort of affective dissociation.

I have chosen my first example [**H3**] partly with a view to making a kind of bridge with the Wittgensteinian simile I discussed a few minutes ago. At the start of *Iliad* book 14, Nestor emerges from his hut, aroused by the growing noise of battle, to observe an 'ugly state of affairs' (ἔργον ἄεικες) as the Trojan advance imperils the Greek wall. The anxious uncertainty this triggers in him (i.e., whether to join the fighting or to seek out Agamemnon) is represented by a simile of the sea in a state of heavy foreboding:

> ὡς δ᾽ ὅτε πορφύρηι πέλαγος μέγα κύματι κωφῶι
> ὀσσόμενον λιγέων ἀνέμων λαιψηρὰ κέλευθα
> αὔτως, οὐδ᾽ ἄρα τε προκυλίνδεται οὐδετέρωσε,
> πρίν τινα κεκριμένον καταβήμεναι ἐκ Διὸς οὖρον,
> ὣς ὃ γέρων ὥρμαινε, δαϊζόμενος κατὰ θυμὸν
> διχθάδι᾽, ...

Although the simile is unusual in a number of respects (including several linguistic features which I do not need to itemise here), it is characteristic of Homeric practice in opening up a sudden shift of perspective by means of a radically cross-modal combination of elements: in the present case, the superimposition of an expansive image of a seascape onto the fraught

interiority of a mind under severe pressure. The sea momentarily becomes a model of the mind, but the mind turned inside out, as it were: objectified in inanimate nature. It is important, however, that while compellingly evocative, the simile's seascape does not represent a simple or immediately obvious category of phenomenon. The kind of groundswell it describes might be readily recognised by those well versed in the ways of the sea, but it is not couched in terms of the universally obvious. (I note in passing that this point is accidentally confirmed by Hermann Fränkel's rather pedantic comment that the description of the waves as directionless is a distortion of strict marine facts.) The waves are at the same time heaving and yet somehow immobilised, as well as somehow 'mute', in that unique phrase, κύματι κωφῶι: a point which arguably reinforces the distance from which an implied observer views things. Since, on the other hand, an acute psychological dilemma is itself an entirely familiar type of experience, we can hardly say that the simile illuminates what is less known with what is more known – almost the reverse, in fact. It is pertinent here that in all its other Homeric occurrences, namely in formulaic phrasing found once in the *Iliad* and three times in the *Odyssey*, the originally physical sense of the verb πορφύρειν is a psychological metaphor. But while this might justify us in detecting in the word's application to the sea (as also with ὀσσόμενον) a faint hint, if not of personification, then of quasi-humanisation, that only serves to heighten the overall pull of the simile in the opposite direction: the translation of psychological and emotional turmoil into a magnified but distanced vision of non-human nature. The simile does not take us inside Nestor's mind; the narrative itself does that. Instead, it fleetingly equates the mind with a play of forces much larger than the individual person – making it, if anything, harder not easier to comprehend.

The importance of effects of aesthetic distancing and emotional dissociation seems to me to have been underestimated in the abundant scholarship on Homeric similes. The element of distance can take various forms, but as a convenient principle of selection for the present occasion I am concentrating on a just a few cases in which a perspective of physical distance is an explicit factor. (Even that principle of selection draws in too much for a single lecture; I am leaving aside some major examples, including the magnificent comparison of the light from Achilles' shield to a fire burning in an isolated farmstead on a mountainside and observed by sailors at sea: *Iliad* 19.375-9.) Take as a relatively simple example the first of the long series of similes preceding the catalogue of ships in *Iliad* 2 [**H4**], where the gleam from the bronze armour of the Greeks is compared to a forest fire on a mountain range:

> ἠΰτε πῦρ ἀΐδηλον ἐπιφλέγει ἄσπετον ὕλην
> οὔρεος ἐν κορυφῆις, ἔκαθεν δέ τε φαίνεται αὐγή,
> ὣς τῶν ἐρχομένων ἀπὸ χαλκοῦ θεσπεσίοιο
> αἴγλη παμφανόωσα δι᾽ αἰθέρος οὐρανὸν ἷκεν.

Here the simile's distance-perspective (I shall look later at other instances of the adverb ἔκαθεν) is coupled with a characteristic reference to the atmospheric diffusion of light. At the same time, the phrase οὔρεος ἐν κορυφῆις implies a rising vista seen from below. But this is paradoxically the opposite of the adjacent narrative statement that the light from the army shone high up to the sky: the simile draws on an awareness of distance-viewing but requires

its audience to invert its perspective by imagining, or at least conceiving of, the battlefield as perceived from above. Angles of vision are thematically important in the *Iliad* in general, and to some extent in the *Odyssey* too, though with differences that reflect the different topographies of the two narratives (we shall soon see examples of this). The gods, of course, paradigmatically see the (human) world from above, often directly from mountain-tops; and theirs is a kind of viewing which, when in operation, is *both* panoramic and detailed. (If Zeus had been a painter, he might have painted like Bruegel.) Such viewing is also instantaneous, as when, for instance, Zeus watches keenly in *Iliad* book 15 in expectation of seeing the flames from the first Greek ship to be set alight, or Poseidon in *Odyssey* book 5, returning from Aethiopia, catches sight of Odysseus's raft floating in the far distance – optically far-fetched, indeed, but dramatically incisive. Iliadic humans, by contrast, typically see the world, whether on land or sea, either on their own horizontal level (where many obstacles obscure their view, not least in the confusions of the battlefield) or else rising up above them into mountains and sky. It is only in the expanded spaces and distances of similes that they are sometimes temporarily positioned at a higher vantage-point.

A particularly striking instance of a simile combining distance with height – this one belonging to the special category of comparisons of measure within a single domain – is the passage in *Iliad* 5 [**H5**] which accompanies the brief journey of the divine chariot carrying Hera and Athena down from Olympus to the battlefield, where they intend to drive Ares out of the fight. The simile is famously quoted in a section of the treatise *On the Sublime* which Martin West discussed enlighteningly in his article 'Longinus and the Grandeur of God'. But pseudo-Longinus, who comments that given the size of stride of the gods' horses, a second stride would take them outside the bounds of the cosmos, was righly criticised by Edward Gibbon, who, despite his general admiration for the treatise, objected [**H6**]: 'To what faculty does the visible horizon appear above half the world? To the eyes it appears the whole; to the understanding, and even to the imagination, a very small part.' Gibbon's attunement to Homer's simile is, I think, more sensitive than Longinus's extravagant hyperbole, which strikes a platonising note in a Homeric context to which it is alien. The Homeric passage defines the sheer disparity of scale between divine action and human experience, but it does so from inside a fully human framework of perception, not in order to evoke thoughts of the extra-cosmic (which are particularly inappropriate where the gods' horses are bringing them down from Olympus to the Trojan plain). That framework incorporates a simultaneous awareness of distance and indeterminacy; the field of vision of someone gazing across the sea from a high rock takes in both expanse and indistinctness, and the adjective (or, rather, the adverb) ἠεροειδές, with its suggestion of an atmospheric quality, is a salient marker in this respect. Primitivist prejudices should not make us worry that we might be in danger here of projecting a post-Romantic sensibility onto the epic context: elsewhere in Homer, it hardly needs saying, the act of gazing across the sea carries the deepest psychological resonance for the central figures of both epics. In the present simile from book 5, the viewer on the rock is anyone or no one. But the aesthetic perspective of the simile involves a mental conception that is not that of the figure as such but of the mind that translates the gaze of that viewer into a sense of what lies beyond the scale of human cognition or comprehension. That is one

variety of a characteristic Homeric perspectivism – a perspectivism embedded in a matrix of Iliadic motifs relating to differences between vision from above and below, from near and far.

While such motifs have some presence in the *Odyssey* as well, the latter contains similes – many fewer extended ones, of course, than the *Iliad* – which draw on the poem's distinctive feeling for landscape and location. One of the most interesting of these is found at the point in book 9 where Odysseus and his men have just moored on the shore of the Cyclopes' land and can see Polyphemus's cave high up on the rocks above them, but have not yet set eyes on the monster himself. Odysseus's narrative, however, incorporates a simile which appears to tell us, proleptically, what Polyphemus looked like [**H7**]:

> καὶ γὰρ θαῦμ᾽ ἐτέτυκτο πελώριον, οὐδὲ ἐώικει
> ἀνδρί γε σιτοφάγωι, ἀλλὰ ῥίωι ὑλήεντι
> ὑψηλῶν ὀρέων, ὅ τε φαίνεται οἶον ἀπ᾽ ἄλλων.

But what is this vignette of a wooded mountain peak, standing out in lonely isolation, showing or telling us? Evidently not a strictly perceptual match for Polyphemus. Rather, it superimposes an image of landscape onto the idea of a monstrous but humanoid body (Polyphemus has been called an ἀνήρ ... πελώριος just before this simile) and thereby constructs a special perspective which stretches the imagination rather than straightforwardly illuminating the unknown with the known. Landscape and its possible meanings are fundamental to this whole episode; the significance of the entire Cyclops story depends on the ironic coexistence of monstrosity with the conditions of pastoralism. Odysseus has already given a long, rich description of the small, low-lying adjacent island, full of potential for human settlers yet inhabited only by wild goats, where he and his men had arrived in the dark of night, had hunted and feasted the next day, and had sat gazing across at the Cyclopes' land, where they could see smoke rising and hear the bleating of sheep and goats. When they cross to the Cyclopes' land, they have mountains looming over them and there is a repeated emphasis on looking up from below; the occurrence of the adjective ὑψηλός in line 192 is the third in just ten lines. So the effect of Odysseus's simile is not to supply a visually informative analogue for Polyphemus's appearance but to convert him into a piece of the landscape he inhabits – a high crag clearly marked in its isolation by the same word (οἶος) used a few lines earlier for the character's *social* isolation. It is worth adding that the simile at 191-2 carries the main weight of the entire narrative's evocation of Polyphemus's physical form. When he does eventually appear in the cave, there is a conspicuous silence about his physiognomy (with the exception of a further reference to his massive bulk, as well as his deep voice, at 257); no attempt is made, there or elsewhere, to provide general details of his appearance. The simile, precisely by its perspectival overwriting of Polyphemus's body with the stark image of a landscape, has done something that an explicit 'portrait' could not do.

A related point can be made about a much-discussed simile – perhaps the best known in the whole poem – from a very different Odyssean context, the encounter between the disguised Odysseus and Penelope in the flickering light of the fire in book 19. This is the famous moment where Odysseus has employed an artful interweaving of truth and fiction – for him,

we might even say, a piece of metafiction, described in Homeric terms as 'falsehoods like the truth' (ψεύδεα ... ἐτύμοισιν ὁμοῖα) – in order to test his wife and reduce her to a display of grief which testifies to her faithful memories of her husband. So much has been written about the resulting simile [**H8**], a great deal of it preoccupied with the repeated vocabulary of 'melting' (with some form of the verb τήκειν occurring in four successive lines), that I want to limit myself to just one observation. The simile compares Penelope's tears, as no one needs reminding, to the melting of snow on mountain tops and the resulting rivers that run down the mountainside. Critics have been so understandably interested in (though scarcely in complete agreement about) the implications of the passage for Penelope's psychology that the paradoxical quality of the simile, which sets up a perspective markedly dissociated from Odysseus's own position, tends not to receive the attention it deserves. Odysseus, sitting directly opposite or next to Penelope (παρήμενον), is confronted by a human face which he scrutinises, as we are told, with unflinching 'eyes of horn or iron; the closeness of vision could hardly be more intense. What the audience is required to conceive of, however, is a weeping face overwritten with a large-scale landscape vista (a vista, as also in many Iliadic instances, seen from below). That vista, which replaces closeness with distance and the human with the non-human, does not and cannot tell us anything that we do not already know about a weeping face. What the simile makes available, cognitively and affectively, is a meaning that arises from the interplay between two images of disparate scale, character, and context, so that the logic of resemblance is far outweighed by the powerful shift of focus from inner anguish to the vast workings of nature across a whole landscape. This is a feature which the simile has in common with many others in Homer, and not just with two cases (those of Agamemnon and Patroclus in the *Iliad*) where profuse tears are compared to a dark-water spring running down a rockface. The imaginative movement of thought effected by the simile – from the almost claustrophobic human scenario in the firelight of the hall to the expansive view of a mountain range – exploits a perspective of physical distance to generate a temporary estrangement from the all-too-emotional immediacy of the situation itself.

In connection with the proposition that Homeric similes can self-consciously exploit perspectival movements of thought, this is as good a place as any to recall that the *Iliad* contains a remarkable simile which itself centres on a sense of the mind as something like a traveller in virtual space. I am referring to the passage in book 15 [**H9**] which gives a special twist to the no doubt very old notion of action 'as swift as thought' by comparing Hera's almost instantaneous translocation from Ida to Olympus with the passage of a person's mind from his present location to places previously visited. (Martin West drew attention to the Indo-European ancestry of the 'swift as thought' motif in his *Indo-European Poetry and Myth*. But in *The Making of the Iliad* he also detected in this simile an autobiographical clue to the travels of the master-poet himself.) While drawing attention to the human inability to transcend the limitations of distance in the way that gods can, the simile nonetheless provides, in miniature, a model of the mind's capacity to move round the world in its own way and hold together simultaneous thoughts of different times and places, darting between them (ἀΐσσειν) in its virtual space. Here, then, we have an acute poetic awareness of self-orientating perspectivism as a mental phenomenon in its own right – and an awareness enacted in a figure of thought whose *raison d'être*, so I am arguing, is itself often expressively perspectival.

For the final part of my argument, I would like to return to some Iliadic cases of similes which, as with the image of the forest fire on a mountainside in book 2, have a factor of distance-viewing integrated within them. I want to glance fairly quickly at four further examples, two of them in book 4. The first of these [**H10**] is a rare instance of a simile anticipated or triggered by a metaphor, in this case the 'cloud' (νέφος) of footsoldiers accompanying the two Ajaxes as they take up their stations for battle. The comparison is with storm-clouds seen approaching over the sea by a goatherd. But the goatherd, unlike the Trojans whose fearful vision of the Greek phalanx some critics take him to focalise, occupies a high vantage-point on a mountainside; he is able to take evasive action by ushering his herd into a nearby cave, and is in any case, as both a lone and a lowly pastoral figure, an incongruous comparandum for battlefield experience. To see such incongruities either as symptoms of a mere ornamentalism or as concomitants of the supposedly peculiar mental processes of oral composition (as some scholars have done) is to eliminate the effect of aesthetic bifocality, so to speak, which similes carry with them. The goatherd is certainly no symbolic surrogate for a Trojan leader, a 'shepherd of the people': this reading was rightly repudiated in Jachmann's vituperative critique of Hermann Fränkel, but I mention this in order to stress that the choice in general between Fränkel's allegorico-symbolist inclinations and Jachmann's myopic fixation with a single *tertium comparationis* represents a false dichotomy which has recurrently blighted the poetics of the simile. In the present case, the juxtaposition of metaphorical and literal dark clouds renders the goatherd's status and anxieties a foil to the life-and-death matters of war. But it is essential that the simile places the audience of the poem in a position which is not simply that of the goatherd himself: the spatial and optical coordinates of the latter's situation are not an exact template for the aesthetic distance of the audience's imaginative response to the events of the narrative.

Later in book 4, just after the fighting has started, another pastoral figure appears in another simile to which the idea of distance is important [**H11**]. This time the effect of dissociation between the narrative theme and the simile's source is all the more salient, given that the bloodshed on the battlefield prompts a comparison to winter torrents flooding down a mountain into a ravine and generating a roar audible from afar by a shepherd. For those who think of Homeric battle narrative, as ancient critics and rhetoricians typically did, in terms of an arena put before us with intense ἐνάργεια, the present simile paradoxically creates a perspective at two removes from the clashing shields and spears, as well as the flow of blood, described in the preceding lines. The comparison modulates abruptly from the close-up detail of the fighting (a scene of those 'killing and being killed', ὀλλύντων τε καὶ ὀλλυμένων) to the distant impression of a dynamic act of nature, and, in a second movement of thought, that natural phenomenon becomes heard without being seen. Those two aspects of the simile's element of perspectival separation mirror on a small scale the aesthetic status of heroic narrative *tout ensemble*. Similes often complicate Homeric ἐνάργεια: they do not simply contribute to or authenticate it.

In the simile of the forest fire in *Iliad* 2 which we looked at earlier [**H2**], the adverb ἔκαθεν is an explicit marker of distance-perspective. This same adverb is found in only two other Iliadic passages, both of them similes. In book 13 [**H12**], the death of Priam's son-in-law

Imbrios at the hands of Teucer is compared to the felling of an ash tree high up on a mountain. ἔκαθεν here qualifies the verb περιφαίνεσθαι in its unique Iliadic occurrence: an observation point (or, rather, a possible multiplicity of such points), gazing up from a distance, is built into the simile. One feature of importance, consequently, is the way in which the simile shifts from the gruesomely close-up, face-to-face detail of the narrative (Teucer had plunged his spear into Imbrios's head 'below his ear') to the panoramic image of a mountain-top visible from far and wide, and concomitantly from the crowded battlefield to an open, elevated location. Moreover, and as so often, the simile affords a perspective that is quite different from that of the agents themselves. We do not see Imbrios's fall as Teucer sees it. Instead, we are given an aestheticised frame within which to contemplate it. If that frame is filled out by details which are obliquely suggestive of correlations between the two phenomena (the heavy crashing sound that accompanies the fall of both warrior and tree, and the delicate hint of an equivalence between the tree's foliage and the warrior's fine-wrought armour, τεύχεα ποικίλα), it remains nonetheless characteristic in reaching beyond the logic of likeness and opening up a sense of separation that is both physical and defamiliarising. The image of the felled tree momentarily blocks out the grievous significance of the human killing while simultaneously inviting at least an intuitive sense of what connects the two kinds of extinction. Many of you will recall the more pointed equivalences of a simile not on the handout, the one attached to the death of Simoeisios in book 4: born on a river bank, we are told, he is imaged as a tall tree seen first from below but then observed lying on a river bank itself. The simile returns the man, as it were, to his place of birth, but stripped – both literally and metaphorically – of his humanity.

In the final Iliadic simile which contains the adverb ἔκαθεν **[H13]**, the element of spatial separation functions in conjunction with a feature we encountered in book 4's image of the shepherd who hears the sound of mountain torrents without being able to see the rivers themselves. Here, in book 16's simile for the battle that rages over the body of Sarpedon, we have a sonic connection which, once again, estranges the source-domain from the narrative theme (the vehicle from the tenor, if you prefer that terminology) in the ostensible act of aligning them. The sound of the clashing warriors' shields and spears arises within a narrative immersed in the events it describes, so that the simile of the sounds of woodcutting heard from far away in the mountains involves a reversal of aural perspective. If we were to rationalise the simile by taking it to mean (what it does not strictly say) that the din of battle, if heard from afar, would resemble the sounds of distant woodcutting, we would still be obliged to infer that it provides a cue to understand the battle scene not in its own, immediate terms (i.e. those of the surrounding narrative) but with a dissociative aesthetic that strips out the human horror of the fighting: to suppose, with some scholars, that the simile creates the impression of 'being there', evoking the actual noise of battle, seems to me, at least, the opposite of the truth. The effect of dissociation is all the stronger for being a precarious, momentary thought, before the narrative returns to a close-focus image of the state of Sarpedon's corpse, covered from head to foot, to the point of unrecognisability, in blood and dirt. And it reinforces this, as you will remember, with a further simile which I do not have time to dwell on here, one of the most remarkable of all in the Homeric epics and a supreme test-case for the poetics of similes – the comparison of the warriors round Sarpedon's body to

flies round brimming milk-pails in spring. Nowhere, perhaps, is the demand that similes should conform to a transparent logic of predetermined likeness, rather than carrying with them their own expressive frames of reference, more flagrantly defied. And yet for those who appreciate the simile's double effect of estrangement, combined with its visual miniaturisation, it encapsulates the tragic irony at the heart of the entire *Iliad*.

I have been engaged in this lecture, both explicitly and implicitly, with the history and implications of certain critical attitudes to extended Homeric similes. But I would like to conclude with the thought that those similes also have an 'alternative' history – a history outside criticism: namely, their complex reception within poetry itself. The poets tell a very different story from the critics, and unlike the latter they understand the similes from inside, so to speak, with creative impulses towards both emulation and renewal. We should trust the poets more than the critics. But this point reaches well beyond the mainstream epic tradition itself, which has conspicuously maintained the extended simile as a hallmark of generic identity and of genealogical pride in Homeric ancestry. Lyric poets too have found ways of incorporating versions of epic similes in their own work, thereby instinctively recognising that in its Homeric elaborations the simile was already tacitly lyric in nature. The process is already visible as early as sixth-century Greece and has continued right up to the present. It would be easy here to reach for Alice Oswald's *Memorial* (2015), which is the *ne plus ultra* in this respect, since it extracts many of the *Iliad*'s similes and turns them into lyric fragments of a new skeletal version of the poem. But the history of lyric appropriations, adaptations and reconfigurations of the Homeric simile is still waiting to be written, even if the dimensions of the task, including languages other than English, would require a heroic degree of scholarship and critical acumen. One of the things such a hypothetical history might discover is the allure of the simile's distinctive capacity to create the kind of doubleness of vision which I have been discussing here in terms of perspectivism. Let me end, then, with a single example which is itself strikingly perspectival, and in ways which echo a number of themes touched on in this lecture, but at the same time an illustration of how lyric can stretch the form and logic of the simile into parallel worlds of 'as if' while still retaining subtle threads of connection with an ultimately Homeric paradigm. In the eponymous poem 'Seeing Things' from Seamus Heaney's 1991 collection, the poet's persona recalls childhood experiences of acute anxiety at family journeys in a small boat off the coast of Ireland:

> All the time
> As we went sailing evenly across
> The deep, still, seeable-down-into water,
> It was as if I looked from another boat
> Sailing through air, far up, and could see
> How riskily we fared into the morning.

One is entitled to feel that in these lines, across a vast distance of time (though one of poetry's functions is, in a sense, to collapse such distance), the spirit of the Homeric simile is still alive yet simultaneously transformed into the source of something searchingly new.

Perspectivism and the Homeric Simile
(Stephen Halliwell, Martin West Memorial Lecture, Oxford, 1st March 2019)

[*Note*: Homeric quotations follow Martin West's own editions, *Homeri Ilias* (2 vols., 1998-2000), *Homerus Odyssea* (2017). Translations of the *Iliad* are taken from Caroline Alexander's 2015 version, which is based on West's text and was endorsed by him. Translations of the *Odyssey* are from Richmond Lattimore's version (1965).]

1. 'You remind me of somebody who is looking out through a closed window and cannot explain to himself the strange movements of a passer-by. He cannot tell what sort of storm is raging out there or that this person might only be managing with difficulty to stay on his feet.' Hermine Wittgenstein, 'My Brother Ludwig', in R. Rhees (ed.), *Recollections of Wittgenstein*, rev. edn. (Oxford 1984) p. 4; see the 1st edn. (1981) p. 88 for the original German text.

2. Charles Perrault, *Parallèle des anciens et des modernes*, vol. 3 (1692) pp. 57-70; Nicolas Boileau, *Refléxions critiques sur quelques passages du rhéteur Longin* (1694) §6; Joseph Addison, *The Spectator*, no. 303 (Feb. 16, 1712).

3. ὡς δ᾽ ὅτε πορφύρηι πέλαγος μέγα κύματι κωφῶι
ὀσσόμενον λιγέων ἀνέμων λαιψηρὰ κέλευθα
αὔτως, οὐδ᾽ ἄρα τε προκυλίνδεται οὐδ᾽ ἐτέρωσε
πρίν τινα κεκριμένον καταβήμεναι ἐκ Διὸς οὖρον,
ὣς ὁ γέρων ὥρμαινε, δαϊζόμενος κατὰ θυμόν
διχθάδι᾽, ... (*Il*. 14.16-21)
As when the great deep sea shimmers dark with silent swell
foreboding the swift passage of shrill winds
but does not break, rolling neither forward nor aside,
until some fair deciding wind descends from Zeus above,
so the old man deliberated, his heart torn
two ways, ...

4. ἠΰτε πῦρ ἀΐδηλον ἐπιφλέγει ἄσπετον ὕλην
οὔρεος ἐν κορυφῆις, ἔκαθεν δέ τε φαίνεται αὐγή,
ὣς τῶν ἐρχομένων ἀπὸ χαλκοῦ θεσπεσίοιο
αἴγλη παμφανόωσα δι᾽ αἰθέρος οὐρανὸν ἶκεν. (*Il*. 2.455-8)
As when obliterating fire rages through an immense forest
on the mountain height, and from afar the flare shows forth,
so the gleam from the sublime bronze of marching men
glinting through the clear sky reached heaven.

5. ὅσσον δ᾽ ἠεροειδὲς ἀνὴρ ἴδεν ὀφθαλμοῖσιν
ἥμενος ἐν σκοπιῆι, λεύσσων ἐπὶ οἴνοπα πόντον,
τόσσον ἐπιθρώισκουσι θεῶν ὑψηχέες ἵπποι. (*Il*. 5.770-2)
As far as a man can see with his eyes into the haze of distance
as he sits on a peak, looking on sea as dark as wine,
so far the horses of the gods leapt in one stride, thundering on high.

6. Gibbon, journal for Oct. 3rd, 1762 (in *The Miscellaneous Works of Edward Gibbon*, ed. Lord Sheffield, one-volume edn., London 1837, p. 450).

7. καὶ γὰρ θαῦμ᾽ ἐτέτυκτο πελώριον, οὐδὲ ἐώικει
ἀνδρί γε σιτοφάγωι, ἀλλὰ ῥίωι ὑλήεντι
ὑψηλῶν ὀρέων, ὅ τε φαίνεται οἷον ἀπ᾽ ἄλλων. (*Od*. 9.190-2)
... and in truth he was a monstrous wonder made to behold, not
like a man, an eater of bread, but more like a wooded
peak of the high mountains seen standing away from the others.

8. τῆς δ᾽ ἄρ᾽ ἀκουούσης ῥέε δάκρυα, τήκετο δὲ χρώς.
ὡς δὲ χιὼν κατατήκετ᾽ ἐν ἀκροπόλοισιν ὄρεσσιν
ἣν τ᾽ Εὖρος κατέτηξεν, ἐπὴν Ζέφυρος καταχεύηι,
τηκομένης δ᾽ ἄρα τῆς ποταμοὶ πλήθουσι ῥέοντες,
ὣς τῆς τήκετο καλὰ παρήϊα δάκρυ χεούσης, ... (*Od*. 19.204-8)

As she listened her tears ran and her body was melted,
as the snow melts along the high places of the mountains
when the West Wind has piled it there, but the South [*sic*] Wind melts it,
and as it melts the rivers run full flood. It was even
so that her beautiful cheeks were streaming tears ...

9. ὡς δ᾽ ὅτ᾽ ἂν ἀΐξῃι νόος ἀνέρος, ὅς τ᾽ ἐπὶ πολλὴν
γαῖαν ἐληλουθὼς φρεσὶ πευκαλίμῃισι νοήσῃι,
“ἔνθ᾽ εἴην, ἠ᾽ ἔνθα”, μενοινήσί τε πολλά,
ὣς κραιπνῶς μεμαυῖα διέπτατο πότνια Ἥρη. (*Il*. 15.80-3)
As when a man’s thought flashes, after he has travelled
much land, and in his sharp mind he thinks:
“Would that I were in this place or that,” and he wishes for many things,
so swiftly did lady Hera fly in anxious haste.

10. ὡς δ᾽ ὅτ᾽ ἀπὸ σκοπιῆς εἶδεν νέφος αἰπόλος ἀνήρ
ἐρχόμενον κατὰ πόντον ὑπὸ Ζεφύροιο ἰωῆς,
τῶι δέ τ᾽ ἄνευθεν ἐόντι μελάντερον ἠΰτε πίσσα
φαίνετ᾽ ἰὸν κατὰ πόντον, ἄγει δέ τε λαίλαπα πολλήν,
ῥίγησέν τε ἰδών, ὑπό τε σπέος ἤλασε μῆλα,
τοῖαι ἅμ᾽ Αἰάντεσσι διοτρεφέων αἰζηῶν
δήϊον ἐς πόλεμον πυκιναὶ κίνυντο φάλαγγες
κυάνεαι ... (*Il*. 4.275-82)
[A]s when a goat-herding man watches a cloud from a mountain peak
when it bears down over the sea by the power of the West Wind’s blast,
and, being far away, to him it seems blacker than pitch
as it moves over the sea, and carries a great tempest with it,
and he shudders seeing it, and drives his flocks into a cave,
just so did the dark ranks of young men cherished by Zeus move with the two Aiantes
close-pressed to war’s destruction ...

11. ὡς δ᾽ ὅτε χείμαρροι ποταμοὶ κατ᾽ ὄρεσφι ῥέοντες
ἐς μισγάγκειαν συμβάλλετον ὄβριμον ὕδωρ
κρουνῶν ἐκ μεγάλων κοίλης ἔντοσθε χαράδρης,
τῶν δέ τε τηλόσε δοῦπον ἐν οὔρεσιν ἔκλυε ποιμήν,
ὣς τῶν μισγομένων γένετο ἰαχή τε φόβος τε. (*Il*. 4.452-6)
As when rivers in winter torrent, flooding down from a mountain
to where valleys meet, hurl together their heavy weight of water,
fed from mighty springs within a cleft ravine,
and to a long distance a shepherd hears their roaring in the mountains –
such was the shouting and panic of men as they came together.

12. τόν ῥ᾽ υἱὸς Τελαμῶνος ὑπ᾽ οὔατος ἔγχεϊ μακρῶι
νύξ᾽, ἐκ δ᾽ ἔσπασεν ἔγχος· ὃ δ᾽ αὖτ᾽ ἔπεσεν μελίη ὥς,
ἥ τ᾽ ὄρεος κορυφῆι ἔκαθεν περιφαινομένοιο
χαλκῶι ταμνομένη τέρενα χθονὶ φύλλα πελάσσηι. (*Il*. 13.177-80)
This man the son of Telamon stabbed with his long spear beneath the ears,
then wrenched the spear out; and Imbrios fell back like an ash tree,
which, on the peak of a mountain conspicuous from far around,
felled by a bronze axe brings its tender leaves to touch the ground.

13. τῶν δ᾽, ὥς τε δρυτόμων ἀνδρῶν ὀρυμαγδὸς ὀρώρεν
οὔρεος ἐν βήσσῃς, ἔκαθεν δέ τε γίνετ᾽ ἀκουή,
ὣς τῶν ὤρνυτο δοῦπος ἀπὸ χθονὸς εὐρυοδείης
χαλκοῦ τε ῥινοῦ τε βοῶν τ᾽ εὐποιητάων, ... (*Il*. 16.633-6)
And as the clangor of woodcutting men is raised
in the glens of a mountain, and is heard from far away,
so from the wide-wayed earth arose the pounding of men’s
bronze and strong-made ox-hide shields ...