HOMERIC SPEECH ACTS: WORD AND DEED IN THE EPICS*

An enormous portion of twentieth-century philosophy has been devoted to a study of language. One question in particular has repeatedly been asked: how does language have, or get, its meaning? In *Speech Acts* John Searle puts it this way: "How do words relate to the world? How is it possible that when a speaker stands before a hearer and emits an acoustic blast such remarkable things occur as: the speaker means something; the sounds he emits mean something; the hearer understands what is meant?"[1] As his title suggests, Searle locates the answer to this question in what he calls "speech acts." It is the fact that "speaking a language is engaging in rule-governed behavior"[2] that provides him with a basis for giving an account of meaning. For Searle a theory of language coincides with a theory of action. He is hardly alone in this orientation. Indeed, a central motif in the philosophy of language for the past thirty years has been just this effort to explain meaning through an analysis of behavior, action, and social practice.

Wittgenstein gave this movement much of its initial impetus. As is true of so many modern philosophers, he understood himself to be attacking a traditional view. He begins his *Philosophical Investigations* with a lengthy quotation from St. Augustine's *Confessions* which describes the process of a child's learning what words mean by having the objects they signify pointed out to him. For Wittgenstein, Augustine typifies the traditional view since in his account "the individual words in a language name objects—sentences are combinations of such names. In this picture of language we find the roots of the following idea: Every word has a meaning. This meaning is correlated with the word. It is the object for which the word stands."[3]

The core of the traditional view is this notion that external objects existing independently of human action and language are the origin of the meaning of words, which in turn are the basic units of meaningful communication. Given this conceptual framework, a theory of language does not intersect with a theory of action, but with an ontology and a psychology; with accounts of the beings in the world which are named, and of the human psyche which names them. Such a view received its most succinct and authoritative articulation in Aristotle's *On Interpretation*:

> Spoken words are symbols of the affections (παθημάτων) in the psyche and written words are symbols of spoken words. And just as written words are not the same for all men, so too are spoken words not the same. However, the original things of which these [spoken words] are significations (σημεῖα), namely the affections of the

*My thanks to an anonymous reader of this essay whose many comments have been very helpful.

[1]John Searle, *Speech Acts* (Cambridge 1969) 3.

[2]Searle (n. 1 above) 17.

[3]Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, G.E.M. Anscombe (New York 1958) 3.

> psyche, these are the same for all men. Also, those things of which these [the affections of the psyche] are likenesses, are the same things (πράγματα).[4]

According to Aristotle, the psyche has access to objects in the world. It is able, initially through sensation, then through imagination, and finally through the intellect, to retain impressions of the forms of these objects. (See *De Anima* 424a20–25, 429a1–5, 429a10–430a25.) It is the nondistorting reception of forms of entities that is meant by "the affections of the psyche." Words which name these entities are a matter of convention and therefore variable, but the objects themselves, since they reside in the world, are the same for all speakers. The basic principle here, and the basis for the traditional view, is that the origin of the meaning of language is psychic apprehension of an invariable set of external objects. As such, Aristotle's theory of language makes no reference to a theory of action and does not intersect with his practical philosophy.

It is not necessary here to go into detail regarding Aristotle's psychology. The relevant point is simply that the traditional view demands that the meaning of language be based upon psychic access to nonlinguistic, naturally existing entities. When Wittgenstein balks at Augustine's account of meaning and says in protest, "the speaking of a language is part of an activity, or of a form of life," he is rejecting this view.[5]

In 1955, in *How To Do Things with Words*, J.L. Austin stated, "It was for too long an assumption of philosophers that the business of a statement can only be to describe some state of affairs, or to state some fact, which it must do either truly or falsely."[6] Here he cast much the same aspersion as did Wittgenstein: the traditional view assumed that language gets its meaning by reference to some set of external objects or "facts." In offering his own theory of speech acts Austin was confident that works such as his were "producing a revolution in philosophy."[7] No longer would the classical, Aristotelian, model hold. Henceforth, in drastic departure from the tradition, the goal of "semantics" would be the analysis of behavior, activity, social practices, language games.

Austin's choice of the word "revolution" is striking. He was certainly prophetic in predicting the cascade of contemporary versions of "linguistic behaviorism" which have appeared in open defiance of the traditional view. This word was, however, accurate in a way he surely did not imagine. In this essay I shall argue that the essential concept of speech acts, the notion that language gets its meaning from the effects it produces, from behavior, actions, etc., can be traced back to, of all places, the Homeric poems. Austin's project is indeed revolutionary, but only because it is a revolving back to the dawn of western thought. Contemporary philosophy, despite its proud and incessant claim to originality, is in fact an elaboration of archaic, preclassical ground.

[4]Aristotle, *De Interpretatione* [περὶ ἑρμηνείας], OCT ed. L. Minio-Paluello (London 1949) 16a3–8. The translation is my own.

[5]Wittgenstein (n. 3 above) 11.

[6]J. L. Austin, *How To Do Things with Words* (London 1973) 1.

[7]Austin (n. 6 above) 3.

It would, of course, be preposterous to attribute to the Homeric poems a developed theory of language. They were obviously not philosophical treatises. Nevertheless, they "conceived" of language in a way which, in one crucial respect, makes them similar to the theories of an Austin or a Searle: in the poems words depend for their meaning on the actions they perform and the effects they produce. There is such an inextricable bond between words and deeds that, as we shall see, the poet understands the two as constituting a unified sphere which can be named by a single formula, one whose translation could well be "speech act."

To establish this claim I will examine nine passages from the *Odyssey* and the *Iliad* which contain the collocation of ἔργον and ἔπος, deed and word. Although these passages comprise a limited amount of textual material, they will be sufficient to illustrate the relevant point about the concept of language in the Homeric poems. Of these passages, the first four contain the formula ἔργον τε ἔπος τε.[8] For reasons which will become apparent, I take them to be paradigmatic and thus begin my study with them. (I begin with three passages from the *Odyssey* rather than the *Iliad* only because they better illustrate the thesis of this essay.) The fifth and sixth passages contain the negative conjunction οὔτε . . . οὔτε and are quite similar to the first four. The final three passages contain the disjunctive connective, ἤ . . . ἤ. While these last three may seem to differ from the first six, it will be shown that in fact "deed and word" are present within them in a quite similar fashion.

These nine passages hardly exhaust the collocations of "deed and word" found throughout the epic poems. Barck, in his comprehensive study *Wort und Tat bei Homer*, counts approximately seventy different phrases which mean "deed and word" in the *Iliad* alone. He finds thirty such phrases in the *Odyssey*. As a glance at his work will indicate, there is an enormous amount of material on this issue in the poems.[9] Even though the textual evidence cited in this essay is limited, its conclusion is in keeping with Barck's, namely that in the epics "one can speak of an extended 'concept-pair,' word-deed."[10] The purpose of this essay is to shed some light on the nature of this pair and to suggest that in an important sense it prefigures a widely held contemporary view.

(1) *Odyssey* 2.270–72.

Athena disguised as Mentor says to Telemachus:

> Τηλέμαχ', οὐδ' ὄπιθεν κακὸς ἔσσεαι οὐδ' ἀνοήμων,
> εἰ δή τοι σοῦ πατρὸς ἐνέστακται μένος ἠΰ,
> οἷος κεῖνος ἔην τελέσαι ἔργον τε ἔπος τε.

The matter of most concern is the phrase ἔργον τε ἔπος τε, "both deed and word." It appears in almost this precise fashion in each of the next eight

[8]It could, perhaps, be questioned whether this phrase is actually a "formula" in the technical sense. Christophorus Barck, in *Wort und Tat bei Homer* (Hildesheim 1976), consistently refers to it as such, and I follow him here.

[9]See especially p. 3 and pp. 121–48.

[10]Barck (n. 8 above) 2. Barck's work should also be consulted for references to the use of "word and deed" in later Greek poets.

passages, a list which exhausts the use of this formula in Homer. Odysseus was a man to complete, to bring to completion, to achieve, or to accomplish (such are the many meanings of τελέσαι)[11] both deed and word. This is puzzling. How does someone bring a deed to completion? Isn't a deed something already complete, something already done? Perhaps, then, τελέσαι means accomplish or achieve. Stanford translates it as "to achieve his word and deed."[12] But what does it mean to say that Odysseus achieved a word? This could mean that he did what he said he was going to do, as in Fitzgerald's "he finished what he cared to say."[13] However, that is what is meant by "bring to completion." Τελέσαι is ambiguous, for it appears to shift meaning with each of the two nouns that function as its object: Odysseus was a man to accomplish deeds and bring his words to completion, i.e., to do what he said he was going to do. It seems unlikely, however, that τελέσαι should change meanings within one sentence. How, then, does ἔργον τε ἔπος τε function in relation to this verb, and what does the whole passage mean?

First, let us note the meaning of the three elements of the key phrase. An ἔργον is something done. It can mean "work," "deed," "task," "labor," "the process of working." Lattimore often uses "action," partly for metrical purposes. It is difficult to argue for the appropriateness of one English word over another, since the notion implied by ἔργον is so broad. I choose "deed" precisely because its range seems to parallel that of the Greek. An ἔπος is something said, either a single word or a collection of words, i.e., a speech.[14]

Perhaps most important for understanding this passage are the connecting particles τε . . . τε. The most common use of τε is "combination or addition, and . . . it denotes on the whole a closer connexion than καί,"[15] the more usual word for "and." It is just this closeness, even intimacy, which requires emphasis. The particle is correlative. It expresses a relationship of correspondence, mutuality, or reciprocity. It fuses two elements into a unity. Commenting on it, Prier says, "The language, then, at a very early stage possessed a dyadic connecting principle that moved towards an equalization and unification of possible oppositions."[16]

Let us return to the passage in question. Telemachus, says Mentor, will be neither a worthless (κακός) man, a coward, nor a thoughtless one. He will, therefore, be useful (brave) and thoughtful if his father's spirit, his μένος, is instilled in him. Μένος means force, might, or spirit, frequently that force which expresses itself in battle, namely courage, vigor, or power. It can, in certain contexts, become equivalent to ψυχή, thus implying life itself. (See, for example, *Iliad* 3.294.)[17] What should be noted here is that something

[11]My principal lexigraphical source is R. J. Cunliffe, *A Lexicon of the Homeric Dialect* (Norman 1963). I have also referred to Henry Dunbar's *A Complete Concordance to the Odyssey of Homer* (Hildesheim 1971) and to G. L. Pendergast's *A Complete Concordance to the Iliad of Homer* (Hildesheim 1971). My Greek text of both poems is the OCT.

[12]W. B. Stanford, *The Odyssey of Homer*, (London 1967) 244.

[13]*The Odyssey of Homer*, tr. Robert Fitzgerald (New York 1963).

[14]This is oversimplified. As Cunliffe suggests, the meaning "is coloured by context" and is more complex than I make it seem.

[15]J. D. Denniston, *The Greek Particles* (Oxford 1934) 496.

[16]R. A. Prier, *Archaic Logic* (New York 1976) 31.

[17]On μένος, see E. R. Dodds, *The Greeks and the Irrational* (Berkeley 1951) esp. 8–14.

singular, μένος, is responsible for the appearance of two qualities, braveness and thoughtfulness. Both are a consequence of its presence.

The next line goes on to explicate what kind of μένος Odysseus had or, we might say, what kind of man he was: "Such a man was he for accomplishing both deed and word." Ἔργον and ἔπος are both in the accusative and function as objects of τελέσαι. But in what exact sense do they do this? As has already been mentioned, if each is taken individually as a separate object of the verb, the meaning of τελέσαι would be forced to shift from "accomplish a deed" to "bring a word to completion." However, as the discussion of τε . . . τε indicates, the two nouns are not meant to stand in such isolation from one another: they are to be understood as a single phrase denoting a single unified object.

Deed and word belong together. When fused they designate the entire range of the hero's power. As Phoenix says at *Il.* 9.442–43 of the task assigned to him by Peleus, namely the education of Achilles, "He sent me along with you to teach you all these matters, to make you a speaker of words (μύθων) and one accomplished in deeds (ἔργων)." The connectives joining μύθων and ἔργων here are again τε . . . τε. Ἔργον τε ἔπος τε tokens the compass of the hero's power or force. Odysseus was a man to bring to glorious fruition the entire sphere of deed-and-word. The accusative employed in *Od.* 2.272 has adverbial overtones in that it is a "substantive expressing a particular *sphere* or *kind* of the action denoted by the Verb."[18] The sense of the passage is that Odysseus was such a man as to actualize, to consummate (τελέσαι) the power of a hero by consummating the sphere denoted by the two boundary words, ἔργον τε ἔπος τε.

The three lines are well balanced. The first, in naming two qualities, contains a dyad. Telemachus will be neither cowardly nor thoughtless. The second line names a single source responsible for both qualities, his father's μένος. The dyad, then, is not composed of two radically distinct elements, since it emerges from a common source. The third line returns to a dyad, ἔργον τε ἔπος τε, but again it is not composed of two independent entities. Rather, just as μένος is the singularity underlying the possible duality of the first line, so in the third line τε . . . τε indicates a unified sphere.

Even if this analysis is correct, it hardly tells what kind of unified sphere, what kind of correlative conjunction, the collocation is meant to express. For this we must examine other passages.

(2) *Odyssey* 2.303–5.

Antinous taunts Telemachus by saying:

> Τηλέμαχ' ὑψαγόρη, μένος ἄσχετε, μή τί τοι ἄλλο
> ἐν στήθεσσι κακὸν μελέτω ἔργον τε ἔπος τε,
> ἀλλά μοι ἐσθιέμεν καὶ πινέμεν, ὡς τὸ πάρος περ.

Here, says Merry,[19] ἔργον τε ἔπος τε is in apposition to κακόν. Telemachus is being warned against considering anything that might be harmful or

[18]D. B. Monro, *A Grammar of the Homeric Dialect* (Oxford 1891²) 130.
[19]W. W. Merry, *Homer's Odyssey*, Vol. 1 (Oxford 1870) *ad loc.*

"evil" to the suitors, and this is explained by saying that it could consist in either deed or word. Again, the two are said to emerge from the singular μένος: if Telemachus restrains his spirit he will consider no κακόν, neither an ἔργον nor an ἔπος.

What exactly does this mean? Is Telemachus being ordered to say and to do nothing harmful? Saying and doing are both capable of threatening Antinous. Telemachus might, for example, make a rousing speech and inspire an attack on the suitors. Or he might do something, such as attack them himself. Both would be harmful because both are capable of doing something to Antinous. Ἔργον here implies an immediate doing, e.g. attacking. Ἔπος implies a mediated doing, e.g., inspiring an attack. Ἔργον τε ἔπος τε designates a unified sphere in apposition to κακόν. Its unity, as we now see for the first time, is based upon possible modes of doing, in this case of doing harm.

(3) *Odyssey* 11.345–46.

Arete, the queen of the Phaeacians, has just told her people to give Odysseus many guest gifts. Echeneüs praises her and says to the crowd:

> μυθεῖται βασίλεια περίφρων· ἀλλὰ πίθεσθε.
> Ἀλκινόου δ' ἐκ τοῦδ' ἔχεται ἔργον τε ἔπος τε.

Alcinous, the king, addresses the people and begins his speech with a prefatory clause: "This word will be mine." He then proceeds to reformulate the order Arete had given. Deed and word belong to Alcinous since he rules. His word is even more final than Arete's. Another way of putting this is that his word will be translated into deeds by his people. He will tell them to give Odysseus gifts, and this will be done. His word is a command and, even as an ἔπος, it is intelligible only in terms of the deeds it produces.

As in the previous passage, ἔργον τε ἔπος τε denotes a unified sphere of action. There both a deed and a word were said to be able to do something harmful. Here the deed and word belong to the ruler because his word will automatically be translated into a deed. In passages (1) and (2) the dualities, bravery/thoughtfulness and ἔργον/ἔπος, emerge from the singular. Here deed and word emerge from the singular person, Alcinous, the ruler whose command the people will perform. In all three cases, in exactly the manner Prier described, τε . . . τε moves the two nouns, which might possibly oppose one another, towards an "equalization and unification." We are seeing that the basis for this unification is the primacy of doing.

(4) *Iliad* 15.234–35.

Zeus addresses Apollo, ordering him to turn the tide of battle in favor of the Trojans. Zeus says of himself that after Apollo has done his share,

> κεῖθεν δ' αὐτὸς ἐγὼ φράσομαι ἔργον τε ἔπος τε,
> ὥς κε καὶ αὖτις Ἀχαιοὶ ἀναπνεύσωσι πόνοιο.

φράσομαι, which appears at 234, means (in the active) "to make known," "to show forth in discourse." In the middle voice, as it is here, the verb means "to observe, consider, plan," or, as in this passage, "to devise." In just the same manner that we have already noted, ἔργον τε ἔπος τε is not a conjunc-

tion of two distinct elements functioning as two separate external accusatives, but a singular phrase. Zeus will devise deed-and-word. Does this mean that he will say something and then do something to aid the Greeks? No. The overwhelming flavor of this passage indicates that the force of the phrase is to devise something to do. Zeus' deed-and-word will effect the outcome of the battle; it will do something to the Greeks and the Trojans. Even if he were simply to say something, this saying would immediately be transformed into a doing. In passage (1) Telemachus is said to be able to cause harm both by deed and word; here deed and word are being devised to cause benefit. It should be noted that Lattimore in this and two of the previous passages reverses the order of the Greek phrase by translating it as "word and action."[20] "Word" should not precede "action," either in translation or interpretation.

(5) *Odyssey* 15.374–76.

Here, instead of τε . . . τε we find the negative οὔτε . . . οὔτε and for the first time ἔπος preceding ἔργον. Eumaeus is speaking, recounting his life story. Odysseus' mother had been extremely good to him, but she has died and:

> ἐκ δ' ἄρα δεσποίνης οὐ μείλιχον ἔστιν ἀκοῦσαι
> οὔτ' ἔπος οὔτε τι ἔργον, ἐπεὶ κακὸν ἔμπεσεν οἴκῳ,
> ἄνδρες ὑπερφίαλοι·

This is interesting. Eumaeus has heard no "word" or "deed" (Lattimore's "fact" is surely inadequate) from his mistress. But how does one hear a deed? Merry explains this by saying, "ἀκοῦσαι goes properly with ἔπος, and with ἔργον only by zeugma. With ἔργον we might rather expect τυχεῖν or ἰδεῖν [to chance upon or to see]."[21] I agree that here we find a zeugma, but not in a technical grammatical sense, i.e., not as a figure of speech which applies to two words, with only one of which it is logically connected. This is a zeugma in that two words are being connected or bound together. But there is no logical gap, no elliptical verb, nor is ἔργον an inappropriate object of ἀκοῦσαι. It would be inappropriate only if it were taken in radical isolation from ἔπος.

An ἔργον can be heard in the same sense that an ἔπος can do something. The two are so closely related in the poet's mind that the phrase is employed as a single object of ἀκοῦσαι, "to hear." We can hear only sounds, among them words. But words are not independent beings in the Homeric poems: they are meaningful only in the context of deeds.

Odysseus' mother had treated Eumaeus with kindness. She gave him a mantle, a tunic, and a home. She has died and will do no more; she will say no more. Her saying and doing were never distinct aspects of her character, and so when she dies Eumaeus can say he will hear no other pleasing word or deed

[20]Richmond Lattimore, *The Iliad of Homer* (Chicago 1973).

[21]Merry, *Homer's Odyssey* Vol. 2 (Oxford 1878) *ad loc*. Stanford (n. 12 above) 255 says "ἀκοῦσαι governs ἔργον by a mild zeugma. ἔργον was probably only added because the antithetical Greek mind found it hard to refrain from balancing 'word' with 'deed' even at the expense of strict relevance." This understates the situation. Strict relevance has not been sacrificed by the poet if I have been correct so far.

from her. He could just as easily say that he will no longer be the recipient of any further beneficial action from her, neither deed nor word.

(6) *Iliad* 5.879–80.
Ares complains to Zeus about Athena:

ταύτην δ' οὔτ' ἔπεϊ προτιβάλλεαι οὔτε τι ἔργῳ,
ἀλλ' ἀνιεῖς ἐπεὶ αὐτὸς ἐγείναο παῖδ' ἀΐδηλον·

Zeus pays no attention to his daughter, neither in word nor deed. Here we find ἔπεϊ and ἔργῳ in the dative and connected by οὔτε . . . οὔτε. This is an instrumental use of the dative in that it is employed "to express whatever accompanies or shares in an action."[22] Zeus is being accused of not restraining his child. He neither says nor does anything. He neither issues a command nor does he lock her up. Again we find what is now a consistent pattern: ἔργον τε ἔπος τε denotes a sphere constituted, in this case, by possible modes of restraining. The unity of the phrase depends upon the centrality of getting something done. The use of the instrumental dative simply demonstrates more clearly what has been argued all along: the basis of this connection is located in doing and the legitimacy of referring to "Homeric speech acts" is becoming apparent.

The nature of this connection, however, has to be explored further, for the poet does have two distinct words; and the connective, while providing an intimate conjunction, does not state an identity. Even further, the poet also uses the phrase "either word or deed." Such a disjunction appears to imply the possibility that the two can be separated. As I shall now show, such separability does not seriously threaten the basic thesis presented up to this point, for it is not taken seriously by the poet.

(7) *Odyssey* 3.98–100 (repeated 4.328–30).
Telemachus says to Mentor:

λίσσομαι, εἴ ποτέ τοί τι πατὴρ ἐμὸς, ἐσθλὸς Ὀδυσσεύς,
ἢ ἔπος ἠέ τι ἔργον ὑποστὰς ἐξετέλεσσε
δήμῳ ἔνι Τρώων, ὅθι πάσχετε πήματ' Ἀχαιοί·

If ever Odysseus undertook or promised (ὑποστάς) a word or a deed he fulfilled it (ἐξετέλεσσε). How does one promise a deed? One promises to do a deed. A promise is a word which aims towards the doing of a deed and is then brought to fulfillment. Perhaps ὑποστάς (from ὑφίστημι) does not mean "promised" but, as Lattimore translates it, "undertook." The problem will then be, how does one undertake a word? Exactly as in passage (1), where we found the related verb τελέσαι, the meaning of the sentence becomes ambiguous, if not unintelligible, when ἔργον and ἔπος are taken in isolation from one another. This is true even here when they are connected by ἤ . . . ἤε, "either . . . or." Odysseus has brought to consummation the entire heroic sphere of deed-and-word. As such, his son can lay fair claim to Mentor's loyalty.

[22]Munro (n. 18 above) 130.

(8) *Odyssey* 4.162–63.
Pisistratus tells Menelaus that Telemachus:

ἐέλδετο γάρ σε ἰδέσθαι,
ὄφρα οἱ ἤ τι ἔπος ὑποθήσεαι ἠέ τι ἔργον.

Menelaus is to advise Telemachus. As in (7) if we isolate ἔπος from ἔργον there will be a problem: what does it mean to advise a word or a deed? This could mean that Menelaus will tell the boy what to do or say to the suitors. He might suggest to him a verbal threat that could be used to frighten them away. Or he might advise him to recruit soldiers from Pylos and then ambush them. These are two different possibilities, one a word, the other a deed, and they do offer a sense of the disjunction. But is this separation any different from that noted in (2), that between mediated and immediate doing? Here the difference is between threatening the suitors in order to drive them away and actually driving them away by force. Both would accomplish, and thus are directed towards and defined by, the same thing: driving the suitors away; getting something done; producing a desired effect. Menelaus will advise Telemachus and instruct him in the appropriate response of the hero in the midst of humiliating circumstances. He will tell him what to do, either word or deed.

(9) *Iliad* 1.393–95.
Achilles, speaking to his mother Thetis, says:

ἀλλὰ σύ, εἰ δύνασαί γε, περίσχεο παιδὸς ἑῆος·
ἐλθοῦσ' Οὐλυμπόνδε Δία λίσαι, εἴ ποτε δή τι
ἢ ἔπει ὤνησας κραδίην Διὸς ἠὲ καὶ ἔργῳ.

Comfort, benefit, or profit (ὤνησας, from ὀνίνημι) was conferred upon Zeus by Thetis, either by word or deed. She benefited him, either by saying or doing something. As in (2), where ἔργον τε ἔπος τε is in apposition to κακόν, and in (4), where they together explicate ways in which Zeus will benefit the Achaeans, here, despite the fact that the connective is disjunctive, we find the two in the dative clarifying how Thetis assisted Zeus. Assistance can be given either by word or deed, and in fact Thetis employed both in her assistance of Zeus. She freed him from the shackles with which the other Olympians sought to restrain him (1.401) and she called upon the mighty Briareus to frighten the other gods away from him (1.402–4). She did and said something. In this sense the two are separable. But in another, and more important, sense they are inseparable: Thetis' call to Briareus, her ἔπος, was a call to action, to ἔργον. The two are separated only by time, which in this case makes the disjunctive insignificant.

To summarize: ἔργον and ἔπος, connected by both τε . . . τε and ἤ . . . ἠέ, demarcate a single sphere. The singularity of this formula is based upon the predominating importance of doing. The Homeric ἔπος is really a "speech act"; speaking is behavior or action which produces effects in the human (or divine) world of deeds, from which it derives its meaning and of which it is a part. Although word and deed can be separated by the disjunction, the separation is only a temporal and not an essential one. The possibility of words freeing themselves from deeds and being considered as meaningful in them-

selves is never taken seriously in the epic poems. An illustration of this point is found in the treatment received by Thersites in Book 2 of the *Iliad*, where the Greeks are debating what to do in the dispute between Achilles and Agamemnon.

Thersites is the "ugliest" man among the Greeks (2.216). He is the man of "endless speech"; his words have no measure (2.212). All he does is talk, and it is just this which makes him so despicable. What he says, however, is interesting, for in content it is no different from what Achilles himself had earlier said (1.149 ff.). Thersites blames Agamemnon for being insanely greedy and claims that Achilles is the better man. But his words are empty. They have no connection with deeds. He is "bandy-legged," lame with stooped shoulders (2.217–18): he is incapable of fighting, of doing something worthwhile. He has no deeds to boast of, no ἔργον by which to measure his ἔπος. As such he is ἀμετροεπής and his speech carries no weight.

Odysseus utterly humiliates Thersites, not as he would an enemy, but as someone less than human, someone unthinkable. In graphic contrast with the "logical" Thersites the Greek men say of Odysseus (2.272–73):

> "ὦ πόποι, ἦ δὴ μυρί' Ὀδυσσεὺς ἐσθλὰ ἔοργε
> βουλάς τ' ἐξάρχων ἀγαθὰς πόλεμόν τε κορύσσων·

Odysseus, whose action in this case (supporting Agamemnon) is terribly ill-starred, has the right to crush Thersites, for he "has done a myriad of excellent deeds." There are two participles in apposition to this phrase: "bringing forward good counsels" and "ordering armed encounters." βουλή, counsel, is an ἔπος whose purpose is to propose an action. Again, the only thing that differentiates it from action itself is time. The same is true of an order, which is simply a delayed doing. Only a man who has proven himself by deeds can authentically command and offer counsel. In an odd way Thersites, of all the Homeric characters, is closest to Aristotle. His ἔπος is "true" and in itself accurately describes a state of affairs. To our ears, he has given sound and intelligent advice, but to the Achaeans his speech is despicable. Even worse, it is meaningless. He is a man too ugly to behold, and it is as if his words, once severed from deeds, are too empty even to be heard.

Much of contemporary philosophy is single-minded in its hostility to the classical or traditional concept of language. It is determined to interpret language and its meaning on the basis of social action rather than relying upon the human capacity to apprehend without distorting beings or forms. It is convinced of Kant's central intuition that the human mind is essentially constructive and responsible for the production of the intelligibility of the world; that it is not, as Aristotle believed, passively receptive to formal structures residing in the world. From Searle's speech acts, to Habermas' appropriation of them in his "universal pragmatics,"[23] to Rorty's "conversation,"[24] this tendency is

[23]See "What Is Universal Pragmatics?" in *Communication and the Evolution of Society*," tr. T. McCarthy (Boston 1979) 1–69.

[24]See esp. "Pragmatism and Philosophy," in *Consequences of Pragmatism* (Minneapolis 1982) xiii–xliv.

consistent and striking. But it is not original. Homeric poetry also had no notion of an independently existing psyche capable of apprehending intelligible entities in the world. Psyche in the epics, as its etymology suggests, was "a vital breath . . . a semi-concrete organ which exists in a man as long as he lives."[25] Psyche meant life force, principle of animation, and it had no unique intellectual or logical functions. So too did language not have any unique status. It was part and parcel of the world, the world of deeds as represented by the incomparable Homeric "poetry of action."[26] ἔργον τε ἔπος τε is a formula repeated in almost identical fashion nine times. It indicates and names the sphere of human deeds-and-words. This essay makes no pretense at having exhausted the Homeric conception of language. There are many varieties of the winged word. I suspect, however, that they would all ultimately rest on this essential phrase which, for those of us who take a small delight in puncturing contemporary claims to originality, can be translated as "speech act."

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[25]Bruno Snell, *The Discovery of the Mind*, tr. T. G. Rosenmeyer (New York 1982 [1965]) 9.
[26]C. A. Bowra, *Homer* (London 1972) 141–65.