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## ON THE ORIGIN OF THE TROCHAIC CAESURA AND THE BUCOLIC DIAERESIS

*Abstract:* Linguistic theories of metre can account for a break near mid-line as a kind of spontaneity, based on instincts for symmetry and the like. Hence the caesura is predictable typologically. But diaeresis marks the beginning of a line, and hence constitutes an inceptive cue. How can one account for the regularisation of a new beginning, the bucolic diaeresis, immediately before the end of the hexameter line? The retrogression and the resumption of the *συρτός*, a surviving Greek dactylic round dance, precisely at the fifth foot, give the clue. Both the caesura and the diaeresis are seen to emerge immediately from the form of this dance, which is attested in an ancient inscription; it may therefore lay claim to be a descendent of the original dance of the Muses.

The opening line of the *Odyssey*,

Ἄνδρα μοι ἔννεπε, μοῦσα, πολύτροπον, ὃς μάλα πολλὰ

well illustrates the two most basic articulations of the epic hexameter line: the trochaic caesura, after *μοῦσα*, and the bucolic diaeresis, between *πολύτροπον* and *ὃς μάλα πολλὰ*. What is the origin of these ‘cuts’ and ‘divisions’? A commendable instinct in linguists suggests that the answers to metrical questions should be found in the structure of language itself. Sidney Allen says, for example, “since Greek metrical patterns, unlike those of classical Latin, were, so far as we know, evolved specifically for Greek, it is likely that they represent, in Meillet’s terms, ‘a stylization or normalization of the natural rhythm of language’.”<sup>1</sup> Sapir has it that verse is “merely the language itself, running in its natural grooves.”<sup>2</sup> More concretely, Gregory Nagy’s derivation of the hexameter conforms to his conviction that “traditional phraseology generated meter rather than vice versa.”<sup>3</sup> Yet the case of Homer presents some rather

<sup>1</sup> W. Sidney Allen, *Vox Graeca*, 3rd edn., Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987, pg. 132.

<sup>2</sup> E. Sapir in A. M. Devine and L. D. Stephens, *The Prosody of Greek Speech*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1994, pg. 101.

<sup>3</sup> Gregory Nagy, *Comparative Studies in Greek and Indic Meter*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1974, gp. 143.

obvious counters to this view. As Pierre Chantraine has said, “*il apparaît que le rythme naturel de la langue grecque s’adaptait mal à la métrique rigide de l’hexamètre dactylique.*”<sup>4</sup> Chantraine gives numerous examples of numerous forms of phonological and even morphological adaptations to metrical constraints in Homer.

The Ancients themselves have bequeathed us the notion that the elements of a metrical pattern are ‘feet’, and here is a clue to a possibly significant extralinguistic cause of metrical articulations. Ancient Greek verse was either danced or danceable; the performance of such ‘verse’ involved the body with the voice, a coordinating and syncopating of the drumbeat produced by the feet upon the ground and the stresses and emphases produced by the voice and the higher consciousness. As Plato describes them in the *Philebus*, rhythms and metres are names for the numerical measurement of the experience of bodily motions (17d). And in the *Laws*:

τῆ δὴ τῆς κινήσεως τάξει ῥυθμὸς ὄνομα εἶη, τῆ δ’ αὖ τῆς  
φωνῆς, τοῦ τε ὀξέος ἅμα καὶ βαρέος συγκεραννυμένων,  
ἄρμονία ὄνομα προσαγορεύοιτο, χορεία δὲ τὸ ξυναμφότερον  
κληθεῖη. (665a)

As for the arrangement of motion, its name is “rhythm”; while the arrangement of the voice, of the sharp (ὀξύς) and the heavy (βαρύς) mixed together, is given the name “harmony”; and “choreia” [dance] is what the combination is called.

A certain line of scholarship eschews extra-linguistic forces in its accounts of metre<sup>5</sup>. Plato is explicit, however, that rhythms and metres are measures not of speech but of bodily motion. There is an overwhelming *prima facie* case for the influence of dance upon metrical form in ancient Greek verse. The entire list of descriptive terms generated by poets and grammarians, such as arsis, thesis, the foot itself (πούς), period, strophe and chorus-not to mention the use of the verb βαίνειν (or ἐμβαίνειν - see, e.g., Plato’s *Alcibiades* 108a, c) and the noun βάσις (*Republic* 399e, 400a) to describe the performance of a foot-must either be ignored on this line, or be understood to participate in some extended metaphor of societal and cultural compass.

Within the *Odyssey* itself there are a number of depictions of dance accompanying song (e.g., 1.150-5, 4.17-9), but singers are also depicted as soloists. The emergence of the hexameter as a purely ‘aoidic’ phenomenon may be compared to the ‘submergence’ of folk dance rhythms in the modern classical repertoire, where soloists, ‘orchestra’, and audience alike remain seated. When Alcinoüs wants

<sup>4</sup> Pierre Chantraine, *Grammaire Homérique*, Paris: Librairie C. Klincksieck, 1942, pg. 94.

<sup>5</sup> see, e.g., Devine and Stephens, pgs. 100-1.

to impress his mysterious guest with the skill of the Phaeacians' dancing, however, after they have embarrassed him somewhat with their showing against Odysseus in athletics, the community reverts to a full, epic display: the appointed officials smooth out the dancing space, Demodocus proceeds to the centre, and the nine young bachelors, the Muses' alter egos, in their first maturity and practised at the steps, circle him and beat the divine dance ground with their feet (8.258-264). The dance comes first. We may imagine Demodocus rooted at the centre, his consciousness suffused on all sides with the Muses' rhythm, which is the matrix from which his syncopated phrases take shape and become winged. Under these circumstances, we should certainly not be surprised that the divisions and emphases of the dance rhythm may leave their tangible mark on the phrasings of the verse.

There is a modern remnant of ancient dance that survives and thrives in the folk tradition of Greece, a dactylic round dance called the *συρτός*. The name itself, *συρτός*, carries the stamp of antiquity; a Boeotian inscription from the 1st century A.D. refers to the dance of the *συρτοί*. While this is a late date in relation to Homeric or Classical times, the dance has apparently survived for nearly two millennia since then, and what is more, it is referred to, even in the first century inscription, as the *πάτριος ὄρχησις*: the dance of the forefathers. (Taken as descriptive rather than limiting, the adjective *πάτριος* yields an even more intriguing sense: the dance of the ancestry, that is, the catalogue dance.) This dactylic round dance of the twentieth century clearly has a prodigious history. It has been neglected by philology as a clue to epic form: what is remarkable is that in its articulations we may find the original epic articulations, the bucolic diæresis and the trochaic caesura.

The basic steps of the *συρτός* take four measures, the first two in a traveling step round the circle and the second two in what is called a pausing step in place, which involves a retrogression. The sequence can be expanded to six or eight or more, simply by adding traveling steps and pausing steps, at the end of which the whole sequence can be repeated indefinitely as the dancers proceed in the round. The musicologist Thrasybulos Georgiades describes its affect thus:

As one dances this round, one feels the elastic quality of this rhythm, but at the same time the static-loose juxtaposition of the individual temporal units. A “give and take” is expressed also by the succession of steps on a larger scale: several steps forward, then a hesitation and a few steps backward.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Thrasybulos Georgiades, *Greek Music, Verse and Dance*, tr. Erwin Benedikt and Marie Louise Martinez, New York: Merlin Press, pg. 135.

In the ancient world, the epic line of verse and dance was viewed in at least two radically different ways: in the first case, as for example in Herodotus, the poetic verse is referred to as hexametric, *i.e.*, as composed of six dance measures; in the second, the epic *dance* is described in Aristotle as a *two*-part thing, of seventeen elements divided into nine on the right and eight on the left, where these elements are *syllables*:

...τὸ ἔπος δεκαεπτὰ...βαίνεται δ' ἐν μὲν τῷ δεξιῷ ἑννέα  
συλλαβαίς, ἐν δὲ τῷ ἀριστερῷ ὀκτώ.

(*Metaphysics* 1093a29-b1)

Note that Aristotle speaks of the syllable as a thing one treads (βαίνεται). This usage, where a syllable is a measure of a dance, is a welcome and long-missing complement to the notion of a 'foot' as a measure of poetic speech. Such terms of description suggest a long cross-pollination, arising from the association between the epic dance and the epic song, such that by the time of Aristotle the two were perceived to be mutually definitive in their structure. But the former description merely in terms of six dactyls suggests a more independent and abstract relation of dance to verse, and the existence of two such synchronic descriptions of the relation, both ancient, and with almost no overlap in content, suggests the presence of an independent matrix which was interpreted and to some extent even intuited in terms of its monodic accompaniment. It is at least intelligible that with the demise of the ancient world-and perhaps even earlier, with the demise of the living tradition of epic composition as accompaniment-the underlying dance, a diachronically invariant matrix, could have continued to survive-no longer interpreted as "epic", dissociated even from a hexametric structure, but still truly a "dance of the forefathers".

Here follows a description of a six-measure *συρτός*, adapted from *Greek Dances* by Ted Petrides; in his words, "in addition to the simple enjoyment of the steps and the music there is a rare sense of human continuity in the experience of dancing a dance the ancient Greeks were performing 2,000 years ago"<sup>7</sup>:

Starting Position: Feet together facing obliquely Right.

*Foot Step Tempo Traveling Step to the Right. Begin on right foot.*

- |   |   |       |   |
|---|---|-------|---|
| 1 | 1 | slow  | Step to the Right on the right foot.                      |
|   | 2 | quick | Step to the Right on the left foot slightly behind right. |
|   | 3 | quick | Step to the Right on the right foot.                      |

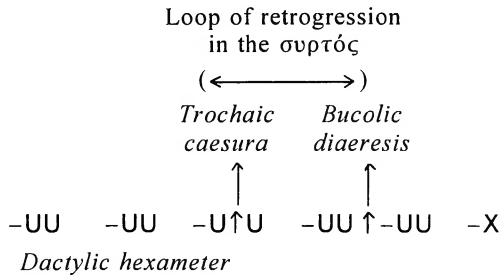
<sup>7</sup> Ted Petrides, *Greek Dances*, Athens: Lycabettus Press, 1975, pgs. 73-4.

- Continue Traveling Step to the Right. Begin on left foot.*
- |   |   |       |   |
|---|---|-------|---|
| 2 | 4 | slow  | Step to the Right on the left foot in front of right.     |
|   | 5 | quick | Step to the Right on the right foot alongside left.       |
|   | 6 | quick | Step to the Right on the left foot in front of the right. |
- Pausing Step in place. Begin on right foot.*
- |   |   |       |  |
|---|---|-------|--|
| 3 | 7 | slow  | Step to the Right on right foot.   |
|   | 8 | quick | Step in front of right foot on the left foot.                                  |
|   | 9 | quick | Shift weight from left foot back onto right foot, which steps back into place. |
- Continue Pausing Step in place. Begin on left foot.*
- |   |    |       |   |
|---|----|-------|---|
| 4 | 10 | slow  | Step diagonally backwards to the Left on the left foot.                                     |
|   | 11 | quick | Step diagonally backwards on the right foot behind left foot.                               |
|   | 12 | quick | Shift weight from right foot back onto left foot which steps forward into its former place. |
- Resume Traveling Step. Begin on right foot.*
- |   |    |       |   |
|---|----|-------|---|
| 5 | 13 | slow  | Step to the Right on the right foot.                      |
|   | 14 | quick | Step to the Right on the left foot slightly behind right. |
|   | 15 | quick | Step to the Right on the right foot.                      |
- End Traveling Step*
- |   |    |       |   |
|---|----|-------|---|
| 6 | 16 | slow  | Step to the Right on the left foot in front of right. |
|   | 17 | quick | Step to the Right on the right foot alongside left.   |
- (rest) *(Prepare to begin the next period, once again with a Traveling Step to the Right on the right foot.)*

Where we look to the verbal composition that might have accompanied this dance, in which we observe caesura and diaeresis, we should first note the obvious fact that a fresh word marks the beginning of each hexameter line. The most basic division in the metrical structure, that between successive lines, is therefore marked by diaeresis. If diaeresis in general has an inceptive quality, we motivate our first articulation: we expect a sense of rhythmic resumption between the fourth and fifth feet, because of the resumption of the traveling step. This resumptive impetus in the dance is marked verbally by the bucolic diaeresis.

The trochaic caesura is a second emergence. Hexameter poets appear to have favoured a word division inside the third foot which corresponds to a division marked by a shift in weight and in the

direction of circling, between the eighth and the ninth steps of the traditional round dance (see above). The caesura usually marks a division in the phrasing as well, so that quite literally the poet may have conceived his turns of phrase to match the turn in the dance. Two structural tenets of the traditional analysis of the hexameter, the trochaic caesura and the bucolic diaeresis, can therefore be seen to reflect the underlying rhythmic articulation of the epic dance—they mark the beginning and the end of a loop of retrogression—if this dance was at all similar in its steps, as it was in its rhythm, to a modern *συρτός*:



It is perhaps not a coincidence that the word *πολύτροπον* fills in the loop between these two articulations in the opening line of the *Odyssey*. Not only the man, but the verse itself turns here.