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Journey to the Center of an Epithet:
How Compound Adjectives Function as Nodes
of Light and Sound in 'Book Two' of
Homer's *Iliad*

J. M. Wilcox

Wilde closes his preface to *The Picture of Dorian Gray* with the following verbal sparkler: We can forgive a man for making a useful thing as long as he does not admire it. The only excuse for making a useless thing is that one admires it intensely. All art is quite useless.¹ I am unashamed to admit that the topic of this paper is quite useless. My aim is to show how specific epithets, in the second book of Homer's great epic of war and its unsparing and attritive effects on the human spirit, operate within their poetic scope, the sensory properties they possess, and their integral relationship with each other and the poem as a whole. The best poetry deals not only with natural images but with lofty thoughts, spiritual suggestions and obscure relations. The greater part of natural truth is hidden in processes too minute for vision and in harmonies too large, in vibrations, cohesions and in affinities.² In the two preceding sentences, Ernest Fenollosa encompasses the basic functions and supreme actions of nature and the universe, i.e., what is seen, as well as what is unseen, as depicted in Chinese poetry, and he goes on to say the Chinese get the job done with great power and beauty. The Greeks also get the job done, and Fenollosa could just as well have been

referring to them in this passage, and in particular to Homer, for the Iliadic epithets in question, the focus of which in this paper will be on compound adjectives, in THEIR performances harmonize, cohere and vibrate, creating a structure massive and sublime, pumped with a rhythm flashing and muscular, and filled with sounds clashing and slippery. The epithets contain and emanate their own 物理 (wùlǐ) (cow-jade>thing-principles), what Ai Chung-liang Huang defines as 'Patterns of Organic Energy'.³ Regarding 'obscure relations' of the best poetry, Aristotle, in the *Poetics*, tells us flatly:

πολὺ δὲ μέγιστον τὸ μεταφορικὸν εἶναι.
μόνον γὰρ τοῦτο ὅντε παρ' ἄλλον ἔστι λαβεῖν εὖ-
φύϊας τε σημειῶν ἔστι· τὸ γὰρ εὖ μεταφέρειν τὸ τὸ
ὅμοιον θεωρεῖν ἔστιν.

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...but by far the greatest thing is word-shifting or verbal mutation. For that alone is not seizable from another but is a sign of supreme creativity; for the knack of image-questing is to behold the jointness of things. (10.16-7)

Hence, according to Aristotle, brilliant metaphor (and here I shall include simile) is what sets off the poet of genius. Cf. 'I am soft sift/In an hourglass' (Hopkins, *The Wreck of the Deutschland*), 'The sky was an inverted cup of blue metal.' (Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*), 'The sun reddening, like a fierce lion in his chains/Descended' (Blake, *Vala*). Similes dot the *Iliad* like miniature constellations which form beautiful autotrophic interlocking patterns, and seem to impart to each other a telepompic light, creating a network of multiple illuminations.

In the following scene, at the behest of Athene, Odusseus is exhorting the men (Attention! This is only a test!), who are virtually tripping over each other clambering to the ships, to go back to the place of assembly on the beach, for Agamemnon had suggested that they return home because they could not seem to make any headway in breaking through the well-fortified Trojan gates. Homer compares the sound of the inevitable and natural confusion (i.e., voices of dismay, shallow water-thrashing, tool-tapping etc.) to that of a wave just at the point where it uncurls:

Ὡς ὁ γε κοιρανέων δέεπε στρατόν· οἱ δ' ἀγορήνδε
 αὔτις ἐπεσσεύοντο νεῶν ἄπο καὶ κλισιάων
 ἤχη, ὥς ὅτε κύμα πολυφλοίσβοιο θαλάσσης
 αἰγιαλῷ μεγάλῳ βρέμεται, σμαραγεῖ δέ τε πόντος. 210

Thus he was poisoning his power, engaging the companies as tour-inspector, and they shot back
 in turn to the meeting place from their ships and huts
 with a clashy rumble, as when a swell of the poluphloisbous sound-abounding undulating soft-splashing hard-pounding sea
 roars on the long-sonic shore and the deep explodes with a dashy tumble. (2.207-10)⁴

The unbroken unimpeded momentum of five consecutive dactyls in line 207 forges ahead, matching the action of Odysseus pacing throughout the host of many men. From 207 to 209, deltas and gammas bang, sigmas hurry, and kappas and khis clatter. (Cf. Crane's novel, *The Red Badge of Courage*, whose structure is loosely based on that of the *Iliad*,

where to a certain degree, similar overall sound effects (voiced bilabials dominating) can be heard from the lively onomatopoeic description of Henry Fleming hastening into action after being kicked awake by a fellow soldier: His canteen banged rhythmically upon his thigh, and his haversack bobbed softly. His musket bounced a trifle from his shoulder at each stride and made his cap feel uncertain upon his head.⁵) The dentals and palatals bracket and squeeze the sibilants creating a striking contrast of sounds which mirrors the action on the beach of the men running back to the place of assembly. Propelled by a prolix and swishing rhythm, the aural effect is built up to a beautiful aquatic crescendo in 209 with ‘poluphloísboio thalássēs’, a compact and efficient image containing one of Homer’s most inspired compound epithets, a tight yet effervescent lucosonic ballet, a virtual *son et lumière*, a true wonder of sound and light. One might call to mind Hokusai’s ‘View Through the Waves off the Coast of Kanagawa’, from the series, *Fugaku Sanjuu Rokkei*, with the prehensile claw-like wave with many two-tone mini-claws and its light-and-dark-blue-striped belly producing various white dots of sea-spray. Where the visual element dominates in Hokusai’s Ukiyo-e woodblock print, the aural commands Homer’s image, although both elements are dexterously interfused and delicately complement each other like the light and dark areas of a crescent or gibbous moon.

Where the goddess Athene appears to Akhilleus alone, invisible to the rest of the army, in ‘Book I’, in ‘Book II’ she assumes the form of a sacred herald, the apparent guise in which she peps up the Greek soldiers who are tired of fighting, exhausted and lonely, and want to go home. In ‘Book I’, her theophany is dramatically necessary, for she is sent by Here to admonish Akhilleus, who is in the process of making a

decision that could result in the death of Agamemnon, the commander-in-chief of all the Greek forces:

ἦος ὁ ταῦθ' ὥρμαινε κατὰ φρένα καὶ κατὰ θυμόν,
 ἔλκετο δ' ἐκ κολεοῖο μέγα ξίφος, ἦλθε δ' Ἀθήνη
 οὐρανόθεν· πρὸ γὰρ ἦκε θεὰ λευκώλενος Ἥρη, 195
 ἄμφω ὁμῶς θυμῷ φιλέουσά τε κηδομένη τε·
 στῇ δ' ὄπιθεν, ξανθῆς δὲ κόμης ἔλε Πηλείωνα
 οἷω φαινομένη· τῶν δ' ἄλλων οὐ τις ὄρατο·
 θάμβησεν δ' Ἀχιλλεύς, μετὰ δ' ἐτράπετ', ἀντίκα δ' ἔγνω
 Παλλὰδ' Ἀθηναίην· δεινὴ δέ οἱ ὅσσε φάανθεν· 200

While he was whirling these possible choices in heart and mind,
 and was drawing the sizable sword from its sheath, Athene came
 down

from the sky, for Here the white-armed goddess sent her ahead,
 who loved both men in her heart equally and truly cared for them.
 She stood behind son of Peleus and grabbed with a tug his yellow
 hair,

appearing to him alone, for no one else beheld her.

Akhilleus was stunned and swiveled around in a dazzle, and direct-
 ly identified

Pallas Athene Dashing Girl, Brandisher, for her terrible eyes spar-
 kled like quasars;... (1.193-200)

Conversely, in 'Book II', Athene reveals herself not only to Akhilleus,
 but to the other men as well, where Homer paints her as cheerleader for
 the Greek cause, exhorting the men to stay and fight, with kinetic éclat:

οἱ δ' ἄμφ' Ἀτρεΐωνα διοτρεφέες βασιλῆες 445
 θῦνον κρίνοντας, μετὰ δὲ γλανκῶπις Ἀθήνη,
 αἰγίδ' ἔχουσ' ἐρίτιμον ἀγήραον ἀθανάτην τε,
 τῆς ἑκατὸν θύσανοι παγχρύσειοι ἡερέθονται,
 πάντες ἐῖπλεκέες, ἑκατόμβοιοι δὲ ἕκαστος·
 σὺν τῇ παιφάσσουσα διέσσυτο λαὸν Ἀχαιῶν 450
 ὀτρύνουσ' ἰέναι· ἐν δὲ σθένος ὤρσεν ἐκάστω
 καρδίῃ ἄλληκτον πολεμίζειν ἥδὲ μάχεσθαι.

So Dis-gelled kings, encircling son of Atreus, brisk and regrouping,
 were rushing, sifting the host, and green-eyed Athene was in their
 midst,

bearing the metallic gorgonic super-precious battle-cape, ageless
 and deathless,

from which a hundred solid-gold edgy tassels dangle and toss in the
 air,

all well-woven, twine-tight, and each worth a hundred screw-horn
 oxen.

With this she twinkled and zoomed through the troops of Akhaioi
 sparking their movement; and she fused force, shot volts relayed
 nonstop in each heart to dash bodies, bash heads, to battle and
 clash. (2.445-52)

In 446, Athene is described as 'glaukopicous', which I have here translated 'green-eyed'. Homer's compound epithet, 'glaukōpis', formed from the adjective, 'glaukós' and the noun, 'ōps'. 'Glaukós' has a primary meaning of 'gleaming' or 'silvery' (i.e. an aspect of the sea) and a secondary meaning of 'bluish green' or 'gray', the former seemingly

lacking a notion of color, but the latter containing a notion of color.⁶ ‘Ōps’ (eye, face) is derived from the future root (OP) of the verb ‘horāō’ (I see). ‘Glaúks’ (owl), i.e., the ‘glaring’ or ‘gleaming-eyed’ (bird), may also be part of the equation because of Athene’s association with this animal (cf. ‘boōpis’ (ox-eyed) as applied to Here). If the color green is presented as the dominant component of ‘glaukōpis’ in 446, then the color blue, if viewed as the principal element in ‘diotrephées’ (Dis-gelled) in 445, may serve as an imagistic parallel, Dis (an old nominative for Zeus) being the god of the blue sky. Anchored by a structural correspondence, the two epithets simultaneously emanate their distinct and vivid hues, well-balanced, tangible and brilliant, while creating a combined image that is both splendid and well-hammered. Besides the visual impact, 450 with the sibilant-heavy ‘paiphássousa diéssuto’ creates a definite effect of speed with its whooshing sigmas. The present participle, a reduplicated form which comes from a root, ‘PHA’ (cf. PHÁŌ: I give light) and the second aorist passive, a compound formed with the simple verb, SEÚŌ (I make move fast), are lashed together in a rhematic fusion generating a photo-kinetic image that rushes and pulsates. The entire scene of Athene on-the-go is a tour de force of light and movement. Fenollosa, referring to Chinese sentence-formation, offers an insight in his ever clear and salient manner:

The truth is that acts are successive, even continuous; one causes or passes into another. And though we may string ever so many clauses into a single compound sentence, motion leaks everywhere, like electricity from an exposed wire. All processes in nature are interrelated; and thus there could be no complete sentence

(according to this definition) save one which it would take all time to pronounce.⁷

The same thing could be said for the rhythm and imagery of the *Iliad*, for one is simultaneously propelled and attracted by its robust and tangible power and color-shot dazzle, and becomes both exhilarated by its pounding waterfalling cadence and intoxicating axon-meets-dendrite-tingling music. If one lets oneself go and allows Homer to work his (her) magic spell, one may feel temporarily insane, certainly ecstatic, and possibly (if lucky) even enraptured, like a thursos-wielding mountain-dancing maenad. Although seemingly wrapped with a ribbon of sensory impressions, primarily those of light and sound, the ribbon actually loops through the dactyl-girded rhythmic patterns of the poem creating a beautiful topology, with compound epithets strategically placed that function as little energy fields, which ramp up and embellish the fluid tone and punching flux of the poem. The compound epithets which dot the *Iliad* can be compared to Chinese characters in their ability to 'leak motion' like electric sparks. Let's look at one of the ideographs for 'bright': 明 (míng). Ezra Pound defines it thus: The sun and moon, the total light process, the radiation, reception and reflection of light; hence, the intelligence. Bright, brightness, shining.⁸ (Although the seal character has been interpreted as the picture of a window beside the moon (so Wieger, Wilder & Ingram and Karlgren, but not Henshall, O'Neill and McNaughton), giving the combined meaning of moonlight streaming through a window, the essential aspects of both interpretations contain two common and dominant elements: light and its implicit speed). Pound's explanation is both umbrella-like in its comprehensiveness and laser-like in its accuracy, elucidating both the

lineaments and the luminous interfusion, the crystal configurations and the integrated images of the evolving bamboo-hovering wick-regulated ink-flows. The meaning of the simple childlike drawing of the sun and the moon side by side subsumes and encapsulates the significations of the brilliant spectrum of the principal Indo-European words for 'to give light or be bright'. Cf. IE **bhā-* (Grk. *phāō* 'I give light, shine'), IE **leuk-* (Lat. *lūcēre* 'to be light or clear, shine'), Grk. *lāmpō* 'I give light, shine' (cf. Lett. *lāpa* 'torch', OPruss. *lopis* 'flame'), Grk. *stílbō* 'I glisten', Lat. *nitēre* 'to shine' (vid. Lucretius' *De Rerum Natura* (1.9) 'placatumque nitet diffuso lumine caelum' (and the womb of the sky, snowlike ensoothed, glitters with gushing light)), Lat. *splendēre* 'to shine' (cf. W. *llathru* 'polish'), Lat. *candēre* 'to be brilliant, glittering', It. *brillare* 'shine, glitter; whirl, librate' (cf. OIt. *birl* 'turn, whirl').⁹ In the realm of painting, one might consider the profound effect of light in Michelangelo's tempera painting, *The Doni Tondo*, where Mary's red khiton and Joseph's yellow himation seem to project the power and beauty of the sun and the moon together along with the additional technical elaborate circumfusion of the brilliant light-dented shadow-crisp blue and green tones of Mary's raiment. The interbeaming colors bound around the attitude of the rhythmically expansive muscles and plenitude of rhythmically structured folds enswirling the shimmering apparel of the Virgin.

Homeric epithets with their concomitant nouns can produce an effect equal if not surpassing in power and beauty to that of a Chinese ideogram or a Renaissance painting. Let's step into the following episode from the second book of the *Iliad*, where a natural phenomenon is magically transformed into a goddess, retaining and exhibiting the original afterglow of her pristine beauty, and the goddess in turn

seemingly assumes human form as she hits the ground running across the Trojan plain:

Τρωσὶν δ' ἄγγελος ἦλθε ποδήνεμος ὠκέα Ἴρις
 παρ Διὸς αἰγιόχοιο σὺν ἀγγελίῃ ἀλεγεινῇ·
 οἱ δ' ἀγορὰς ἀγόρευον ἐπὶ Πριάμοιο θύρῃσι
 πάντες ὁμηγερέες, ἡμὲν νέοι ἡδὲ γέροντες·
 ἀγχοῦ δ' ἵσταμένη προσέφη πόδας ὠκέα Ἴρις· 790
 εἴσατο δὲ φθογγὴν νῆϊ Πριάμοιο Πολίτη,
 ὃς Τρώων σκοπὸς ἴξε, ποδωκείῃσι πεποιθώς,
 τύμβῳ ἐπ' ἀκροτάτῳ Αἰσυνήταο γέροντος,
 δέγμενος ὁπότε ναῦφιν ἀφορμηθεῖεν Ἀχαιοί·
 τῷ μιν ἐεισαμένη προσέφη πόδας ὠκέα Ἴρις· 795

And a messenger who moved like the wind, podemenous, air-powered foot-blown molecule-cooled Iris, Rainbow Girl, came to the Trojans from Zeus of the snakehead-goatshield with a painful message;

and they were holding assembly at Priam's gate, all gathered, all cohesive, both young cadets and old chiefs. Airstream Iris, Rainbow Girl, quick to the feet, stood tight and spoke to them.

Her voice unseen vividly seemed like that of Polites, Man of the City, son of Priam the king, who, like a searchlight, stood as look-out for the Trojans, counting on his quick feet, on top of the tomb, the mound of rocks, of aetatic Aisuetes, waiting for the Akhaioi to storm and attack in a shock and a crack

from their ships.

Assuming his shape, airstream Iris, Rainbow Girl, quick to the feet,
spoke to Priam the king: (2.786-95)

In this scene, Zeus sends Iris, the goddess of the rainbow, to Troy to warn the people of the advancing and menacing Greek army, who are under the illusion that they can, at this point, take the town of Troy. Her voice resembles that of Polites, Hektor's younger brother, stationed at a designated and elevated point in front of the citadel, whose job it is to alert the Trojan commanders if he notices anything unusual, especially any sign of mobilizing forces or aggressive enemy activity. In 795 we see that Iris not only borrows Polites' voice, but his shape too. The great Alexandrian librarian, Aristarchus of Samothrace, athetised 791-5 due to the 'merging of roles', as G. S. Kirk notes. M. M. Willcock notes an 'enhanced vividness'. Does the goddess become the man? Like the character of Shapeshifter of North American tribal myths, a mysterious and wonderful metamorphosis takes place here, a process resulting in DEGREES OF DIVINITY. Where a rainbow is refracted into an arc of variegated wavelengths simultaneously, the transformation from celestial to terrestrial being appears rather successively but brilliantly in this scene, resulting in Hektor's immediate perception of the goddess's voice (which undoubtedly had a profound impact upon the chief warrior of the Trojans—cf. the disarmingly reverberating lines of Emily Dickinson: The silence like an ocean rolled,/And broke against my ear¹⁰), and the subsequent rush to arms, with the attendant unhuddling sounds.

The first and last feet of 786 become spondees by position, anchoring the four internal dactyls, and almost seem to create an invisible arc

above the line, a miniature version of the image holographed in this and the following line, where the high-speed rhythm of five consecutive dactyls acts as a proponent for the projected image of the instantaneous appearance of a rainbow. Where the element of speed dominates Homer's Iris, simple and hard as a gown-dented karyatid, in this scene, the element of color pervades Vergil's Iris, complex and soft as a Roman bridal veil, in 'Book IV' of the *Aeneid*:

ergo Iris croceis per caelum roscida pinnis,
mille trahens varios adverso sole colores,
devolat et supra caput adstitit.

So Iris, Rainbow Girl, dewy with saffron wings, down-turning
rushes through skyswell, trailing a thousand and one mutable hues,
and stood and hung above her head. (4.700-2)

Where Vergil paints, Homer chisels. Finally, just as many points of light seem to enswirl a beautiful statue, so, the variegated compound epithets, the plane edges of which embrace and bolt the *Iliad's* framework, function as miniature power stations or lighthouses or jungle drums, for these adjectives are not only high-voltage, but telephonic AND telephonic. Their potential energy is released throughout the *Iliad*, which is one reason why the poem seems to have such a kinetic quality. The beauty of the *Iliad* is that these multiple nodes of sound and light do not create a blinding and grating effect upon the reader, but rather, an original and unified sensuous impression slowly emerges as the aesthetic perception comes together, like diatoms on a glass slide, when the blurred image is adjusted to a bright focus, as seen

through a microscope.

Endnotes

- 1 *The Portable Oscar Wilde*, ed. Richard Aldington (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1978), p. 139.
- 2 Ernest Fenollosa, *The Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry* (CWC) (New York: John Casper, 1951), pp. 71-2.
- 3 Gary Zukav, *The Dancing Wu Li Masters* (New York: Bantam, 1980), p. 4.
- 4 All translations in this paper are my own. Vid. 'The Iliad of Homer, Book Two: *The Dream, the Test, and the Boiotia or List of Ships*', trans. J. M. Wilcox, in *The Hiyoshi Review of English Studies*. Keio University, no. 37, Sept., 2000, pp. 161-207.
- 5 Stephen Crane, *The Red Badge of Courage* (New York: Bantam, 1983), p. 20.
- 6 Liddell and Scott, *An Intermediate Greek-English Lexicon* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972), p. 165.
- 7 CWC, p. 61.
- 8 *Confucius*, trans. Ezra Pound (New York: New Directions, 1969), p. 20.
- 9 Carl Darling Buck, *A Dictionary of Selected Synonyms in the Principal Indo-European Languages* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1988), pp. 1046-7.
- 10 *The Poems of Emily Dickinson*, ed. Martha Dickinson Bianchi and Alfred Leete Hampson (London: Jonathan Cape, 1937), p. 38.