

A. P. DAVID

The Form of the Hexameter: On the Origin of Caesura and Diaeresis

What is the origin of the 'cuts' and 'divisions' in the Homeric hexameter, the trochaic caesura and the bucolic diaeresis? A commendable instinct in linguists suggests that the answers to metrical questions should be found in the structure of language itself. But 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."

Linguistic theories of metre can account for a mid-line break as a kind of spontaneity, based on instincts for symmetry. Hence the caesura at least is predictable typologically. But the phenomenon needs to be rethought, in the terms of a new theory of the Greek accent that I developed in my dissertation ("The Dance of the Muses: Choral Theory and Greek Poetics," to be published by Brill). I showed how W. Sidney Allen's discovery of an apparent stress pattern in Ancient Greek, derived from the study of line ends in ancient poetry, was connected to the received system of accent marks introduced by Aristophanes of Byzantium. There must have been in Greek, as in the cognate Sanskrit, a *svarita*, or automatic down-glide following the rise in the voice that was marked by Aristophanes' acutes and circumflexes. Hence the Greek accent was a 'contonation,' with both a rising and a falling element. Where this down-glide occurred on a long vowel or heavy syllable—not just in the case of vowels marked with the circumflex, but also in the case of long syllables that *followed* the acute mark, syllables that were themselves unmarked—they were in fact the most prominently stressed elements in a word. Such syllables were described as *barús*, 'heavy,' a designation that is currently interpreted, somewhat counter-intuitively, as 'unaccented'. In words where the acute was followed by a short vowel, however, the *svarita* was deemphasised, and it was the 'sharp' (*oxús*) syllable itself that was the most prominent.

A newly possible rhythmic-harmonic analysis of sample passages in Homer discloses clear evidence of a tendency towards agreement between accent and ictus not just at the end of the line, where one should expect it in any case, but also in the third foot. Caesura can now therefore be seen as an automatic consequence of the desire to *accent the thesis of the third foot with a barytone*, to produce a mid-line cadence. Caesura results from the prosodic placements that produce a sense of agreement—a concrete musical motivation—not from a desire to pour words into metrical moulds. The Greek recessive rules allow for only two possible locations of barytonic (heavy) stress: on a long penult (followed by a short) and on a long ultima. Hence barytonic prominence placed on the third thesis, producing either a masculine or a feminine cadence at that point of the line, entails either a penthemimeral or a trochaic caesura. That is why there are the two of them. That is why these word breaks exist in the hexameter.

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. There is a modern remnant of ancient dance that survives in the folk tradition of Greece, a dactylic round dance called the *syrtós*. What is remarkable is that the favoured locations of these

divisions of the epic line, trochaic caesura and bucolic diaeresis, frame a distinctive leftward retrogression in this dance's rightward circling step. Diaeresis marks the beginning of a line, and hence constitutes an inceptive cue. A resumption of rightward movement after the retrogression in the dance corresponds to the 'second beginning' in the words. Hence dance may be the source of this peculiar feature. It is perhaps not a coincidence that the word *polútropōn* ('of many a turn') fills in the retrogression between caesura and diaeresis in the opening line of the *Odyssey*. Not only the man, but the verse itself turns here.