

ILIAD 13.754: ΟΡΕΙ ΝΙΦΟΕΝΤΙ ΕΟΙΚΩΣ*

At *Iliad* 13.751–3, Hector heeds Polydamas' advice to rally the Trojans by gathering their best fighters together and debating their next move (13.736–47). The speech is followed by a simile that has puzzled some commentators, in which Hector is compared to a snowy mountain as he moves through the Trojan ranks. The passage runs as follows:

‘Πουλυδάμα σὺ μὲν αὐτοῦ ἐρύκακε πάντας ἀρίστους,
αὐτὰρ ἐγὼ κεῖσ’ εἶμι καὶ ἀντιῶ πολέμοιο·
αἶψα δ’ ἐλεύσομαι αὐτις ἐπὶν εὖ τοῖς ἐπιτείλω.
ἦ ῥα, καὶ ὀρμήθη ὄρει νιφόεντι εἰοικῶς
κεκλήγων, διὰ δὲ Τρώων πέτετ’ ἠδ’ ἐπικούρων.
οἳ δ’ ἐς Πανθοῖδην ἀγαπήνορα Πουλυδάμαντα
πάντες ἐπεσεύοντ’, ἐπεὶ Ἴκτορος ἐκλυον αὐδῆν.’

755

‘Polydamas, hold all the best men here, while I go there and face the battle. I shall swiftly come back again, when I have given my orders to the men.’ He spoke and rushed off appearing like a snowy mountain, crying out, and flew through the ranks of the Trojans and their allies, and they all rushed to the kindly-minded Polydamas, Panthoos’ son, when they heard Hector’s voice.

The reasons for exegetical unease are immediately apparent. The image of the mountain in 754 indicates stillness, while Hector is twice described as moving (ὀρμήθη ... πέτετ’). The enjambéd participle κεκλήγων seems out of place.¹ There is also an issue of scale: while Hector is physically imposing, one might feel that the comparison with a mountain is odd given that mountain similes are used elsewhere in Homer only in relation to figures of superhuman stature, Polyphemus and the Laestrygonian Queen.² Richard Janko is unperturbed by these potential problems, commenting that the simile conveys Hector’s ‘huge size’, and that ‘the ... effect is enhanced, not spoilt, by the fact that mountains do not move’.³ Janko’s reading, however, has not commanded assent,⁴ and requires more detailed analysis than is given in his relatively brief note.

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¹ Cf. E. Bradley, ‘Hector and the simile of the snowy mountain’, *TAPhA* 98 (1967), 37–41, at 37; C. Michel, *Erläuterungen zum N der Ilias* (Heidelberg, 1971), 128. For criticisms of the simile cf. W. Leaf, *The Iliad*, vol. 2 (London, 1902), 56, and further references at Bradley (n. 1), 38 n. 7.

² At *Od.* 9.190–2 Polyphemus is compared to a wooded mountain (καὶ γὰρ θαῦμ’ ἐτέτυκτο πελώριον, οὐδὲ ἐφόκει | ἀνδρὶ γε σιτοφάγω, ἀλλὰ ῥίω ὑλήεντι | ὑψηλῶν ὄρεων, ὃ τε φαίνεται οἶον ἀπ’ ἄλλων), while at *Od.* 10.113 a similar description is applied to the Queen of the Laestrygonians (εὗρον ὅσην τ’ ὄρεος κορυφῆν). In each case the similes are accompanied by references to the characters’ size (*Od.* 9.187, 190; 10.120). Cf. Bradley (n. 1), 37–8.

³ R. Janko, *The Iliad: A Commentary, Vol. IV: Books 13–16* (Cambridge, 1994), 140.

⁴ *LjGrE* s.v. νιφόεις questions whether the simile is apposite; M.L. West, *The Making of the Iliad* (Oxford, 2011), 286 calls it ‘odd’.

A different approach is taken by Edward Bradley, who argues that the primary point of comparison is not ὄρει but νιφόμεντι. On the basis that νιφάς ('snowflake') is often used in contexts where movement is at issue, he claims that the adjective νιφόμεεις would have connoted movement. Audiences 'conditioned by repetition to recognize a close symbolic relationship between snow and dynamic movement would have easily isolated the dominant element of th[e] simile and appreciated the *justesse* of likening a relentlessly surging hero to the essential nature of snow'.⁵ Bradley's explanation, however, is weakened by several interrelated considerations. First, Hector is compared to the mountain, not the snow. Although Homeric similes frequently have multiple points of comparison,⁶ a simile's connotative force should not be explained purely by making a secondary aspect of the vehicle the 'dominant element'. His reading also fails to account for the role of κεκλήγων in relation to the simile.

Moreover, while it is true that snowfall is often used to describe rapid and decisive movement,⁷ the other passages in which 'snowy mountains' are mentioned contain no connotations of the snow itself moving. Hera 'speeds over the snowy mountains of the horse-driving Thracians, over the highest peaks' at *Il.* 14.227–8 (σεύατ' ἐφ' ἱπποπόλων Θρηκῶν ὄρεα νιφόμεντα | ἀκροτάτας κορυφάς), and at 20.385 Tmolus is described as 'snowy' during the account of Iphition's birth (ὄν νύμφη τέκε νηῖς Ὀτρυντῆι πτολιπόρθω | Τιμόλω ὑπο νιφόμεντι Ἰδῆς ἐν πίονι δήμῳ). At *Od.* 19.338 Odysseus describes leaving behind Κρήτης ὄρεα νιφόμεντα. None of these passages explicitly says that the snow is moving, and there is no reason to take νιφόμεεις in these passages other than neutrally as 'snowy' or 'snow-covered'.⁸ Consequently, we should not think that Homeric audiences necessarily or always took the phrase ὄρεα νιφόμεντα as picturing moving snow, an observation which enjoins caution when considering *Il.* 13.754. It could be argued that, because Hector is moving, it is necessary to find some figuration of movement in the vehicle, a consideration which Bradley meets with his reading of νιφόμεντι. Taking fuller account of the mountain's role in the simile, however, will preclude the need for this connection and for privileging νιφόμεντι as Bradley does.

At this point it is worth considering the ancient scholia on the passage. Ancient commentators do not seem to have been overly troubled by the simile, and explain it in terms of a focus on Hector's size:

754a ὄρει νιφόμεντι: ὅτι νιφόμεντα τὰ ὄρη. καὶ Ὀλυμπος τοιγαροῦν ὄρος· νιφόμεεις γὰρ λέγεται [*sc.* Σ 616]. A 754b ὄρει νιφόμεντι: καὶ Ὀλυμπος ἄρα ὄρος· φησὶ γὰρ 'κατ' Οὐλύμπου νιφόμεντος' [Σ 616]. πρὸς δὲ μέγεθος ἢ εἰκῶν, ἐπεὶ ἀκίνητόν ἐστι τὸ ὄρος. bT ἅμα δὲ καὶ

⁵ Bradley (n. 1), 40.

⁶ See e.g. J.L. Ready, *Character, Narrator, and Simile in the Iliad* (Cambridge, 2011), 221, 247–8 for a definition of multiple comparisons and an exploration of the terms. The argument for a single point of comparison has recently been put again by H. Erbse, 'Beobachtungen über die Gleichnisse der Ilias Homers', *Hermes* 128 (2000), 251–74.

⁷ The closest comparison to Bradley's understanding of the present passage is Iris' descent from Olympus at *Il.* 15.170–1 (ὡς δ' ὅτ' ἄν ἐκ νεφῶν πτήται νιφάς ἢ ἡ χάλαζα | ψυχρῆ ὑπὸ ῥιπῆς αἰθρηγενέος Βορέου). Cf. the use of νιφάς in the plural at 3.222 to describe Odysseus' words (καὶ ἔπεα νιφάδεσσιν ἐοικότα χειμερήσιον), at 12.156 to describe the Greeks and the Trojans pelting each other with stones (νιφάδες δ' ὡς πίπτον ἔραζε), and also 12.278, 19.357. Cf. also Hes. *Op.* 535 (τῷ ἱκελοῖ φοιτῶσιν, ἀλευόμενοι νίφα λευκῆν), where the snow's movement is also implied.

⁸ Thus *LfGrE* s.v. νιφόμεεις, which is distinguished from νιφετός ('snow fall') and χιών ('fallen snow'). It should be noted that νιφόμεεις is the only Homeric adjective which has the neutral sense 'snowy'; ἀγάννιφος means literally 'much snowed on' (cf. *LfGrE* s.v.). Given that snow on mountains is not always in motion, it seems reasonable to suppose that the semantic range of νιφόμεεις encompassed moving and fallen snow.

τὸ ἄγχιον αὐτοῦ καὶ φοβερὸν ὄρει παρεϊκάζει χιόνι κεκαλυμμένῳ· τὸ γὰρ ἄνιφον πάντως καὶ ἤμερον. **T**

‘Like a snowy mountain’. Because mountains are snowy. Olympus is evidently the mountain, for it is called ‘snowy’ [*Il.* 18.616]. **A** ‘Like a snowy mountain’. So Olympus is the mountain [he means], for he says ‘down from snowy Olympus’ [*ibid.*]. The comparison relates to his size, since the mountain is immovable. **bT** He also likens his wildness and fearsomeness to a mountain covered with snow, as a mountain completely without snow is unthreatening. **T**

Janko follows **T**’s line of interpretation, asserting that the mountain’s stillness is essential to the picture (‘[t]he savage and fearsome effect is enhanced, and not spoilt, by the fact that mountains do not move’),⁹ but does not explain why this is the case. He also notes the importance of νιφόνεντι; use of the metrically identical ὄρει σκιάονεντι ‘would have had a pastoral nuance’, an analysis similar to that of **ΣT**, which contrasts snowy and ‘cultivated’ mountains (τὸ γὰρ ἄνιφον πάντως καὶ ἤμερον).¹⁰

We do not, however, need to endorse **ΣA** and **bT**’s stress on Olympus as the point of comparison; as noted above, Homeric audiences would have been familiar with other snowy mountains, and there is nothing to link Hector to Olympus beside this detail. Instead, the simile’s visual aspect is of a more general nature, the image of a snow-capped mountain according with that of Hector and his glittering helmet (κορυθαίολος),¹¹ and connoting Hector’s forbidding appearance. This aspect, and indeed the simile as a whole, makes more sense if we allow εἰκοῦς the specific force of connoting visual likeness which it often has elsewhere.¹² Indirect yet suggestive evidence for taking the simile in this way is offered by *Aen.* 12.701–3, where Virgil describes Aeneas in terms which recall our passage (*quantus Athos aut quantus Eryx aut ipse coruscis | cum fremit ilicibus quantus gaudetque niuali | uertice se attollens pater Appenninus ad auras*).¹³ Since there is no other Homeric simile comparing a hero with a mountain to serve as a model, it seems likely that *gaudetque niuali | uertice* is an expansion of ὄρεϊ νιφόνεντι εἰκοῦς as connoting Hector and his helmet, and that Virgil understood *Il.* 13.754 in something like the visual terms I have outlined.

While the scholia show that it is possible to read the simile as unconnected with the notion of movement, many readers may feel dissatisfied with the explanations they outline. However, two features which have hitherto been overlooked can help to clarify the simile’s effect, and yield an explanation which expands on that given by the scholia. First, the objection that Hector’s μέγεθος does not warrant such comparison can be overcome if we consider that the simile focalizes the perception of Trojans looking at Hector from a distance, alerted by his call (κεκλήγων ... Ἔκτορος ἔκλυον αὐδῆν). Hector is in the centre of the Greek line at 13.681 and moves through the Trojan

⁹ Janko (n. 3), 140.

¹⁰ The ὄρεα σκιάονεντα which Odysseus sees at *Od.* 5.279 and 7.268, for example, appear at moments of relief and are a welcome sign of land, as marked by Odysseus’ reaction in the latter passage ὀκτωκαίδεκάτη δ’ ἐφάνη ὄρεα σκιάονεντα | γαίης ὑμετέρης, γήθησε δέ μοι φίλον ἦτορ. Cf. P. Mazon, *Homère: Iliade 3* (Paris, 1946), 32 for an approbation of the scholiast’s view.

¹¹ For a somewhat different view see H. Fränkel, *Die homerischen Gleichnisse* (Göttingen, 1921), 21; Janko (n. 3), 140. When reflected at its brightest, light appears white regardless of the reflective surface; snow is thus an apt comparandum for the visual impression given by Hector’s helmet glinting in the sun.

¹² See e.g. *LfGrE* s.v. 1c, *LSJ* s.v. 1 for examples. Murray’s rendering in the old Loeb (‘in semblance like a snowy mountain’) captures the sense.

¹³ For the visual aspect of Virgil’s simile cf. R. Tarrant, *Virgil Aeneid 12* (Cambridge, 2012), 270.

ranks (755),¹⁴ meaning that he could be seen by the Trojans from different directions. On a focalization-based reading, the problem of scale is diminished: Hector appears like a mountain which when seen from a certain distance does not appear overwhelmingly large to the viewer. Thus understood, the simile conveys both the idea of Hector's magnitude and the scale at which he is seen.

More serious is the problem raised at the outset, of comparing a moving figure to a static object. ΣbT evinces sensitivity to this issue. The phrasing of πρὸς δὲ μέγεθος ἢ εἰκῶν, ἐπεὶ ἀκίνητόν ἐστι τὸ ὄρος indicates that the disconnection between movement in the narrative and motionlessness in the simile was thought striking by ancient readers: 'it must be directed at magnitude, since the mountain is motionless'. Similarly, the textual movement from ὄρεϊ νιφόνεντι το κεκλήγων also emphasizes the distinction between simile and narrative. Yet this interpretative difficulty and the negotiation of the disconnection between the two levels that it occasions in the listener, together with the image's compression,¹⁵ is part of the simile's effect. In registering the striking shift from movement to a static image and back again, the listener enacts how the Trojans see Hector, and the surprise created by this shift emphasizes Hector's extraordinary status. The static visuality of the mountain combines with the verbs of movement which frame it to imitate the moment of perception: a single visual image is abstracted from process of movement, connoting the brief glimpse an onlooker catches of Hector in motion.

Differentiation of tenor and vehicle is a common feature of Homeric similes, and creates various effects. For example, the comparison of violence to a scene with domestic or pastoral colouring is a frequently noted technique for creating pathetic contrast.¹⁶ *Il.* 13.754 is a particularly marked instance of this technique, involving as it does a distinction of kind between tenor and vehicle which has to be negotiated by the listener, rather than a difference of scale or quantity. Although there is no exact parallel for the effect created by the comparison of Hector to the mountain, it can be seen as part of a pattern in which the contrastive elements in similes contribute to their effects.¹⁷ To elucidate we might compare the simile which likens Apollo destroying the Greek wall to a boy destroying sandcastles (ἔρειπε δὲ τεῖχος Ἀχαιῶν | ρεῖα μάλ', ὡς ὅτε τις ψάμαθον πάϊς ἄγχι θαλάσσης, | ὅς τ' ἐπεὶ οὖν ποιήσῃ ἀθύρματα νηπιέησιν | ἄψ αὐτίς συνέχευε ποσὶν καὶ χερσὶν ἀθύρων, *Il.* 15.361–4). Here the contrast between tenor and vehicle lies in the scale of the actions and their objects, as noted by ΣbT *Il.* 15.362–4 (καὶ ταπεινὴ μὲν ἢ εἰκῶν, ὅμως πᾶσι γνωστή), whereas at *Il.* 13.754 the

¹⁴ For his position cf. Janko (n. 3), 131–2. For a similar reading cf. Michel (n. 1), 128: '[w]ie der Schneegipfel weithin leuchtet ... von weither sichtbar und daher auch eine Orientierungshilfe, so ragt Hektor unter den Troern hervor, allen sicht- und vernehmbar und Anweisungen gebend, so dass die verstreute Menge nun wieder weiss, was zu tun ist.'

¹⁵ Noted by e.g. West (n. 4), 286, who comments that it is 'not clarified by development'.

¹⁶ See e.g. *Il.* 12.451–2 and D. Porter, 'Violent juxtaposition in the similes of the *Iliad*', *CJ* 68 (1972–3), 11–21 for more examples. S. Nannini, *Analogia e polarità in similitudine: paragoni iliadici e odissiaci a confronto* (Amsterdam, 2003), 49–91 gives a detailed treatment of 'antithetical' similes, and sees them as evidence of a particular mode of explanation.

¹⁷ Other examples might include *Il.* 4.130–1, where Athena, protecting Menelaus from Pandarus' arrow, is compared to a mother warding a fly away from a sleeping child: similarity and contrast, marked in particular by the child's 'sweet sleep' (ὄθ' ἠδὲϊ λέξεται ὕπνῳ, 131), combine to convey Menelaus' vulnerability and Athena's power; *Il.* 11.269–71 (Agamemnon's pain at his wound compared to the pains of childbirth, where a contrast of situation emphasizes Agamemnon's suffering; cf. B. Hainsworth, *The Iliad: A Commentary, Vol. III: Books 9–12* [Cambridge, 1993], 254–5), and *Il.* 12.421–4, where the Greeks and the Lycians fighting at the wall are compared to two men disputing a boundary stone.

contrast pertains to the states of the *comparanda*. But it is important to note that this distinction is only partial, and, as shown above, this contrast does not so outweigh the points of similarity between Hector and the mountain as to make the simile incomprehensible. On this reading, the mountain being ἀκίνητον creates a surprise which, rather than being explained away, should be seen as contributing to the text's expressive force.

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