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SOME ASPECTS OF STRUCTURAL SYMMETRY IN THE *ILIAD*

The question of structural symmetry in Homeric epics has been treated in many scholarly works.¹ As early as 1974, I tried to present in my dissertation my vision of the structural integrity of Homeric epics. The approval of my viewpoint on the part of renowned scholars A. F. Losev, V. N. Yarkho, E.G. Schmidt, I. M. Tronski and others encouraged me to publish its elaborated version as a monograph in Russian language.² At that point, the main pathos of my work was aimed at providing proofs in favour of the unity of Homeric epics, and I pointed to the structural symmetry as one of the principle arguments in favour of the idea. In the monograph published in German in 1986, I referred to the principle of structural integrity in order to present Homeric poems as carefully organized texts, i.e. texts developed in written form.³ Several tendencies can be distinguished in recent Homeric studies concerning the relevance of structural symmetry in Homeric epics. According to the supporters of the idea of oral poetry, the symmetric principle underlying the architecture of the poems suggests the use of the patterns of compositional organization; however, they are skeptical about the systemic application of the principle in sizeable poetic structures not intended for single recital. E.g., G. S. Kirk notes in connection with C. H. Whitman's schemes of structural symmetry: 'the reverse order of themes is surely so abstruse that it could only occur to a pen-and-

¹ The problem is reviewed in Гордзезиани Р., Проблемы гомеровского эпоса, Тбилиси 1978, 38 ff.; 102 ff.

² Гордзезиани Р., Проблемы ...

³ Gordesiani R., Kriterien der Schriftlichkeit und Mündlichkeit im homerischen Epos, Frankfurt am Main, Bern, New York 1986, 26 ff.

paper composer. The oral poet, if he needs such compositional aids, chooses simpler and more obvious correspondences.⁴

Part of modern analysts is very sceptical about the idea of structural symmetry as well as about any scholarly effort to trace it. E.g., L. S. Klein argues: 'The symmetry, which many unitarists are eager to detect ..., cannot bring together all of the *Iliad's* parts, as the symmetry is mostly fictitious.'⁵ Another analyst, K. Stanley, who distinguished between several stages of the formation of the *Iliad* and speaks about the modification of its latest fixed version to fit the Panathenaic festivals, on the contrary, finds the role of structural symmetry in the *Iliad* very important. According to K. Stanley, the so-called principle of ring composition can be traced in the structure of individual parts as well as groups of songs.⁶

The majority of unitarists believe that the evidence of structural symmetry in Homeric epics is an infallible proof in favour of their integrity, as none of the possible alternatives of multiple authorship will allow integration of detached parts of brilliant poetic pieces through the principles of symmetry.

Consequently, the question of structural symmetry in the *Iliad* still remains relevant. In the present paper, I will attempt to consider some of its aspects. Naturally, it would be appropriate to begin with answering the following principal question: is it justified and possible to analyze the narrative structure of the *Iliad*?

Whether we agree or not with ideas cultivated in Homeric studies regarding the evidence of the principles of structural symmetry in Homeric poems, it appears out of question that the poem, as well as its parts, is a structure. Out of the numerous definitions of structure, I find the most adequate and acceptable in terms of literary studies the following one: structure is a system of elements which are so distinctly interrelated that a change in one of them entails a change in all the rest.⁷ Depending on the type of the structure to be analyzed and the goal of the analysis, the structure can be broken down into entirely different sets of elements. Various hierarchic levels can be traced in a structure.

If we take interest in revealing the principles of compositional organization of a sizeable piece of poetry, viewed as a structure – the *Iliad* in our case – it will be reasonable to distinguish between three hierarchical levels:

⁴ Kirk G. S., *Homer and the Epic*, Cambridge 1965, 186.

⁵ Клейн Л. С., *Анатомия Илиады*, Петербург 1998, 10.

⁶ Stanley K., *The Shield of Homer. Narrative Structure in the Iliad*, Princeton 1993.

⁷ Лотман И. М., *Анализ поэтического текста*, Ленинград 1972, 12.

a. Microstructures – the smallest constituents of the poem. They can be defined as autonomous units that are obviously structured to certain rules of compositional organization. In our case, the best object for observation would be, for example, the words by the characters of the poem.

b. Megastructure – parts of the poem which in terms of size and component structure can be placed between micro – and macrostructures. Here belong sizeable catalogues (e.g. *The Catalogue of Ships*), extensive descriptions (e.g. *The Shield of Achilles*), individual scenes (e.g. *The Encounter of Hector and Andromache*) or groups of scenes, individual songs or groups of songs (e.g. Song I or a groups of songs), etc.

c. Macrostructure or the whole poem, viewed as an extensive and complex system of elements.

a. The most profound analysis of microstructures, in my opinion, was undertaken by D. Lohmann.⁸ He focused on the characters' words. Analyzing each of the microstructures, the scholar singled out sentences as their constituent elements, which is quite natural, and juxtaposes them in terms of similarity or polarity of meaning. According to D. Lohmann, two principles prevail in the composition of words: ring composition *abcb'a'* and parallel division *a, b, c ... a', b', c'*. However, the third, so-called free sequence principle can also be traced. The analysis of Diomedes' well-known address to Glaucus (6, 123-143) can show to what extent it is possible to identify the principle of compositional organization underlying a particular microstructure.

123-126 opening, identity query.

a. 127. Threat: Unhappy are they whose children face my might

b. 128 But and if thou art one of immortals...

c. 129 than will I not fight with the heavenly gods

d. 130/131 Nay, for even the son of Dryas, mighty Lycurgus, lived not long, seeing that he strove with heavenly gods

e. 132-139^a citing an example (reference to a paradigm)

d'. 139^b-140 and he lived not for long, seeing that he was hated of all the immortal gods

c'. 141 So would not I be minded to fight against the blessed gods

b'. 142 But if thou art of men...

a'. 143 Threat: draw nigh, that thou mayest the sooner enter the toils of destruction.

⁸ Lohmann D., *Die Komposition der Reden in der Ilias*, Berlin 1970.

In this case, the use of the principle of ring composition is obvious.⁹ Naturally, the principle of compositional organization may not be fully observed, which according to D. Lohmann is to be attributed to interpolation as well as to the poet's own choice to give priority to logical necessity over structural consistency.

b. In fact, the analysis at the level of megastructures also reveals the poet's loyalty to the same principles of compositional organization. E.g. as I pointed out on several occasions¹⁰, *The Shield of Achilles* (XVIII, 483-608) is structured to the principle of ring composition. The constituents of megastructure in this particular case are the images depicted on the shield. In my opinion, the elements of the shield make up the following composition:

A 483-489 The sky – the earth – the sea and natural phenomena

B 490-508 Two cities: the first city – peaceful scenes

C 509-540 Two cities: the second city – bloody battles

D 541-549 The scene of peaceful work in the field

E 550-560 The realm of the king holding a scepter in his hand

D' 561-572 Garden; peaceful work; circular dance

C' 573-586 The bloody attack of lions on a flock of sheep

587-589 Peaceful flock

B' 590-606 Joyful song and round dance

A' 607-608 The power of Oceanus

Independently from my observation, K. Stanley came to the same conclusion through the detailed analysis of the Shield.¹¹ Similar principles of compositional organization especially that of ring composition can be traced in other megastructures.¹² Naturally, the use of the principles of compositional organization is not imperative – structural anomalies come across where required by the logic of the development of a scene or a song.

c. The elements for macrostructural analysis, i.e. the analysis at the level of the whole poem, are, in my opinion, the so-called action blocks, which at the same times can be treated as megastructures and the constituents of which, on their part, appear as the so-called action lines or action scenes. The analysis re-

⁹ Lohmann D., op. cit., 13 ff.

¹⁰ Гордџиани Р., Проблемы композиционной организации в раннегреческом эпосе (А. Ф. Лосеву к 90-летию со дня рождения, Тбилиси 1983, 74 ff. = *Lekta*, 156 ff.); Gordeziani R., *Kriterien...*, 126 ff.

¹¹ Stanley K., op. cit., 13 ff.

¹² Khintibidze Z., *The Principles of Structural Symmetry in the Composition of the Songs of the Iliad*, synopsis of the thesis for the Degree of the Candidate of Philological Sciences, Tbilisi 1988.

vealed that action blocks are interlinked through the principle of ring composition, while the principle binding their constituent action units is that of parallel division. Consequently, scenes in each block are arranged according to the free sequence principle so that the scenes of a particular block could balance the scenes of the corresponding block structurally connected to them through the principle of parallel division. The only exception is the central block, where scenes are structured to the principle of ring composition. This is quite natural as the central block is not balanced by any other block.¹³ If we attempt to present in the maximally schematic way the arrangement principle of blocks and scenes with respect to the central block, we will receive the following table:

Block	Song	Succession of Scenes
A	1	a b c d e f
B	1	a b c
C	2	a b c d
D	3	a b c d e f
E	4-5	a b c d e f g h i j k l m
F	6	a b c d e f g h
G	7	a b c d e f
H	7	intermezzo – funeral, wall
I	8	a b c d
J	9	a b c d e
K	11	a b c d e f g
L	12	a b c b' a'
K'	13	a' b' c' d' e' f' g'
J'	14	a' b' c' d' e'
I'	14-15	a' b' c' d'
H'	16	intermezzo – catalogue of Myrmidons
G'	16	a' b' c' f' d' e' f'
F'	17-18	a' b' c' d' e' f' g' h'
E'	18-21	a' b' c' d' e' f' g' h' i' j' k' l' m'
D'	22	a' b' c' d' e' f'
C'	23	a' b' c' d'
B'	24	a' b' c'
A'	24	a' b' c' d' e' f'

L. S. Klein questions the existence of the like symmetry. To corroborate his skepsis, he refers to the parallelism between Songs I and XXIV, i.e. between A and A' blocks as presented in my book.¹⁴

¹³ Cf. Гордезиани Р., Проблемы гомеровского эпоса, 45ff.; Gordesiani R., Kriterien..., 26 ff.

¹⁴ Клейн Л. С., op. cit., 219ff.

I

- a. Chryses goes to Agamemnon with a ransom to bring back her daughter.
- b. Agamemnon refuses to allow her father to ransom her
- c. An argument between Achilles and Agamemnon (Achilles drops out of fighting for a while)
- d. Achilles and Briseis (abduction of Briseis)
- e. Chryseis is taken to her town (Chryseis's delight)
- f. The Achaean's destruction and the funerals are over. The ritual. The feast

XXIV

- a' Priam goes to Achilles to ransom his dead son's body
- b' Achilles accepts the ransom and returns Hector's body
- c' A dispute between Achilles and Priam (Achilles drops out of fighting for a while)
- d' Achilles and Briseis (Achilles goes to bed with Briseis, who has come back)
- e' Priam takes his son's body to his city (The laments of the Trojans)
- f' The burial of Hector and mourning over him. The ritual. The feast

Klein pays attention to the fact that the juxtaposed scenes are not always counterparts in terms of their importance. Although he does not deny either abundance of parallels between them, he argues that this can be put down to many different reasons but not to structural symmetry. Eventually, as an analyst, he admits that both songs could have been composed and elaborated by the same aoidus.¹⁵ In my opinion, several points should be taken into account when considering structural symmetry: elements should be compared not in terms of their importance for the story development, but in terms of their ability to balance each other through polarity or similarity. Naturally, the argument between Achilles and Agamemnon in Song I is more important to the story development than the dispute between Achilles and Priam in Song XXIV; however, in structural terms they are counterparts. Let us recall that many homerologists find quite unnatural Achilles' anger in this episode of Song XXIV; however, at the level of structural parallelism, this unexpected tension is essential to maintain balance between the episodes. Besides, again in the terms of story development, the impressive scene of taking Briseis away from Achilles from Song I and a couple of lines from Song XXIV (675-6), which only

¹⁵ Клейн Л. С., *op. cit.*, 220.

mention that Achilles went to bed with Briseis, may at first sight seem rather unequal in terms of their importance. It is no incidence that some philologists find Briseis' brief reappearance in this highly dramatic episode somewhat strange. However, again in terms of structural symmetry, the element is indispensable in the final Song of the poem.¹⁶

b) Naturally, if we focus only on the parallelisms between Songs I and XXIV, it may prove difficult to argue with those who find the parallels incidental or otherwise motivated. On the other hand, the like correlations make up a fully developed system in the poem and embrace the whole of it. Let us assume that Songs I and XXIV are typologically similar and therefore show parallelism of scenes. However, the absolute majority of structurally interlinked scenes cannot be regarded as the unity of story segments (action segments) whose parallelism can be due to typological similarity – e.g. G and G' blocks, which link the story segments in Songs VII and XVI.

G VII

- a. Hector joins the fighting again
- b. The battles where the Trojans have an advantage
- c. Athena is concerned with the positions of the Achaeans. Apollo advises her not to interfere. Athena follows Apollo's advice
- d. Helenus calls on Hector to challenge to single combat the most gallant of the Achaean heroes. The call is accepted
- e. The anxiety of the Achaean heroes. Nestor brings shame upon the Achaean heroes
- f. Single combat between Hector and Aias. Aided by Apollo, Hector fights against Aias with dignity

G' XVI

- a' Patroclus joins the fighting
- b' The battle where the Achaeans have an advantage
- c' Zeus is worried about the possibility of having his son killed. Hera advises him not to interfere. Zeus follows Hera's advice
- d' Single combat between Sarpedon and Glaucus
- d' Glaucus appeals to Hector and the Trojan heroes to fight around Sarpedon's body. The appeal is accepted.
- e' Zeus inspires Hector with fear. Apollo puts him to shame.
- f' Single combat between Hector and Patroclus. Aided by Apollo, Hector kills Patroclus.

¹⁶ For more details cf. R. Gordesiani, *Kriterien...*, 55 ff.

In G', the poet skillfully doubles the motivation for Patroclus' combat. He shifts the main accent on Patroclus' and Sarpedon's combat, almost avoiding Hector's duel with Patroclus as Apollo's intervention determined its outcome. All what Hector has to do is to finish Apollo's deed and stab a lance into wounded Patroclus. The motivation for Patroclus' combat is obviously doubled. This episode clearly shows how a poet can allow a slight deviation from the principle of structural symmetry if this is dictated by the inner logic of the episode.¹⁷

c) The blocks of the poem, as well as their elements, are structured to a particular logic and follow the rules of symmetry and balance. Therefore, no matter how hard we try, the like parallelism cannot be traced between other, for instance, A and G' or A' and G blocks.

What can account for such symmetry at any compositional level of the poem: coincidence or poetic design? In my opinion, at the microstructural level the symmetry is due to an unconscious adherence to the tendency of applying some particular forms of compositional organization – in our case, structural symmetry – characteristic of the artistic culture of a particular period.¹⁸ The degree of awareness obviously increases with megastructures, while at the level of macrostructures, i.e. the overall structure of the poem, the awareness becomes almost dominant. Naturally, this does not mean that the poem knowingly matches the schemes from different parts of the poem; it would be more realistic to believe that structuring the general compositional layout of the poem, the author had in mind the principles of composition that were closer to him, while the degree of symmetry that can be traced throughout the poem can be explained by the impulse for self-organization, which may exist within the poet at the level of the unconscious.

Is it possible to ascribe the above-presented symmetrical arrangement to the efforts of the 6th century BC redactors, who used to the Homeric text for official holidays or for didactic purposes? The principles of structural symmetry in the Homeric epics are distinguished by their universality. They are found at any level of compositional organization. Although individual elements of ring composition and parallel division can be found in the artistic culture of many various periods, their use in those cultures is not universal and all-embracing. It suffices to compare the text of *The Shield of Achilles* with the text of *The Shield of Heracles*, obviously influenced

¹⁷ Gordeziani R., Kriterien..., 45 ff.

¹⁸ Gordeziani R., Die Strukturellen Gesetzmäßigkeiten der Aufstiegs – und Niedergangsperioden in der altgriechischen Kultur, Phasis, 1, 1999, 49 ff. = Lektia, 283 ff.

by the former, to notice that the principle of compositional organization found in *The Shield of Achilles* is missing in *The Shield of Heracles*. The same is true about the Hymn to Aphrodite by Homer and other so-called Homeric hymns. The first is clearly marked by the above-considered Homeric principles of compositional organization, while in the rest of the hymns no such principles can be traced.¹⁹ The same principal difference can be found between the Homeric epics and the poems by his junior contemporary, Hesiod. Moreover, comparison of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* reveals the certain variability of the compositional principles. This may suggest that corresponding modification of the vision of compositional structure taking place within the same period (e.g. the Geometric Age) could have been reflected on the works of one poet. It appears obvious that the above-considered principles of compositional organization, as well as the extent of their application, fully fit within the context of the Geometric Age.²⁰ It is not likely that the use of the principles could have been likewise markedly characteristic of the Greek poets and 'editors' of the post-Geometric Age.

The question of structural symmetry is closely related to the question of integrity of the *Iliad*. If we accept the thesis of its structural integrity, we should certainly admit that the poem is a strictly organized single structure based on the intercorrelation of symmetrically arranged blocks, i.e. A O A', B O B', etc. Naturally, the high degree of organization suggests that it could have been composed as a written piece.²¹

¹⁹ Gordesiani R., *Kriterien...*, 126 ff.

²⁰ Gordesiani R., *Kriterien...*, 125 ff.

²¹ For more details, cf. Gordesiani R., *Kriterien...*