Artistry of the Homeric Simile

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The Simileme

The Background of the Homeric Simile

If Yeats’s lines were really oral-traditional lines, and if you were in the traditional audience or its equivalent, you would not need to go back over them to savor them. The traditional diction would be familiar, known, understood, and appreciated on first hearing, because words and word clusters or configurations like them had been heard before. . . . Written poetry’s technique is to seek a striking non-traditional image.

Albert Lord

The Oral Nature of Homeric Verse

It has been argued that insistence on a sharp division between orality and literacy in Homeric studies is misleading. In one sense orality implies an older, prewritten style; but it is equally clear that “oral” need mean only that words are spoken. In this second sense there is no advantage in conjuring up a written version of the utterance; such an imagined structure is inherently irrelevant to the understanding of the oral statement or the appreciation of its form. In our world oral utterances are being formulated constantly, and they are different than written compositions produced at the same moment. Bakker put this succinctly: “‘Oral’ denotes a medium, the way in which a discourse is realized. And as a medium, orality is not the absence of writing or its imperfect and clumsy (‘early’) use, but simply a way of using language that is different from, and opposed to, written communication.”

As a result, Homeric style itself authorizes the study of those qualities of the Iliad and the Odyssey that are deeply rooted in speech patterns. The studies of Milman Parry, his successors, and his critics make evident the special nature and extent of formulaic expression in a performance environment; others have focused on repeated typological scenes. Most critics agree that
the poems were composed by a poet well grounded in the traditional diction, stories, and themes of early Greek oral narrative verse, and this familiarity is clear in virtually every line. More recent studies acknowledging the oral root to the means of poetic expression have identified an adaptability, an appreciation of the latent potential of the language, and a complexity in the design of the poems that bespeak a poet—literate or not—who uses traditional diction with a full awareness of its poetic power. The poems are oral in nature, but not necessarily expressed in performance.

In my earlier study, *The Oral Nature of the Homeric Simile*, I explored the components of the similes that seem most closely related to the techniques of oral verse-making. The extended similes, especially those that are repeated, do not seem to be solely the creation of a single poet but comprise expressions shared by Homer, his predecessors, and his colleagues. Many features of the similes in the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* appear to arise from language and images that the tradition offered to the poet as he developed his narrative. The necessary foundation for a study of individual similes in the poems is the establishment of possible alternatives to similes—repeated suggestions that rise from a tradition developed and transmitted by poets prior to the period in which Homer created his two large epics.

The fact that formulaic diction has simultaneous generic and specific aspects is a major cause of difficulty in analyzing Homeric verse; each phrase must be continually understood both in its immediate context and in the larger semantic fields with which it is associated. Although the phrase “swift-footed Achilles” seems a gratuitous—at times almost contradictory—addition to most of the contexts in which it occurs, continual repetition suggests a past history where its honorific connotations were appropriate. Before Homer there was a group of bards composing songs that kept alive tales from earlier centuries. In telling these tales they continually molded and honed their language to make it a highly expressive tool. As successive bards reshaped previously used phrases and lines, earlier associations were both extended and forgotten—and each further usage confirmed, adapted, modified, or replaced the previous phrasing. And Homer repeatedly used such subjects and phrases because they facilitated effective communication. Thus each detail within the extant similes is important because Homer chose that detail in place of others. To the extent that critics can incorporate the evolving nature of the traditional diction into their studies, they will move closer to understanding the poetic mind that created the individual similes.
The simile is one of many traditional devices that are repeated throughout the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*; examples include speech structures and speech language, repeated type scenes, the uses of general principles in argumentation, and variations in forms of address. Speeches have been studied in detail to determine the customary forms of direct communication. Griffin has shown the special terms, words, and emotive language that make Homeric speeches effective; Lohmann has outlined the repeated structuring of speeches; and Martin has studied the *mythos* as an authoritative speech act. All have demonstrated that the poet is able to move freely within these traditional forms to create especially moving and compelling statements. Armstrong, Krischer, and Foley have shown how type scenes can be fitted into the narrative. Lardinois has studied the use of *gnomai* and their expressive usage by various characters. Brown has shown how addresses can be modified to convey special meaning. All demonstrate Homer’s mastery of traditional narrative style.

Similes seem equally based in the tradition. This is clear in their customary placement and topics. Similes appear in repeated contexts but can also be suppressed in such passages; familiar objects and actions in the narrative suggest the use of the same simile subjects. Yet when the poet does use a simile, he has made a significant narratological move in choosing an indirect mode of presentation over a simpler, more straightforward description. In both modes he calls special attention to an action or an object, but in choosing indirectness he is inviting his audience to blend their familiarity with the narrative item and their understanding of the removed world of the simile in order to judge how each affects the presentation of the other. As a result, a responsible critic must not only be conscious of the poet’s goals in choosing to use a simile within a tight narrative structure—but must also consider his reasons for avoiding a more direct presentation.

The strong contrast in narrative styles in the *Iliad* between book 1’s description of the quarrel and book 2’s preparation for the next day’s activities makes the point. In book 1 there are only four short similes, but in book 2 there are twenty, many of them long and elaborate. In book 1 Homer wants to build the issues of the quarrel and its effects cumulatively. In book 2 he is eager to bring his audience to a deeper understanding of Agamemnon as the leader of the army; consequently, he introduces a series of similes—indirect descriptions of the Greek army’s actions. Direct presentation of these actions would make the army look as though it were in chaos, but that is not Homer’s point; the effect that Agamemnon’s commands have on the army is more impor-
tant than the clear structuring of their actions. The audience, which is famil-
 iar with the possible alternative ways of presenting the action of book 2, will
 realize that the poet’s focused use of similes demands judgment. Because of
 their long experience of hearing epic traditions used and varied they will real-
 ize that here the customary similes for the movements of a great army dis-
 appear or are consciously weakened. Subliminally they are being told that
 the great Greek expeditionary army — the army that will appear in its full
 strength shortly in the catalogue, the army that is destined to defeat the Tro-
 jans — is no longer acting like a great army. In seeking reasons for this weak
 and confused performance the audience must realize that the opening of the
 book has put the focus on the inept commands of Agamemnon. The contrast
 between the numbers of similes in books 1 and 2 is sharp and follows closely
 the poet’s plan for developing this theme. My assumption is that no simile,
 long or short, appears by accident.

 For the most part the subject matter of the Homeric similes seems to have
 been taken from a limited set of topics. The process of classifying the subjects
 of the similes as well as the contexts in which they frequently occur is made
difficult both by the incompleteness of the oral record and the poet’s freedom
to make a choice. Yet it is possible on the basis of consistent usage to separate
most of the similes in the Homeric poems into at least sixteen subject groups.
In much the same way, the contexts in which Homer often placed similes
 can be determined by the regularity with which the simile was selected from
 among a small group of alternatives available at specific junctures.

 The poet chose such subjects in repeated contexts because they had proven
 apt for the stories he usually told, could be adjusted to suit scenes that fre-
 quently occurred in such stories, could be extended by drawing on the stock
 of phrases the tradition had developed, and — perhaps most important —
 were familiar to his audience. Undoubtedly there were other simile fami-
 lies in existence that left only slight traces in the texts, and others that have
 left no trace at all. While it is impossible to construct a full classification of
 simile subjects used in the large body of early Greek narrative, at least in the
 repetition of these topics and the consistency of their employment in similar
 contexts there is evidence for significant influence of the tradition in the indi-
 vidual simile’s formation. Such a tradition left the poet free to move in a vari-
 ety of directions or to adjust emphasis by adding or deleting items. And, of
equal importance, this ongoing tradition had been implanting itself continu-
 ously in the minds of the audience.
It is easy to respond to each simile as though it were a small, individually composed lyric. Among the many similes that have attracted numerous admirers, the most famous is probably the picture of stars at night describing the Trojan watchfires scattered over the dark field:

As when in the sky the stars about the moon’s shining are seen in all their glory, when the air has fallen to stillness, and all the watch places of the hills are clear, and the high shoulders, and the ravines, as endless bright air spills from the heavens, and all the stars are seen, to make glad the heart of a shepherd; such in their numbers blazed the watchfires. . . .

(Iliad 8.555–60)

Visualization is an important element in Homeric composition and communication. But I would argue that the complex language of Homeric diction is no less important. Not only does it focus on pictorial features; it also carries meanings that have been derived from previous performances and are conveyed by the poet as the latest version of the larger picture he is painting. The nuances and the enrichment of each new presentation are dependent on the audience’s recollection of the previous performance — and that performance drew both on the visual features necessary for a full appreciation of the poet’s image and on their experience of previous verbal descriptions. Not only do they hear each phrase as a small component in the bigger picture; they also hear it in a framework of other phrases that have been tempered and shaped by previous usage. As filled with visual observations as this watchfire simile seems, it is also firmly based in oral tradition. Lines 557–58 are repeated as an identical two-line unit in book 16 in a different context (16.299f.); the end of line 557 appears twice as a formula in the Hymn to Apollo (22 and 144), and in the first half of each line there is only a very slight remodeling of the Homeric line. In addition, the final line adding the rejoicing observer is repeated several times with a variety of different subjects (Iliad 11.683; Ody. 6.106; and Hymn to Demeter 232).

None of this analysis should lessen the emotional impact of the simile or dampen the response so strongly felt by its audience. Rather, this particular simile should be appreciated both as the expression of an individual poet and as a product of motifs which have been used in past performances. Homer’s
audience could avail themselves of their experience of these subjects in lines used elsewhere to enrich their appreciation of the constructed image; this more precise awareness of the traditional alternatives—verbal and nonverbal—available to the poet also deepens a critic’s understanding of the poet’s artistry in this and other similes. I will call the mental structure underlying each simile the “simileme”—in itself not fully expressible but composed of repeated actions and objects and alternative modes of expression, all of which have become associated through frequent usage. The individual simile is the single poet’s particularized composition shaped to fit the full narrative passage; the simileme is the nonverbal background material shared by poet and audience—in other words, the full range of possibilities for dealing with the standard topics that have been developed through a long series of performances.\textsuperscript{14}

Given the partial nature of the evidence for early Greek narrative, the definition of the simileme is inexact, but the attempt is supported by the impressive regularity with which discrete elements appear in separate simile families. Because these elements are not necessarily repeated in the same phrasing, it is not productive to use the type of close formulaic analysis developed by Milman Parry. In addition, Parry’s studies depended on a formula of frozen meaning: every phrase, in the classic Parry definition, must have an “essential idea.” While critics have had understandable difficulty in rejecting Parry’s findings as a whole, there have been telling criticisms of his conclusions, especially in the area of the strictly univalent meaning of the formulas.\textsuperscript{15}

As a simple instance, in book 22 of the \textit{Iliad} Apollo mocks Achilles by asking:

\begin{quote}
Why, son of Peleus, are you \textit{chasing me with swift feet [posin tacheessi diokeis]}?
\end{quote}

(22.8)

Later Priam, looking from the wall of the town, says:

\begin{quote}
Now again around the town of Priam is the divine Achilles \textit{chasing him with swift feet [posin tacheessi diokei]} . . .
\end{quote}

(22.172–73; my italics)

Later Athena in the guise of Deiphobos begins to encourage his brother Hector by saying:

\begin{quote}
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\end{quote}
Brother, to be sure the fleet Achilles presses you around the town of Priam, *chasing you with swift feet* [*posin tacheessi diokon*].

(22.229–30; my italics)

“Swift feet” does seem to be expressing an essential idea (= speed) in each of the above lines and does appear in a metrically identical position. In association with Achilles it gains added force from his famous epithet “swift-footed” in its various formulations\(^\text{16}\) and is probably used pointedly on these three occasions in book 22 to enhance the threat to Hector.

It is possible that this phrase, *posin tacheesi diokeis/ei/on*, has special attachment to Achilles, perhaps deriving from a lost earlier story. There is, however, one other appearance of this formula, *Iliad* 8.338:

As when a dog snatches at a wild boar or lion from behind *chasing him with swift feet* [*posin tacheessi diokon*].

Here the phrase has been deprived of all association with Achilles by being placed within the simile world, used to describe a dog, and applied to Hector.

As language develops through usage, words gain varied connotations, all of which are heard each time the word is used even though certain of these connotations will be immediately suppressed as irrelevant to the context. There will still remain a variety of meanings attached to the words and phrases in a simile, all of which must be coordinated to determine the poet’s meaning. Foley calls such a collection of potential meanings “metonymic pathways.”\(^\text{17}\)

These clusters of expanded meaning derive from what he describes as “traditional referentiality”:

Traditional referentiality . . . entails the invoking of a context that is enormously larger and more echoic than the text or work itself, that brings the lifeblood of generations of poems and performances to the individual performance or text. Each element in the phraseology or narrative thematics stands not simply for that singular instance but for the plurality and multiplicity that are beyond the reach of textualization. From the perspective of traditional context, these elements are foci for meaning, still points in the exchange of meaning between an always impinging tradition and the momentary and nominal fossilization of a text or version.\(^\text{18}\)
The expressive power of Homer’s language is increased by its continual evolution within a narrative tradition. The broad background of tales and heroes, which was developed over centuries, enriched the meanings of the repeated words and phrases and kept them fresh in the minds of poet and audience. Given the multivalent meanings that can be assumed for most words and phrases in the Homeric poems, the poet must limit these meanings to those he deems important. He has three means of accomplishing such limitation:

1. The suppression of elements that could be associated with the phrase but would be misleading
2. The enhancement of elements focusing on the desired meaning
3. The combination of selected items from among the customary alternatives in order to control the meaning to be assigned by the audience

Each of these methods allows the poet to refine his meaning by working within the traditional diction.

The four type scenes of arming in the *Iliad* provide good illustrations of all these methods. In the scene describing the arming of Paris (3.330–38) most of the particularizing elements elsewhere used to develop the basic form are suppressed; only the mention of his brother Lycaon as owner of the breastplate is added to the basic form of the type scene and, indeed, there is very little that is special about Paris as a warrior. However, more specific and targeted omissions are possible. In book 16 the stated rejection of Patroclus’ ability to manage the Pelian ash spear is a particularly pointed removal of a customary item in order to emphasize his vulnerability and exposure in playing the role of Achilles (16.131–46). Many elements are added to the arming of Agamemnon, including the richly inlaid breastplate of Cinyras, the thick and elaborately decorated shield, the crested helmet, and the gleaming spears that excite the thunder of Athena and Hera (11.17–46). It is significant that all of these elements concern the external appearance of the Greek leader rather than his ability as a warrior — (as in the arming of Patroclus); while Agamemnon may look like a warrior, he needs Zeus’ support. The arming of Achilles illustrates the third method, the combination of various alternative elements to accompany the best of the Achaeans (19.369–91): similes, enhancement of decoration, description of the hero’s spirit, and the addition of the Pelian spear that was denied to Patroclus.
These same methods are used in designing the individual similes. Repeated similes are evidence that there were some passages carried in the poet’s mind as units, and repeated sections of similes and even individual lines reveal certain phrases or blocks of lines that could be added to or deleted from the basic form. Thus the short lion simile, “like a lion,” can be regarded as the basic lion simile with all elements but one—the subject—deleted; extended lion similes can likewise be considered adaptations of the basic lion simile made by deleting those elements that provide incorrect guidance to the precise meaning of the passage.

Such gatherings of customary elements were so present in the folk memory that the poet could produce a specific simile to suit his narrative with confidence that the audience would appreciate the adaptations he had made. To find the fundamental unity beneath the diversity presented by a series of similes requires, as a first step, the identification of topics used repeatedly and with sufficient frequency to be regarded as customary simile subjects. An effective method must produce a list of the categories that the poet used in individual similes as well as alternative elements—even contradictory elements—within each category.

Most critics agree that there are simile families centered on the topics of lions and boars, fire, wind, trees, and gods. Yet the challenge, and the second step in finding similes’ unity, is to define the qualities that mark separate similes as derived from a common simileme in the minds of poet and audience. A numerical test as the sole criterion is inadequate because the mere counting of surviving examples within highly selective original evidence will not produce compelling conclusions. There were undoubtedly other equally traditional simile subjects that are unrecognizable because they occurred only once in the two surviving epics. A more adequate method rests on the awareness that the poet chose one or two simile families frequently at specific narrative junctures; thus a major determining factor in the association of a simile family with a specific context is the subject. The seven identically repeated similes that appear often in the same context offer strong corroboration of the principle that frequency of usage at a specific narrative juncture is significant in establishing a simile family.

The third criterion in identifying families is the most stringent and enlightening of all: the use of common motifs for each simile in the family. The tree similes, of which there are fourteen in the two poems, provide a model (thirteen in the *Iliad*, one in the *Odyssey*); they appear only in contexts describ-
ing a warrior who is either dead (or about to die) or unmoving. Thus tree similes seem a legitimate category on the basis of their frequent occurrence and also their consistent usage in defined contexts. However, they appear even more tightly organized as a family because they are constructed from a limited set of repeated elements. In chart 6 the fourteen similes are listed in the first column; then each element—essentially each noun and verb—within the simile is identified as the contributor of a generic type of information. For example, the simile of the poplar describing the fallen Simoesius at *Iliad* 4.482 can be analyzed into categories as follows:

Species = poplar  
Locale = marsh  
Action = tree felled  
Agent or force = chariot maker  
Tool = “shining iron”  
Purpose of action = to make a chariot wheel

The chart shows that the other thirteen tree similes can be analyzed into similar categories. Three, 4.482 and 13.389 = 16.482, contain the full series of elements, but, more importantly, the nouns and verbs in all the tree similes can be easily assigned to one of the six categories. Of course, each simile has a few specific details that are not repeated, thus cannot be so categorized, and their status must remain indeterminate.

From this chart it seems possible to derive a simple list of the basic elements present to the poet’s mind when he chose to employ a tree simile—thus, the tree simileme: a tree in a specific location stands or falls under the attack of an outside force that may employ a specific tool and may lead to a specific use for the tree. Of course, there is a fair amount of flexibility in the basic simileme for adding or deleting elements. Not only can the poet choose freely what items to include, but the choice of one specific item can limit or preclude the use of other variants: if the wind uproots a tree, then no purpose need be given for felling the tree, nor is any specific tool identified. As a result, motifs are assigned to separate columns on the chart when they seem to represent independent choices: the tree may be felled by means of a tool with or without the specific mention of a human agent or his purpose (13.178).

Pietro Pucci’s analysis of the two lion similes at 12.299 and *Ody.* 6.130 offers a clear example of the degree of adaptation available to the poet and his audience in drawing on the simileme. In both similes Homer chooses the lion
to represent the hero, but when he comes to the lion’s motivation to kill other animals, there are variants: in *Iliad* 12 he is ordered to kill by his bold heart; in *Odyssey* 6, by his belly (*keletai de he thumos / gaster*). Pucci writes: “We are encouraged to recognize the same animal in both passages, as if the divergence in the two descriptions was dictated by nothing more than their different contexts” (160). The role of the poet is admittedly crucial in the design of each simile, as is the ability of the co-creating, experienced audience to decode the intent of the different choices from the full simileme:

And yet this reading faces an impenetrable opacity. Certainly the allusion is there and lets itself be read, but what sense should we grant it? Should we attribute to the *Odyssey* a humorous intent and imply that the *Odyssey* smiles at the high-minded lions of the *Iliad*? Or should we assume the timidity of the text and say that for its tradition a king is always comparable to a lion? Probably both answers are correct in the sense that the Odyssean “allusion” can mean at the same time the need for the poet to follow the traditional patterns and also his need to get out of them. (161)

It is clear that both the poet and his audience share the inheritance from the tradition. In analyzing Homeric composition scholars have compellingly supported a generative process dependent on mental constructs. Nagler has applied a model based in Gestalt psychology that explains how formulaic and typological scenes express general conceptions. But a Gestalt (or “mental template”) has associations with innate knowledge shared by all audience members, while the simileme is solely man-made and thus in all cases can be changed and developed to suit narrative needs. Fillmore developed a helpful concept in the “semantic frame,” a “system of categories structured in accordance with some motivating context”; but such contexts include commonly known areas, such as the structure of the face, as well as elements learned from the broader experience of life. In similes the physical scenes (e.g., lions) seem mostly derived from poetic typologies. Thus while many features of simile composition are made understandable by parallels to both Gestalt structures and frame semantics, neither is a precise guide, fully adequate to define the Homeric simile as the product of customary placement and repeated topics, all expressed in a traditional diction.

In addition, there is a much more consciously creative, even possibly individualistic, potential to the form underlying the simile. The simile takes its being from the surrounding passage; in origin the mental construct under-
lying the individual simile was created and shaped to parallel the recurring actions of early Greek narrative. Just as Homeric Greek is a specialized language developed to sing the old stories of Greece, so also the similemes were developed to provide easy comparison to the events that are customary in such stories.

For these reasons I have chosen the term “simileme” to represent the basic objects and actions that comprise each traditional simile family; this form is carried in the folk memory as an inheritance from previous generations of practicing poets but probably is impossible to express fully in any single example. Throughout decades of use the simileme remained an entity that was constantly developed by its redeployment in familiar contexts. The most important feature of the simileme is its flexibility; as similes are the product of human imagination, a wide variety of individual similes can be created by recombination, deletion, or addition of customary and familiar elements—and also, undoubtedly, at moments of creative innovation or discovery. Nagler has well described the special quality of Homeric expression: “All is traditional on the generative level, all original on the level of performance.”

In drawing on the simileme, the poet is exercising his artistic choice within the traditional devices and language of early Greek narrative in order to tell his own story.

Several general points should be made about the simileme using the chart constructed from the tree similes. First, the simileme is not a simple picture but a flexible and functional collection of variables that can be— and generally must be— adapted to a variety of situations. The tree simileme contains both complementary and contradictory components that the poet can mold into an understandable scene on each individual occasion. Therefore the analytical category of “tree similes,” which seems so neat as a classification, is in reality an unorganized gathering of relevant but not necessarily consistent components, all of which were present in the poet’s mind anytime he chose to use this topic, but any one of which could be enhanced, diminished, or passed over as he considered the needs of his ongoing narrative. A short simile would best be defined as the suppression of all components of the simileme except one; the repeated similes are the product of the same series of choices— perhaps reinforced by the poet’s recalling a striking image that he created on a previous occasion.

To deal with similemes one must understand the choice or rejection of variants. Nimis views a simile as an encoded passage that produces meaning.
only by being perceived through its intertextual parallels. He draws on Riffaterre in asserting that such a passage “is not an ideal configuration existing on a higher ontological plane than any of its ‘realizations’; it is itself a system of signs whose poetic transformation results in the generation of variants of itself.” Yet there is one powerful element that I find missing in this reading of Homeric similes — the oral tradition. Any theory about Homeric expression must leave room for the seven identically repeated similes in the Homeric poems; in these similes Homer excludes all variants. The source of these passages is not necessarily a totally memorized model, but each passage can arise from the poet’s recollection of having sung such a passage before — most likely in a situation that may not even survive for us. Thus the repeated horse similes used for Paris and Hector are not best interpreted as an original and a copy; rather, both similes have the same ontological status (6.506 and 15.263).

At the same time the mind of the poet contains a preexistent archetype that strongly influences the individual similes in the text. The horse simile, for example, has a consistent unwarlike tone that makes the whole suitable only for certain narratives. The audience of each passage will realize that there is a basic poetic unit of a certain length and tone that has a sufficiently fixed nature to withstand attempts to introduce variants.

This more fixed and lasting simile sketch is parallel to the basic type scene or even the shorter formulaic expressions that can be shifted within the line or split to accommodate new needs. The force preserving this archetypal simile is the conservatism of the oral tradition itself. The poet is not compelled to use one and only one form of a type scene or to keep the formula as a fixed unit in its position in the line, but the texts show a strong tendency to reuse the same formula unless there is a reason to change. It seems clear that at certain junctures of the narrative the use of the simile was a suggestion from the tradition which the poet could either accept, reject, or modify; similarly, at certain junctures the poet knew from experience that certain topics he had used successfully before were particularly apt. These suggestions led the poet to reuse simile subjects and phrasing — even to repeat certain long similes six times word for word.

Second, each simileme normally occurs to the poet in a limited number of narrative contexts. If the warrior stays fixed and unmoving, so does the tree; if the warrior falls, the tree falls. Even Achilles is proleptically described by tree similes when his mother realizes that his death is near; Telemachus receives
the same simile when Eumaeus reports that his life is threatened by the suitors (18.56, 57, 437, 438, and Ody. 14.175). The tree simileme is not so much an analytical category as a description of the poet’s repeated response on occasions when his story returns to familiar narrative junctures.

Third, neither the simileme nor its components are necessarily attached to repeated phrases; no one of the motifs listed on the chart is expressed through a limited set of formulae. There are four similes centered on the oak tree, all extended. In two (12.132 and 14.414) the oak is introduced in different phrases, neither of which is parallel to formulae in other parts of the Homeric poems. However, in the other two passages (13.389 and 16.482) the oak is included as part of a repeated three-line unit. The opening line of this repeated simile reveals alternative species of trees: “He fell as when an oak falls, or a poplar, or a tall pine.” As a result the simileme offers different expressions to specify the oak tree; two of these expressions appear only once in the two epics, while the other two seem formulaic. Further, at 4.482 the poplar is introduced with a different word from that at 13.389 and 16.482, as is the pine at 5.560. The same is true for the words for leaves and shoots in the longer similes at 4.482, 13.178, and 17.53; yet the short similes at 18.56, 18.437, and Ody. 14.175 are identical in the choice of word, occur at the same position in the line, and are clearly formulaic. Likewise, there is little repetition of formulae in the element of the craftsmen, their cutting tools, their act of cutting, the mountain peak, or the intended use for the fallen tree. While the simileme depends for its existence on being expressed in specific words, the choice of those words is a separate act.

The most compelling proof for the nonverbal existence of the tree simileme is found in two other passages that draw upon its elements even though they are not similes. Clearest is 11.86:

at the hour when a woodcutter prepares his meal
in the glades of a mountain when he has tired his hands
cutting tall trees . . .

The elements shared with the tree simileme are the cutter, his act of cutting, and the mountain locale. Likewise, 23.117:

but when they came to the valleys of many-fountained Ida,
then in haste they cut the lofty oaks with their long-edged bronze;
they fell with a great crash. . . .

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Again the poet uses the elements of cutting, a cutting implement, the oak trees, and the mountain. Each scene seems derived in its motifs, and occasionally in its phrasing, from the same model as the tree similes. However, in each of these passages—one an indication of time analogous to the formal independence of the simile, one a scene from the ongoing narrative—the poet has drawn upon categories contained in the tree simileme, but the passages do not occur in the limited contexts standard for tree similes, and in the first two cases they do not function as similes. Thus the word “simileme” is useful in a study analyzing similes but has applications to forms broader than and different from similes; in Homer’s mind there seem to have been nonverbal collections of elements, each of which, in whatever words they are expressed, could be conjoined and adapted for a variety of purposes within the poem.

If the form and usage of similes developed over a long period, it is surprising that there are only seven identically repeated extended similes in the two poems, but this number rises significantly if one considers repetitions at a level deeper than the verbal expression. In other words, since simile motifs are often repeated in varied words and phrases, the simileme appears to exercise its force at a level that is nonverbal.

The tree similes derive from a simileme that is easy to analyze because there are relatively few examples in the Homeric text, but the characteristics of this simileme can be found in the other, more complex simile families: lions and boars, wind and wave, fire, and gods. The charts that appear in the appendix list the repeated motifs common to these similemes and show the flexibility available to the poet in choosing among and adapting these elements within a limited number of contexts.

In order to fully appreciate the achievement of the individual poet, it is necessary to develop a method that will not only allow critics to perceive the nonverbal form of the simile but also to be conscious of shadings the poet could assign to each component. If a poet chooses a lion simile, then all of the elements carried with the simileme are instantly present; he must decide either to include or omit each in forming the individual simile. He is free to choose words that he has used or heard before—or he may manipulate his language to introduce new phrasing. Of course, context is always important. Since the poet is attempting to embed his simile within his story, he has good reason to use words from the surrounding narrative to express parallel features of the simile. Thus each simile is the result of a series of indi-
vidual choices from among alternatives that are drawn from both nonverbal and verbal traditions, operating independently and together, and are heavily influenced by the context. Any simile so produced is a unique and complex creation of the poet's imagination.

As the largest of the simile families, the lion and boar similes provide the best examples of the variables that the poet manipulates in bringing the simileme to verbal expression (see chart 2). It is immediately evident that in seeking a parallel for his narrative the poet is thinking far more widely than the single point of comparison. This simileme comprises at least five major motifs, other than the animal: number, attack or attacked, hunter or victim, time or place, and other variables.

Number. The comparison is sometimes to one animal and sometimes to several. Generally the number in the narrative is repeated in the simile; often a precise dual matches a pair in the text. Yet these variations seem to make no difference in the list of motifs comprising the simile. And there are even occasions where the numbers between narrative and simile are in disagreement, such as 15.323, where Apollo’s threat to the Greeks is compared to two animals.

Main Actions (attack/attacked). Many similes are linked to the narrative by a repetition of an action word:

When Menelaus, dear to Ares, saw him
    striding forward before the army with big steps —
    as a lion rejoices coming upon a large carcass,
      finding either a horned stag or a wild goat —
      and he was hungry; he ravenously devoured it,
        even though swift dogs and sturdy young men rush upon him —
          just so Menelaus rejoiced seeing Alexander. . . .

(3.23; my italics)

It would be easy to define the function of Homeric similes if their main action verbs were always drawn from the surrounding narrative; the components in the lion/boar simileme would be almost automatically generated by parallel verbs of attack. But such direct linkage does not occur often enough to define the narrative action as the major source of the simile’s phrasing.

It is not uncommon for the action in the simile to be so complex that it is compared to at least two movements in the narrative. For example, the simile at 5.554 sketches the lifetime of two lions: they were raised in the mountains,
preyed on cattle and sheep, and finally are slain by men. The surrounding narrative contains a precise parallel to this whole story: Crethon and Orsilochus were two fighters, well trained in warfare; they came to fight at Troy, and now they are slain by Aeneas. The verbs in the simile, however, do not repeat those in the narrative: in the narrative the stages of growth are marked by genesthen, hebesante, eis Ilion hepesthen, telos thanatoio kalupsen, damente kappeseten; in the simile the verbs marking the parallel stages are etrapheten, harpazonte . . . keraizeton, katektathen. The verbs in the simile describe quite precisely three stages of development, yet the emphasis of the simile is on the single action of being slain. In addition, several similes are built from two different points of comparison in the narrative (11.61, 12.145, 13.137, 13.491, and 15.623). These are important observations because they indicate that the poet seeks parallels for full scenes in the narrative rather than creating tight comparisons to individual actions or words.

Supplementary Figures (victims/hunters). Although a variety of other forces confront the lion/boar, the similes of this family present only two basic scenes: the lion as predator (in which case the opponents are limited to sheep, cattle, oxen, goats, or deer) and lion/boar defending his own life from those who hunt or stalk him (farmers and herdsmen, hunters, or dogs). Of course, the major subjects are distinguishable in that the boar is not a carnivore and thus does not prey on other animals for food, although he does confront the same hunters. And there are some similes where the lion challenges a boar in a fight for their lives. Generally the actions in lion/boar similes are quite limited; there is no mention of the lion at play, or asleep, or standing majestically in a king-of-the-beasts pose, or in a family scene among his mate and cubs. This restriction of the breadth of scenes results from the simileme’s status as the major source of the lion similes: that is, the poet usually tended to work within the poetic tradition and did not draw on broader observations of nature.45

Time or place. Chart 2 reveals only three further standard components in the lion/boar simileme: the confidence or fear of the animal, the location in space or time, and his hunger or thirst. In each case there are alternatives. The locations are most often mountains; otherwise farms or folds, a roadside, a marsh, a wood or thickets, the lion’s lair, over a victim, or over young lions; night is the only time cited, probably because night is the time for animals’ hunting and stalking activities. Such a variety of alternatives offers the poet many choices in generating individual similes. The phrasing for several
locations and times is familiar from other simile families as well as narrative scenes — another indication that the decision to include the element of location was taken independently of other choices; the phrase *nyktos amolgoi* is shared by both similes and narrative, and *pannychoi egressontes/a* occurs only three times, twice in a repeated simile and once in the narrative in Athena’s words to Odysseus (*Ody*. 20.53). The traditional diction was adapted to the needs of the simile just as easily as to those of the narrative.

**HOMER AND HIS AUDIENCE**

This exploration of the complex traditional material underlying each simile shows the necessity of including the audience as a reliable co-creating participant in the production of the Homeric poems. First, the audience could appreciate Homer’s choice to sing a simile because they knew that there were other customary ways of continuing the narrative that had been passed over. From a lifetime of hearing previous performances the audience could hear the enrichment of the narrative that Homer created through the indirectness of the simile as well his adjustments for its length or shortness. They could then evaluate the choice of subject, since they were aware of the various alternate similemes that the tradition made available to the poet for specific narrative junctures. The audience would not only listen to the details of the individual image and appreciate its contribution to the whole passage; their awareness of the basic simileme would also make possible a complex kind of coded communication — not only through words and phrases but also through silent communication (e.g., repeated motifs with conventional connotations, consciously excluded options). Homeric epic was a joint creation of a trained poet and an experienced audience, in which the skill of the poet was judged not on the basis of free invention but rather on the effectiveness of his choices from among known alternatives.46

One of the clearest examples of this silent communication occurs at *Odyssey* 4.791. Penelope is in her bed wondering whether her son has been slain, and then drifts off to sleep:

Such things as occur to a lion in his [deisas] fear in the midst of a crowd of men when they draw a treacherous ring around him, these are the things which she [hormainousan] pondered as sweet sleep came upon her. . . .

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This simile occurs at an appropriate juncture: one of the standard uses of the simile is to provide a parallel scene through which the poet can express the psychological state of a person in the narrative.\textsuperscript{47} In addition, the simile is molded to suit the situation of the beleaguered Penelope, who is virtually imprisoned in her own chamber by the suitors. Yet though it may seem unsuitable for the poet to have chosen the subject of the lion, with its customary battlefield associations, that is precisely the point. Both poet and audience knew that the simile of farm animals was readily available, as well as those of deer or birds,\textsuperscript{48} all of which would provide a tone more consistent with the unwarlike narrative. Yet the poet rejected these topics in order to use an image that provided more than a superficial parallel. With no overt explanation he has drawn upon his audience’s familiarity with the tradition to describe a Penelope who may be entrapped and threatened but who is also a lioness in character—a fit mate for Odysseus, the lion.\textsuperscript{49} The men in this simile may momentarily have the upper hand, but they are contending with a lion (note the acknowledgment of the tradition in the use of the masculine, \textit{deisas}), and there are many similes that testify to the resourcefulness and strength of other lions who emerge victorious over men and hunting dogs. When the poet suppresses any suggestion that the lion is killed or the lion is triumphant, he leaves his audience to imagine the continuation with an enhanced respect for the capabilities and resources of Penelope.

Or, the reverse—the poet may use scenes from more lyrical, gentler nature to describe warlike elements in the narrative:

\begin{quote}
As a star appears among other stars in the darkness of the night, the evening star, which stands as the fairest star in the heavens, just so was the gleam from the sharp-pointed spear which Achilles balanced in his right hand devising evil for the noble Hector.
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{(22.317)}

Again, knowledge of the tradition enriches communication. Similes are constantly used to describe the gleam of weapons—here the death weapon at the final moment of the battle between Achilles and Hector. Homer has gone out of his way to present this star as “the most beautiful star in the heavens,” in contrast to the language used of Achilles, which focuses on his monomaniacal, ugly pursuit of vengeance. The simile highlights the difference between Achilles, the aberrant force, and the background of the wider world of nature that was introduced with the long description of Achilles’ shield and has been
developed by a combination of settings and similes throughout his aristeia. Against this background of nature as normalcy, the motivations of the warrior appear distorted and grotesque—a judgment that will be confirmed by Achilles in book 24, though at this point he is too enmeshed in his own limited concerns to see it. At the moment when Hector is fatally wounded, the poet places a traditional simile at a customary juncture in the narrative but fills the broader passage with meaning by emphasizing the contrast between nature’s beauty and Achilles’ destructive intent. Such communication is silent but effective.

Evaluations of individual similes depend on the audience’s recognition of the formal features of similes as well as explicit parallels between simile and narrative. Similes are attached to the narrative by a limited and constantly repeated set of phrases (e.g., “just as when,” “like a [lion] who,” and so on) and usually share at least one parallel element with the narrative. It is important for the audience to realize through an explicit marker that the poet has begun a section that requires experience of the simile tradition for full appreciation. In addition, a prominent point may serve to anchor the simile tightly—and perhaps mechanically—within the context both before and after the simile and thus contribute to the surface impression of “threaded speech” that is so common a characteristic of Homeric verse. Yet all the time the simileme as an independent whole has been present in the poet’s mind, continues to offer many alternative motifs to be developed, and provides the poet with opportunities to draw multiple connections to the narrative.

A clear example of a simile framed by standard linking phrases, presenting only a single point of connection, and significantly enriching the full passage through artful extensions is the famous lyric simile at Iliad 8.555 describing the numbers of the Trojan watchfires at night (cited earlier). Formally this simile is introduced with the customary “just as when” and is reattached to the narrative by an equally familiar “so many were the fires.” The single point of comparison is the number of stars that describe the number of fires; this is made clear through an explicit A B A structure of quantitative words: “many fires,” “all the stars,” and “so many were the fires” (554, 559, and 560f.). This single point of connection, however, scarcely explains the effectiveness of this simile either as an image in itself or as a marker of this pivotal point in the story. The poet has chosen to express a fuller form of the fire simileme by adding a series of details to the picture. As the audience experiences each added phrase, the scope is widened. First, there is the narrow view of bright stars
around the moon; then the vision widens to include the landscape of peaks and thickets on the hills. Next the clear air pours forth from the heavens and all the stars are seen. Finally the poet puts a viewer into the scene: “and the shepherd rejoices in his heart.” Only at this moment does the movement of the simile emerge. Each element in the widening scene has been revealing the view of the whole as it comes clear to the shepherd. First he sees the brightest stars; then—as his eyes adjust—he begins to pick out the less distinct landscape; then he is able to see all the stars through the clear air, and this wider scene stirs joy in him. The poet has not only used his language to tell his audience that number is his concern; he has molded the nonverbal elements in the simileme to create in his audience the experience of one man as he progressively grasps the fuller scene. It is almost a time-lapse image; the poet leads his audience from a formulaic beginning to the profound experience of a lone man whose eyes only gradually arrive at a broader and finally almost infinite vision.52 Then when the poet leads this audience back to the narrative with the simple formulaic phrase “so many were the fires,” he will have given no literal number but will have created the feelings stirred in an observer who lets his eyes dwell on a whole heaven full of stars. Confining interpretation to the single point of comparison will ruin the effect of this powerful interaction between simile and narrative.

In general, Homer’s literal phrasing, while seemingly indispensable to the poet, is only one guide to his thought processes.53 Homer has themes, conceptions, and imaginative passages that must be expressed within the language that he inherited from the tradition, a language that is largely designed to describe concrete objects and physical actions. The consistency with which the poet is able to make a simile respond significantly to the larger narrative movement reveals a mind striving to create a particularized complex image from preexistent building blocks.54 A number of similemes are so firmly fixed in the minds of his audience that the poet can include in one simile a series of suggestive comparisons to the narrative from the literal to the metaphoric; the devices he uses repeatedly are the components of the simileme that he then must express in specific phrasing. In putting the simileme into words he creates a vivid picture both by including complementary objects and suppressing alternatives that he felt were inappropriate. It is the role of the audience to appreciate the individual simile as the mental product of suppressed alternatives—and then to fit the decoded comparison into the developing larger narrative.55
Above I defined a short simile as a version of the simileme in which all the components but one had been passed over. While short similes are often treated as virtually meaningless formulaic filler, Homer seems to have employed these similes with the realization that they conjure up the full pattern of the simileme for the audience even though only one component is mentioned. The organizing force of the simileme underlies all similes in that family, long and short, and the full awareness of the background is vital if these similes are to be effective in their context.

A compelling example of the allusive potential in a short simile occurs at Iliad 24.572, where Achilles leaves old Priam and goes to arrange the return of Hector’s body:

The old man grew afraid and was obedient to his words, but the son of Peleus went forth from the tent like a lion. . . .

In the final books of the Iliad Achilles has been compared to a lion three times: 18.318—the grieving lion that tracks a hunter who has snatched away his cubs and seeks vengeance (= Achilles mourning for the dead Patroclus); 20.164—the angry and dangerous lion (= Achilles going to fight Aeneas); and 24.41—the cruel lion who attacks the flocks to get dinner (= Achilles savaging the body of Hector). The poet has formed each of these similes by choosing to enhance certain features of the simileme and to suppress others. Through this process of adaptation the details in each simile come to contain several connections to the surrounding narrative, and the tone of each simile is appropriately warlike in describing Achilles’ attitude and actions.

By the time Achilles meets Priam in book 24, he has decided to return the body, and in a quiet and private conversation he and Priam find a wider conception of mankind’s interdependence. At the end of the Iliad Achilles transcends his society—yet this development is not supported by that last simile of the lion. It is only a short formulaic simile; yet even this short mention of the lion should evoke the whole simileme for the audience. They will be reminded of the usual warlike context for such subjects and may even recall the three lion similes that have already described Achilles in his aristeia. There is no way to avoid the conclusion that the lion simile on the surface (i.e., without the contribution of the co-creative audience) is inappropriate when Achilles is trying to renounce the demands of the warrior ethic, yet this inappropriateness echoes the ambiguity involved in the ending of the Iliad. Achilles is a tentative member of a new generation. He is not presented as

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the full-fledged spokesman for a different code or a new world; he is still the hero who will fight and die before Troy. Priam protests the inevitability of war when he tells Achilles that they will all fight again after the truce for Hector’s funeral “if it is necessary”; and Achilles in his brief response merely acknowledges that the war will continue (24.665–70).

In the speech immediately preceding the short lion simile Achilles has shown his familiar impatience:

No longer drive my spirit in its grief,
old man, lest I not leave you alone in my tent
even though you are a suppliant, and I violate the commands of Zeus.

These are the words of a recently converted and uncertain new man; the reflex of the warrior code is strong in him and will break out with disastrous consequences if he is pushed. He is openly telling Priam to respect the fragile nature of his newfound behavior. Thus the lion simile, though short, does incorporate the full simileme of the lion/warrior with overtones appropriate to a hesitant, tentative action based only on an inchoate sense of the appropriate response. A longer lion simile would overemphasize the usual spirit of the bold warrior; here the short simile with the exclusion of the murderous activities of the lion and other features that are associated with warriors is a subtle yet effective means of presenting the warrior king who finds himself guaranteeing high honor for his enemy.

In form short similes often share the same formulaic beginning as extended ones, since long similes are usually phrased as a series of motifs that are added to the initial brief statement of the subject. Thus the presence of a simile is marked clearly, even though the audience does not know whether it will be long or short. Once their attention is caught, the short simile effectively fulfills clear poetic purposes:

- introduction of the simileme without retarding the narrative movement for a full pause (best illustrated by the sequence of god similes in *Iliad* book 5, which, though short, do repeatedly emphasize the confusion of men and gods, one of the major themes of the book—5.438, 459, and 884)
- introduction of a subject that will appear later (cross-referencing or framing—e.g., 18.56–7 = 18.437–38; *Ody.* 6.231 = *Ody.* 23.158)
- introduction of a subject with no need for developing it into a small story paralleling or predicting the direction of the narrative—in other words,
the poet can invoke the subject while leaving room for his audience’s speculation.58

The widespread usage of the short simile demonstrates its usefulness in providing another bit of flexibility for an audience well versed in traditional technique.

SIMILE AND SIMILEME

In summary, the simileme exists powerfully in the minds of both poet and audience even though it can never be fully defined or represented in any one concrete simile. The usefulness of similemes in poetic composition is evident in the frequency with which the poet draws upon them—although their power is no greater than that of any other element in the traditional diction.

The contexts in which the similemes appear are sufficiently confined that they seem subject to many of the same rules that have been defined for type scenes; one can even meaningfully speak of a modified economy and extension in the usage of the simile. But the greatest piece of evidence for the existence of the simileme is the regularity with which similes of a single family are developed from a series of motifs that are repeatedly used together; it is this consistency that makes possible the construction of the charts of simile families. Such similemes are highly flexible and complex collections of nonverbal components that give poet and audience an extranarrative device dependent on a coded language and capable of providing the narrative with reinforcement, nuance, and subtlety.

The poet’s most powerful compositional technique in shaping the individual simile is suppression—the choice to do less. Both framing and selection, processes vital to the composition of the simile, are products of the poet’s need to include and to exclude. The expressive potential of conscious framing is often unnoticed, yet it is a technique used broadly in the arts, most obviously in painting and filmmaking. A painter is surrounded with the disorderly collection of paraphernalia typical of a studio, and a movie director sits among the chaos of his crew and equipment; each is attempting to create a small patch of order, and in both cases the frame is crucial in isolating the area in which a controlled design can be realized. Selection of the objects to include within the frame is of equal importance. In addition, objects and the modes in which they will be presented offer major opportunities for selection,
modification, and exclusion: the tones or shades of color, the harmonies or disharmonies, the juxtapositions or disjunctions, or the relative weighting of objects in the design of the whole. The artist endlessly refines and reworks his material to express with precision the idea that justifies his creative effort.\[59\]

Homeric criticism has produced many comments about the power of the existing text based on the poet’s decision to include, rather than assessments of his choice to exclude. But the decision to add to a composition is the inverse of the choice to reject; the creative process encompasses both in a simultaneous decision. The identification of the simileme allows a critic to construct sets of alternatives considered by the poet at each parallel juncture. It is just as significant to discover that the poet did not include a simile in one passage as that he did in another; the effects of the two scenes can be quite different and should offer clues to the design of the larger narrative. Likewise, it is vital for the interpretation of a passage to know why the poet created a simile that contained a large number of categories, while at other places he omitted many of these in order to produce a shorter version. There are even possibilities of evaluating the relative harshness or calmness, the crudeness or refinement, the bleakness or brightness within the phrases the poet has chosen; such comparative evaluations become possible once the alternatives that were not chosen for each passage have been made clear.

In addition, the simileme places several standard problems regarding Homeric similes into new perspectives:

1. The delineation of the simileme’s motifs permits a clearer understanding of the process of poetic composition in regard both to the similes and to the larger epics. The similes provide a unique body of evidence within the Homeric epics that is identified by features inherent in their basic form: their relative shortness and separateness, their clear demarcation as discrete poetic units, their close references to a parallel scene, and their flexibility. In forming the individual simile the poet makes many artistic choices similar to those made in composing other less well defined and delimited elements of his larger epic. The paralleling of two radically different subjects or actions juxtaposed and placed in like settings permits a critic to see the artistic processes of the poet with a clarity available at few other places in the poems. First, the poet is describing the same moment twice in different words and from different perspectives; second, it is possible to compare parallel passages in the narrative where the poet employs a different subject or even chooses not to use a simile.

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2. There is reality to the classifications of simile families that various critics have developed. However, if critics are to deal with Homer’s creative processes, they must avoid statements that are based solely on the phrasing and language of the individual similes, that is, classifying similes only by the first animal mentioned or the active subject. To analyze an individual simile properly one must compare the maximum number of similes composed of parallel elements. While there is no law prohibiting the continual subdivision of the individual simile into increasingly discrete units, the establishment of elements that are repeated through a series of similes should enable critics to come closer to dealing in the broader categories in which Homer himself thought.

3. Scholars have long felt that there was more being expressed through certain similes than the simple surface meaning of the words. The discovery that the simileme is the shared property of poet and audience allows more open discussion of silent, but powerful, nonverbal communication; it also permits a measure of control over impressionistic responses to those similes which have been appreciated as though they were freestanding small lyrics of high emotional charge. In spite of the limitations of the traditional diction, which usually ties the simile to the narrative through one and only one contact, it becomes mandatory for a critic to press for a broader interpretation that acknowledges that the simileme as a whole was present to both poet and audience whenever its subject was introduced.

4. The difference between long and short similes is not as important as some have thought. The choice is aesthetic: a short simile can add a degree of emphasis to the narrative without injecting the full weight of an expanded simile into a passage.\(^6\)

5. Most similes seem to be told from the point of view of the narrator—but there are repeated methods for introducing others’ points of view. It is even possible for the poet to allow the audience to perceive the action with the eyes of a character in the narrative.\(^6\)

Homer’s creative process can never be adequately defined; therefore it is easy for critics to speak in ways that diminish it. The talent, poetic brilliance, and remarkable abilities shown by later poets should not be denied to Homer even though he was dependent on those modes of expression prevalent in his own time. To the extent that his verse-making is viewed as a mechanical process, the fault is ours for underestimating his creations on the basis of criteria developed from the study of later and more familiar poetry. The derivation of

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traditional modes of expression and categories of thought from the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* themselves comes as close as possible to establishing the phrasing, typological classes, and customary associations that were in the mind of Homer as he composed his two epics — and in the minds of his audience as they interpreted them.

There is no simple way to limit the holdings of the human mind from which a poet can draw. Such a stock is built through experience, and we are so ignorant of Homer — his home, his workplace, his method and occasion of composition, significant facts about his life and the time in which he lived — that it is impossible to specify the experiences that formed and were re-formed in his mind and in that of his audience. Studies of the broader traditional background to the epics suggest that various sets of information were coded and available to the poet; they operated simultaneously at several different levels and could be formed into a variety of combinations in the process of verse-making and verse-hearing. The easiest of these sets to identify, analyze, and quantify has been the pervasive formulaic language in the two epics. Homer was not enslaved to these formulae, but he did choose to use and adapt formulaic speech as the basis of his expression. In addition, some typological scenes were repeated word for word in the poems and seem to have been maintained in his mind as virtually preexisting units.62

Of equal interest are the traditional features that were not carried in verbal form but were images, ideas, or concepts that could be brought into the poems through a variety of expressions; these existed separately from the system of formulaic language. They vary widely in subject and use — the standard actions of epic verse, narrative stories of individual heroes and incidents that could be transferred among several heroes, the basic tales of the ancient kingdoms, the customary norms and qualitative values accepted by all members of the society, devices for developing a narrative, and — among the latter — the similemes. Most of these nonverbal conceptions were shared by Homer, his fellow poets, and his audience as basic elements of their culture.

Of course, both poems were composed to express Homer’s individual and independent thoughts on his society and culture. He drew from earlier legends and stories that he carried in his mind, organizing his selection through the poetic devices that he had learned from years of listening and performing. To express this personal statement to others he turned to the preexistent formulaic language and worked to make this language tell the narrative in the way he wanted it told. Of course, this is too diagrammatic a scheme to repre-
sent the associative way in which the human mind works. Because many of these elements would have instantaneously suggested new modes of organization and the poetic mind can continually borrow traditional elements and recombine them to make new forms, the categories of thought can never be so neatly defined. Such a creative process, with its continuous interaction between differing subjects and plots, can never be fully defined in itself, but it can be described to some extent through the careful analysis of existing passages. Because the similes are discrete units and seem to arise from this type of creative process, they offer a particularly fruitful area for the investigation of Homer’s compositional style.63