

HECTOR AND THE SIMILE OF THE SNOWY MOUNTAIN

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*Ἡ ῥα, καὶ ὀρμήθη ὄρεϊ νιφόεντι ἑοικώς,
κεκλήγων, διὰ δὲ Τρώων πέτετ' ἦδ' ἐπικούρων.*
—*Iliad* 13.754–55

The comparison of Hector to a snowy mountain in *Iliad* 13.754 appears at first glance to be a rather inapposite and embarrassing anomaly.¹ Inapposite because it is framed by two verbs of motion, the second of which, in conjunction with an accompanying participle, seems to generate a metaphorical crosscurrent by introducing the image of a screaming bird in flight.² Embarrassing because the widespread belief that the Homeric similes are the products of a creative elaboration of traditional materials by a dynamic poetic talent is shaken by what appears to be a clumsy line-filler.³ Finally, Hector's likeness to a snowy mountain is something of an anomaly insofar as comparison to a mountain is applied to only two other characters in Homer, both of whom patently exceed ordinary mortal proportions. In *Odyssey* 9.190–92 Polyphemos is likened to a "wooded peak of high mountains." The comparison apparently proceeds in part from two earlier references to the Cyclops as *pelōrios* (9.187, 190).⁴ It is a fact, moreover,

¹ I am indebted to Professor Sterling Dow for having brought this simile to my attention.

² For the fairly common use of *klazein* to describe the cry of birds, see *Il.* 10.274–76, 12.207, 16.428–30, and 17.755–57.

³ Cf. C. M. Bowra, *Tradition and Design in the Iliad* (Oxford 1930) 114–28; Richmond Lattimore, trans., *The Iliad of Homer* (Chicago 1960) 40–45; Albin Lesky, *A History of Greek Literature* (London 1966) 63–64; James A. Notopoulos, "Homeric Similes in the Light of Oral Poetry," *CJ* 52 (1957) 323–28; G. S. Kirk, *The Songs of Homer* (Cambridge 1962) 273, 327–28.

⁴ Polyphemos' likeness to a mountain headland may also convey the notion of his fierce isolation both from ordinary men and from his fellow Cyclopes. For a Vergilian

that he is not an ordinary mortal, but the son of a god. Similarly, the Laestrygonian queen is described as "big as a mountain peak" (*Od.* 10.113). She belongs to a ferocious race which Odysseus terms "not like men, but like Giants" (*Od.* 10.120). In both cases, therefore, the comparison to mountains is physically apt: Polyphemus and the Laestrygonian queen are superhumanly huge. There is not the slightest hint in the *Iliad*, however, that Hector's physical dimensions are comparably extraordinary.

It is no wonder, then, that *Il.* 13.754 has discomfited many editors of the poem. The idea of inertness is likely to be suggested by *orei*, but such a metaphor is hardly suitable to Hector's behavior in *Iliad* 13. After his energetic struggle around the Greek rampart (679–89) the Trojan hero pauses only long enough to listen to the advice of Polydamas (726–47) and immediately plunges back into the fray (752). By the end of the book the taste of glory has excited him to hunger for final victory (824–32). Given, therefore, Hector's unmistakably spirited conduct in this entire episode, we are compelled by logic, if not by literary instinct, to turn to the idea of physical bulk or weightiness as the relevant factor in the simile.⁵ Such is the suggestion of the scholiasts (*πρὸς δὲ μέγεθος ἢ εἰκῶν*), but only Mazon seems to have been seduced by it.⁶ Other editors approach the simile more negatively by directing their comments to its apparent absurdity.⁷ As for Nitzsch's desperate expedient—interpretation of the snowy mountain as an allusion to an avalanche—it is at best commendable for its daring.⁸

version of the comparison of a hero to a mountain with a snowy summit see *Aen.* 12.700–3.

⁵ Waves are sometimes likened in size to mountains, as in *Od.* 3.290 and 11.243.

⁶ W. Dindorf, *Scholia Graeca in Homeri Iliadem* 4 (Oxford 1877) 34; Paul Mazon, *Homère: Iliade* 3 (Paris 1946) 32. Mazon also accepts one scholiast's application of the simile to the "aspect sauvage, effrayant" of Hector, although there is no precedent for this in the *Iliad*. Cf. E. Maass, *Scholia Graeca in Homeri Iliadem Townleyana* 2 (Oxford 1888) 52–53.

⁷ Cf. Walter Leaf, *The Iliad* 2 (London 1902) 56; K. F. Ameis, *Homers Ilias* 2.1 (Leipzig 1878) 46; D. B. Monro, *Homer: Iliad* 13–24 (Oxford 1957) 281; A. T. Murray, *The Iliad* 2 (Loeb Classical Library, London and New York 1925) 58–59.

⁸ Cf. Leaf (above, note 7) 56; G. W. Nitzsch, *Beiträge zur Geschichte der epischen Poesie der Griechen* (Leipzig 1862) 342–43. Nitzsch's imagination may have been fired by the simile of the hurtling boulder wrenched by winter rains from a hilltop (13.136–46).

While it is true that most scholars who have grappled with *Il.* 13.754 have either grumbled about the inappropriateness of Hector's comparison to a mountain or, in one case, settled limply for the explanations of the scholiasts, none, however, seems to have examined closely the second element of the simile, *niphœnti*. Yet even a cursory review of the metaphorical significance attributed to snow in Homer illuminates sharply the aptness of such an image to Hector's activity both in the passage at hand (754-55) and in *Iliad* 13 as a whole.

There are eleven references to snow in the *Iliad*.⁹ Of these only three do not appear in similes, but figure in non-metaphorical, descriptive passages.¹⁰ In addition, two of the eight remaining references occur in the same simile (12.278, 280). The fact to notice, however, is that in all but one (10.5-10) of the seven similes, where snow is merely listed as one of several meteorological disturbances, the quality of snow consistently deemed most relevant to the poet's imaginative needs is that of incessant movement.¹¹ Evidence that Homer's eye concentrated primarily upon this one aspect of snow is implied by the main verbs of the passages which involve snow similes: *heîê* (3.221),¹² *pipton* (12.156), *reon* (12.159), *pôtônto* (12.287), *hormêthê* (13.754), *dieptato* (15.172), and *ekphoreonto* (19.360).¹³ It is this quality of movement that constitutes the essential difference between *νιφάς*, etc., and *χιών*, the latter being represented four times in the *Iliad* (10.7, 437; 12.278; 22.152). The latter, related etymologically to *χεῖμα* and *χειμῶν*, is a generic term and defines that general condition which ensues in part from the advent of the former. *Chión* may, therefore,

⁹ 3.222; 10.7; 12.156, 278, 280; 13.754; 14.227; 15.170; 18.616; 19.357; 20.385. In this study the term "snow" is applied exclusively to the various forms of *niphās*, *niphētos*, *niphœis*, and *niphēin* found in the *Iliad*. For *chión* see below.

¹⁰ 14.227: ἐφ' . . . ὄρεα νιφόμεντα; 18.616: κατ' Οὐλύμπου νιφόμεντος; 20.385: Τμώλῳ ὑπὸ νιφόμεντι.

¹¹ Even in the simile of 10.5-10 there may be a suggestion of movement implied by *πυκνὴ* (9), if not by the main verb. Cf. 11.454.

¹² Apropos of 3.222 it ought to be observed that the essential difference between Menelaus and Odysseus seems to be that the former speaks concisely (*παῦρα* . . . οὐ πολὺ-*μυθος*, 214), easily and smoothly (*ἐπιτροχάδην*, 213), and in a clear voice (*λιγέως*, 214), whereas Odysseus, despite his unprepossessing appearance and lack of the traditional graces of delivery (216-20), produces vigorously persuasive arguments (221-24). In this light, the driving movement of snow corresponds aptly to Odysseus' oratorical force.

¹³ It may be worth noting that even two of the three descriptive passages which mention snow also involve verbs of rapid motion: *σεύατ'* (14.227), *ἄλτο* (18.616).

be most conveniently understood as the fallen snow, the result of *niphās*, the falling snow.¹⁴ Density or abundance, however, appears to be a much less inherently distinctive property of snow than movement, for when the poet wants to underline such qualities in snow, he tends to rely upon the adjectives *tarpheus* (12.158; 19.357) and *thameios* (12.278). At no point in the poem, finally, is there any allusion to dazzling light as a special property of snow. This seems rather a pity; the blinding gleam of snow would otherwise have seemed to symbolize so fittingly both Hector's likeness to a fiery flame and his zeal to fire the Greek ships.¹⁵

The net effect of the simile in *Il.* 13.754 is, therefore, to magnify the seemingly inexhaustible momentum of Hector's warfare.¹⁶ A Homeric audience, conditioned by repetition to recognize a close symbolic relationship between snow and dynamic movement, would have easily isolated the dominant element of this simile and appreciated the *justesse* of likening a relentlessly surging hero to the essential nature of snow.¹⁷ It does not matter that the adjective *niphoenti* is morphologically static;¹⁸ within the *Iliad* the poetic imagination conceives of snow (*niphās*) as fundamentally kinetic. The English language is simply not equipped to offer a translation that is semantically graphic enough to indicate the force of *niphoenti* for a Homeric audience. In the mind's eye *niphoenti* must have suggested something more like "snowing" than "snowy," despite the paradox which this timid rendering evokes in our own minds.

As for the mountain, although its weight in this simile may not be as powerful as that of its qualifying epithet, its presence is, nevertheless, both necessary and poetically appropriate. First, the mountain frames the prevailing snow image of the simile in a landscape that is natural

¹⁴ Cf. E. Boisacq, *Dictionnaire Etymologique de la Langue Grecque* (Heidelberg and Paris 1923) 1053 and *LSJ*⁹ s.v. "*chiôn*."

¹⁵ 13.688, 39-40, 317-20. Pure whiteness is, however, a property of *chiôn* in one instance (10.437).

¹⁶ The dramatic culmination of this theme within Book 13 occurs seventy lines later in Hector's triumphant boast to Ajax (824-32).

¹⁷ The audience's prompt recognition of the precise force of *niphoenti* was facilitated by the association of other properties of snow, such as whiteness and coldness, with *chiôn*. Cf. 10.437, 22.152.

¹⁸ Cf. Carl D. Buck, "Studies in Greek Noun-Formation: Dental Terminations II.3: Words in *-eis*, *-essa*, *-en*," *CP* 16 (1921) 367-83.

to the eastern Mediterranean. In Greece, the Aegean, and along the littoral of Asia Minor, snow falls most frequently and most abundantly on the mountains.¹⁹ At the same time, the final aspect of Hector's action in 13.754-55 (διὰ δὲ Τρώων πέτετ' ἡδ' ἐπικούρων) tends to imply a comparison between the Trojan leader and the men he leads, between his movement and their immobility, between a great hero and his less glorious comrades.²⁰ In this light, the eminence of a mountain animated by sweeping snow corresponds perfectly to Hector's conspicuous *aristeia* throughout *Iliad* 13.

Although seemingly bald in language and contradictory in sense, the simile of 13.754 emerges from an examination of *both* of its elements as a model of poetic economy and pungency, a metaphorical translation of human action which defines and dignifies without imposing upon or diverting from the swift pace of heroic events.

¹⁹ This meteorological fact is reflected in Homer not only by the simile in 13.754 but also by 14.227, 18.616, and 20.385, where *niphoeis* seems to offer a ready and empirically correct epithet for mountains. See above, note 10.

²⁰ Cf. G. Weigel, *Eustathii Commentarii ad Homeri Iliadem* 3 (Leipzig 1829) 187. While Eustathius follows the scholiasts in believing that size and weightiness are the relevant factors in Hector's comparison to the mountain, he also suggests that the mountain may imply Hector's pre-eminence among his comrades (τὸ ὑπερφαίνεσθαι τῶν λοιπῶν).