How to talk about Death?

Françoise Letoublon

CENTRE FOR ODYSSEAN STUDIES

THE UPPER AND THE UNDER WORLD IN HOMERIC AND ARCHAIC EPIC

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of the 13th International Symposium on the Odyssey
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… κατ᾽ ἀσφοδελὸν λειμῶνα (Ὀδ. λ 539)

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ΠΕΡΙΕΧΟΜΕΝΑ / CONTENTS

Françoise Létoublon

How to Talk about Death?[1]

In the usual dictionaries of the Greek language we read that Greek οἴχομαι was an euphemistic use of «to leave» for «to die». We intend to show that this opinion might be a ghost created by lexicographers: no such use can be found in archaic Greek poetry, and perhaps not even later. Departing from a systematic study of movement verbs in the Greek language, and particularly in Homer,[2] I would like to come back to some uses of those verbs, to the link between language and representations, and to the question of euphemism. I actually do not pretend to give a clear cut answer to this question, but at least to show how complex it is.

In his *Dictionnaire étymologique* Chantraine does not take sides with the birthdate of the euphemistic use of οἴχομαι, and this dating does not change in the recent republication.[3] His formulation does not leave any room for the idea of a linguistic evolution in this field. It is basically what was said in Schmidt's *Synonymik*: «Daher ist οἴχομαι ein gewöhnlicher Euphemism für "dahingeschieden", d. i. gestorben sein, wobei der Zusatz von θανών nur eine Ausnahme ist».

1. A first draft of this research was first published in French in *RPh* 66, 1992, 317-335. I would like to thank very deeply those who helped me, the organizors of the Homer Conference in Ithaki, the audience, and Stephen Rojcewicz who corrected my English for the oral version and again for this written text.

2. That study was first led by Pierre Chantraine and Jean Irigoin. My thesis (Létoublon 1985) announced an article on the euphemism for death that could not be achieved because of the sudden death of a dear friend.

3. «sens: rarement "aller" (*Il.* 1.53), ordinairement "s'en aller, disparaître" et par euphémisme "mourir", avec un sens proche du parfait, souvent accompagné d'un participe qui accompagne ou qui précède "être parti, disparu"». (Chantraine 2009, 761). There is no entry for οἴχομαι in the *Chronique d'étymologie grecque* appended to this republication, and I confess I feel guilty for this absence, since I might have sent an entry in time.

1. The taboo of death and euphemistic expression

From an anthropological point of view, general studies of the representation of death on one hand, and of linguistic taboo and euphemism on the other,[4] show that in most cultural areas living people fear death and the dead, and seek to ensure for them a correct and easy way to the Otherworld.[5] In contemporary Greece, anthropologists say that it still happens that one can see a piece of money put in the dead person's mouth in order to pay for the travel, and that the dead wears new shoes «because the trip will be long».[6]

In Homer, the warriors fear to stay on the battlefield after death, exposed to dogs and birds of prey, as several formulas express: this seems to correspond to an obsessional fantasma. Ritual funerals occur when someone dies in war because one knows that one may need the same assistance later. That is why, when a hero dies, the enemies may, at most, take away his arms to their camp as a trophy, but the opponents do everything in their power to defend the corpse. Two symmetric cases show this in the *Iliad*, when the Achaeans allow Hector to take Achilles' arms to Troy, but fight for Patrocles' corpse, bearing it back to Achilles. In contrast, Hector's corpse, left alone on the battlefield, is taken by Achilles as a trophy, as well as his arms.[7]

The euphemism for death has been recognized as linked to the more general phenomenon –because not exclusively linguistic– of taboo, i.e., of religious prohibition.[8] Comparatists, after Meillet, noted some marks that the euphemism has left in diverse lexical fields in Indo-European languag-

4. The bibliography of euphemisms for death in English increased spectacularly with the web: see Fernández 2006, Jačková 2010, Gao 2013, King 2015, Lynneng 2015, Nordquist 2017, Rawlings and others 2017.

5. See Guiart 1979, Ziegler 1975.

6. De Sike and Hutter 1979, 59-71, part 66.

7. See mainly Segal 1971.

8. Freud (chapter 2 of *Totem and Taboo*), Mauss 1947.

es.[9] In 1946 Havers devoted an important book to linguistic taboo, with several pages on the death taboo.[10] Benveniste picked up this theme, first as a tribute to Havers, thereafter in a larger philosophical and theological perspective.[11] As a tribute to Benveniste, Watkins in turn took an interest in the linguistic taboo and in the words referring to taboo in Indo-European languages, studying in parallel some terms he interpreted as relevant to such an explanation.[12] As said before, the publications considerably increased with the development of e-learning, particularly about the euphemism of death in English.

Lexical items signifying "to die", "death", and "to kill", "murder" especially seem to carry a kind of religious fear which can lead speakers to prohibit and replace them idiomatically or stylistically with less direct and less brutal terms: verbs signifying "to depart, go away, pass away" are used instead of "to die",[13] verbs meaning "to hit", "to obscure", or "to put in the middle" instead of "to kill":[14] those euphemistic substitutions may be seen in the history of a particular language. It is also known that the verb meaning «to die» may itself indicate in prehistory of Greek a case of linguistic prohibition: there is no correspondence to Latin *morior* and sanskrit *MAR*-, and the root of θνῄσκω and θάνατος only parallels a Sanskrit verb meaning "to go out" (Skr. aor. *ádhvanit*, adjective *dhvanta* "dark").[15] In short, the same process that leads to substitute τελευτῶ "to end" for ἀποθνῄσκω "to die" in the classical period might have led in prehistorical

9. Meillet 1906.

10. Havers 1946, particularly 99-102 on the death taboo.

11. Benveniste 1949; 1969.

12. Watkins 1975a, 1975b, 1977.

13. See Havers 1964, 99-102 Slavic, Indian etc. parallels to Greek οἴχομαι. For English, see the references given above in note 4. The Latin verb *decedere* meaning "to go way" became in French a literary substitute for "to die" (*décéder* instead of *mourir*).

14. For the Greek θείνω and its parallels and the more recent evolution of σκοτόω, first as an expressive substitute, then as the euphemistic equivalent of ἀποκτείνω, see Chantraine 1949; on Latin *interficio* and Vedic *antardha*-, Sandoz 1976. As noted in the discussion of the conference, in modern Greek ἔφυγε literally meaning "he fled" became usual for "he died".

15. Chantraine *s.v.* θάνατος. See also Perpillou 1976, especially 50.

Greek to the replacement of **mer-* "to die" by **dhvan-* "to go out".[16]

The linguistic taboo of death and the tendency to replace its direct expression with an euphemistic substitute thus seem well-established facts, supported by numerous parallels in Greek as well as in Indo-European comparative linguistics.

Before discussing more precisely the development of the euphemistic uses of οἴχομαι and some of its neighbours, I would like to stress the Homeric context of death: is there any prohibition around expressing death in Homeric epics?

2. Epic death

A look at Homeric uses[17] allows us to conclude that θαν- once meant "to die" (and no longer "to go out", whatever its prehistory may be), the word and its family do not seem to suffer any ostracism:

One counts 26 occurrences of θανάτοιο (excluding a case where it is a proper name completing κασιγνήτω), 20 of θάνατον (*idem* for one example of the proper name in the accusative), 3 of θάνατον δε, 24 of θάνατος, 2 of θανάτου, 1 of θανάτῳ (2 examples of the proper name in the dative are excluded from the count).

For verbal forms, note θάνε (one item being the aorist 3d pers., one the imperative); infinitive θανέειν, θανέεσθαι, θανεῖν; participle θανόντα, θανόντι, θανόντος, θανόντων, θανών; joint forms: θάνες, θάνῃς, θάνῃσι, θάνον, θάνωσι, θνῆσκον, etc., and perfect τέθναθι, τεθναίην, τεθναίης, τεθνάμεν, τεθνάμεναι, τεθνᾶσι, τεθνάτω, τεθνειότα, τεθνειότος, τέθνηκε, τεθνειώς, τεθνειῶτα, τεθνειῶτος, τεθνειώτων, τέθνηκε, τεθνωμένων.[18]

16. As remarked in the discussion of the conference, **mer-* was conserved in Homer and afterwards in the poetic language through βρότοι and the corresponding negative form ἄμβροτοι, "mortals" vs. "immortals".

17. Prendergast and Marzullo 1983. When writing this paper, the TLG was not at disposal, but I checked it afterwards.

18. Note that the compound in ἀπο- used in classical Greek does not seem to be known in the *Iliad*.

Corpses of the dead are also frequently mentioned directly: νεκροί, νεκροῖο, νεκροῖς, νεκροῖσι, νεκρόν, νεκρός, νεκροῦ, νεκρούς, νεκρῷ, νεκρῶν. Therefore it can be clearly concluded that Homeric epics do not avoid talking about death and the dead, without resorting to euphemism.

In those showpieces consisting of battle narratives, either in mêlée or in single fighting, one can even note a kind of complacency in the analysis of the very moment when fighters die: as soon as a first mêlée is narrated, the visual focus is on a man's death, Trojan Echepolos killed by Antilokhos: six verses tell his injury and death, *Il.* 4.457-461

Πρῶτος δ' Ἀντίλοχος Τρώων ἕλεν ἄνδρα κορυστὴν
ἐσθλὸν ἐνὶ προμάχοισι Θαλυσιάδην Ἐχέπωλον·
τόν ῥ' ἔβαλε πρῶτος κόρυθος φάλον ἱπποδασείης,
ἐν δὲ μετώπῳ πῆξε, πέρησε δ' ἄρ' ὀστέον εἴσω
αἰχμὴ χαλκείη· τὸν δὲ σκότος ὄσσε κάλυψεν,
ἤριπε δ' ὡς ὅτε πύργος ἐνὶ κρατερῇ ὑσμίνῃ.

The narrative depicts an imaginary brutal show, where strength is the rule, without mucking about various states of mind of one or another. But if we still doubt the narrator's views, we must read further: Echepolos' death leads to a fight for his spoils and the death of Elephenor who wanted to take his arms, *Il.* 4.463-472

τὸν δὲ πεσόντα ποδῶν ἕλαβε κρείων Ἐλεφήνωρ
Χαλκωδοντιάδης μεγαθύμων ἀρχὸς Ἀβάντων,
ἕλκε δ' ὑπ' ἐκ βελέων, λελιημένος ὄφρα τάχιστα
τεύχεα συλήσειε· μίνυνθα δέ οἱ γένεθ' ὁρμή.
νεκρὸν γὰρ ἐρύοντα ἰδὼν μεγάθυμος Ἀγήνωρ
πλευρά, τά οἱ κύψαντι παρ' ἀσπίδος ἐξεφαάνθη,
οὔτησε ξυστῷ χαλκήρεϊ, λῦσε δὲ γυῖα.
ὣς τὸν μὲν λίπε θυμός, ἐπ' αὐτῷ δ' ἔργον ἐτύχθη
ἀργαλέον Τρώων καὶ Ἀχαιῶν· οἳ δὲ λύκοι ὥς
ἀλλήλοις ἐπόρουσαν, ἀνὴρ δ' ἄνδρ' ἐδνοπάλιζεν.

Antilochos kills Elpenor, Elephenor tries to benefit from the situation, but Agenor kills him. The third act is not bloodier, but more pitiable and more melodramatic, because of the dead warrior's youth and personality, Simoisios, a tender shepherd who might be found in Theocritus' *Idylls* or *Daphnis and Chloe*, 4.473-492.

After this pastoral breakaway, the following episode shows a return to war's wildness and nonsense; a Trojan wants to revenge Simoisios' death by shooting at Ajax, but he misses him, killing another warrior, 489-493:

… τοῦ δ' Ἄντιφος αἰολοθώρηξ
Πριαμίδης καθ' ὅμιλον ἀκόντισεν ὀξέϊ δουρί.
τοῦ μὲν ἅμαρθ', ὃ δὲ Λεῦκον Ὀδυσσέος ἐσθλὸν ἑταῖρον
βεβλήκει βουβῶνα, νέκυν ἑτέρωσ' ἐρύοντα·
ἤριπε δ' ἀμφ' αὐτῷ, νεκρὸς δέ οἱ ἔκπεσε χειρός.

Let us note the spectacular accumulation of corpses in verses 492-3.

Odysseus then avenges his companion against Democoon, a bastard son of Priam (493-504). We shall cite only four verses narrating his death, 501-4:

τόν ῥ' Ὀδυσεὺς ἑτάροιο χολωσάμενος βάλε δουρὶ
κόρσην· ἣ δ' ἑτέροιο διὰ κροτάφοιο πέρησεν
αἰχμὴ χαλκείη· τὸν δὲ σκότος ὄσσε κάλυψε,
δούπησεν δὲ πεσών, ἀράβησε δὲ τεύχε' ἐπ' αὐτῷ.

In this *Heroic Suite*, here analyzed as a *Funeral Suite*, one remarks constants and variations: the identity of the person who will die, possibly the identity of his killer (often a well-known hero whose name is enough, sometimes with a patronym or a typical epithet), the lethal weapon, the kind of injury, and mostly the last moment, the instant of death: let us stress the recurring formulas and the archaisms:

v. 461 *τὸν δὲ σκότος ὄσσε κάλυψεν,*

469-70 *… λῦσε δὲ γυῖα.*
ὣς τὸν μὲν λίπε θυμός

482 *ὅ δ᾽ ἐν κονίῃσι χαμαὶ πέσεν αἴγειρος ὥς*

493-4 *…. ἤριπε δ᾽ ἀμφ᾽ αὐτῷ,*
νεκρὸς δέ οἱ ἔκπεσε χειρός …

503-4 *τὸν δὲ σκότος ὄσσε κάλυψε,*[19]
δούπησεν δὲ πεσών, ἀράβησε δὲ τεύχε᾽ ἐπ᾽ αὐτῷ.

Is it possible to state that «the shadow covered his eyes» and «vital breath left him» are euphemisms? We think on the contrary that they very directly express the manifestations of death in the particular typology of archaic Greek culture, without any attempt to mitigate in language the brutality of the facts.

The *corpus* allows us once more to determine that the phrases are mostly poetic formulas in the sense of Milman Parry:[20] apart from 503 in the same book, the whole verse 461 is found again in 6.11 and the sole second hemistich in 4.526, 13.575, 14.519, 16.316, 20.471, 21.131. A minimal variation occurs in 16.325 δούπησεν δὲ πεσών, κατὰ δὲ σκότος ὄσσε κάλυψε, and a more important one in 13.672= 16.607 ᾤχετ᾽ ἀπὸ μελέων, στυγερὸς δ᾽ἄρα μιν σκότος εἶλεν. Shadow and obscurity, either covering the dying man's eyes or seizing him, seems for Homeric belief the very characteristic of death.[21]

There are in total ten occurrences of the canonical form τὸν δὲ σκότος ὄσσε κάλυψε, one of the variations with κατὰ, two with another formula containing the same noun, σκότος. The second hemistich of verse 469, λῦσε δὲ γυῖα, is for its part met again in 7.12, 11.240, 11.260, 16.312,

19. The Belles Lettres edition adopts here τὸν δὲ σκότος ὄσσ᾽ ἐκάλυψε, we do not see why a text different from 461 is adopted, prefering the reading found in Allen-Monro.

20. Parry 1928, 1971.

21. See Vermeule 1979, 25: «Darkness is the oldest metaphor for both stupidity and for death, and always the most common.» The author refers to parallels in *Gilgamesh* and Egyptian hymns, as well as the modern Greek slang, θά σᾶς σκοτώσω «I'll kill you», literally «obscure». I only remark that when Homeric Greek says «the shadow covered his eyes», there is no metaphor.

16.400, 16.465, 21.406.[22] With a minimal variation, addition of a verbal prefix, ὑπέλυσε δὲ γυῖα, 15.581, 23.726. With a more important variation, at the same time syntaxical and morphological, λῦντο δὲ γυῖα 7.16, 15.435, ὑπέλυντο δὲ γυῖα 16.341, and λύθεν δ᾽ὑπὸ φαίδιμα γυῖα 16.805 compared to λύθεν δ᾽ὑπὸ γυῖα ἑκάστης 18.31.

Concerning verse 4.470 ὣς τὸν μὲν λίπε θυμός it is well known that verse beginnings are less formulaic than verse endings; while we actually never find the identical beginning phrase, we find as the second part of the verse:

16.410 … *πεσόντα δέ μιν λίπε θυμός*
16.469 … *ὣς τὸν μὲν λίπε θυμός*
16.743 … *λίπε δ᾽ ὀστέα θυμός.*
20.406 *ὣς ἄρα τόν γ᾽ ἐρυγόντα λίπ᾽ ὀστέα θυμὸς ἀγήνωρ·*

This suggests that there exist one or several verse ending formulas that express the idea that vital ardor leaves somebody, or leaves his carnal envelope during the process of dying. The occurrence in book 4 is innovative only in beginning a verse with a variant of this formula.

Fear of dying is sometimes explicit in the mouth of such-or-such among the fighters, even if not always to their honour. Thus for Paris-Alexander who, wearing a panther skin on his shoulder, gives a challenge to Achaean heroes, 3.19 προκαλίζετο πάντας ᾽Αχαιούς.[23] His panic terror before Menelaus is developed in two verses, then amplified with a great epic simile, 31-34:

… κατεπλήγη φίλον ἦτορ,
ἄψ δ᾽ ἑτάρων εἰς ἔθνος ἐχάζετο κῆρ᾽ ἀλεείνων.
ὡς δ᾽ ὅτε τίς τε δράκοντα ἰδὼν παλίνορσος ἀπέστη
οὔρεος ἐν βήσσῃς, ὑπό τε τρόμος ἔλλαβε γυῖα,
ἄψ δ᾽ ἀνεχώρησεν, ὦχρός τέ μιν εἷλε παρειάς,
ὣς αὖτις καθ᾽ ὅμιλον ἔδυ Τρώων ἀγερώχων
δείσας ᾽Ατρέος υἱὸν ᾽Αλέξανδρος θεοειδής.

22. See also 6.27 καὶ μὲν τῶν ὑπέλυσε μένος καὶ φαίδιμα γυῖα.
23. On heroic challenge in general, and this passage particularly, see Létoublon 1983.

Hector reacts to this fear shown by an operetta hero, this *miles gloriosus*, by wishing that Paris had died, since shame for his bad manners rebounds on the whole Trojan side, 3.39-42:

Δύσπαρι εἶδος ἄριστε γυναιμανὲς ἠπεροπευτὰ
αἴθ' ὄφελες ἄγονός τ' ἔμεναι ἄγαμός τ' ἀπολέσθαι·
καί κε τὸ βουλοίμην, καί κεν πολὺ κέρδιον ἦεν
ἢ οὕτω λώβην τ' ἔμεναι καὶ ὑπόψιον ἄλλων.

The epic poet never recedes before the expression of death. On the contrary, describing death on the battlefield gives him the occasion for some purple pieces, probably appreciated by the epic audience.[24] In the heroes' conscience, fear of dying holds a not insignificant place, even if its external manifestations lead the fearful warrior's companions to critical attitudes —and probably his enemies to laughter. Vernant's anthropological analysis of the «two faces» of Greek death is therefore verified by the linguistic and literary point of view.[25]

3. Οἴχομαι and the alleged euphemism of death

3.1. Homeric uses are not euphemistic

Dictionaries usually cite as euphemistic the Homeric occurrences of οἴχεται meaning «he is dead» in *Il.* 22.213 and *Od.* 1.242. An attentive examination of both examples in their context shows that there is no euphe-

24. Contrasting with Paris' fear with his panther skin, see Menelaus' blithe gladness, compared to a lion seeing a prey, 3.23-29:

ὥς τε λέων ἐχάρη μεγάλῳ ἐπὶ σώματι κύρσας
εὑρὼν ἢ ἔλαφον κεραὸν ἢ ἄγριον αἶγα
πεινάων· μάλα γάρ τε κατεσθίει, εἴ περ ἂν αὐτὸν
σεύωνται ταχέες τε κύνες θαλεροί τ' αἰζηοί·
ὥς ἐχάρη Μενέλαος Ἀλέξανδρον θεοειδέα
ὀφθαλμοῖσιν ἰδών· φάτο γὰρ τίσεσθαι ἀλείτην·

25. Vernant 1989: Mort grecque, mort à deux faces, *Panta kala*. D'Homère à Simonide. Figures féminines de la mort en Grèce.

mism. The occurrence in the *Iliad* occurs in the episode of the weighing of fates of Achilles and Hector:

Il. 22.213 *… ῥέπε δ' Ἕκτορος αἴσιμον ἦμαρ,*
ᾤχετο δ' εἰς Ἀΐδαο, λίπεν δέ ἑ Φοῖβος Ἀπόλλων.

The formula might be metaphorical, insofar as weighing the fates immediately equals death for one hero, without any delay between divine judgment and its terrestrial consequence. But apart from this assimilation – moreover theologically appropriate since the gods' decision takes effect without intermediary or delay– and if we admit the equivalence between «day», ἦμαρ, and soul or life, the expression ἦμαρ … ᾤχετο (δ') εἰς Ἀΐδαο has no euphemistic value,[26] but expresses the belief in death as a departing of the soul towards Hades' mansion,[27] or at least sustains it in language.

Leaf's note does not suggest any euphemism: «ὤιχετο, the subject may be αἴσιμον ἦμαρ, *Hector's fate descended to the grave*, symbolizing his death, or better, *Hector* himself, who is proleptically said to have gone to Hades when his fate was decided». The link alleged by Monro in the next section of the note with ὤλετο does not seem to me convincing, apart from the rhythmic aspect. The other part of the verse does not recall any of the two verses he cited, therefore ᾤχετο is not a formulaic substitute of ὤλετο. When Leaf recalls that Düntzer and Nauck suspected this verse as interpolated, he confirms that it is problematic for modern scholars.

However, the Byzantine commentator of Homer, Eustathius, seems to have understood how important the representations of the phenomenon of death were: ὅτι δηλαδὴ τὴν κάτω νεῦσιν οὐ περὶ γῆν ἀλλ᾽ὑπὸ γῆν εἰς αὐτὸν τὸν Ἅιδην.

He stresses the image of the balance and weighing,[28] and the gods' pro-

26. Létoublon 1985, 101-102.

27. The *locus classicus* is Rohde 1907[4], 37: «Die homerische Dichtung macht Ernst mit der Überzeigung von dem Abscheiden der Seelen in ein bewusstloses Halbleben im unerreichbare Totenlande.»

28. Eustathius cites the metaphor βίου ῥοπή as a borrowing by Sophocles from Homer (Van Der Valk 1987, 604-607).

tective presence as long as the heroes are living, as Athena beside Achilles; Apollo disappearing beside Hector means his death as well as does the bending tray. The symbolism of κάτω relating to the descent to Hades is also developed by the learned and wise Archbishop: Οὐ περὶ γῆν ἀλλ᾽ ὑπὸ γῆν εἰς αὐτὸν τὸν Ἅιδην. Apollo leaving Hector means for Eustathius that it is sun's light that leaves Hector. We might add that it is also Apollo's role as protector of Troy which is at stake.

The lexicographers' remarks may nethertheless come from an interpretation by ancient critics: a scholiast, without mentioning euphemism, comments on the Iliadic passage as *hyperbolic*, and mostly seems to accept in the ending of his sentence the idea that οἴχεται is an equivalent of ἀπέθανε or τέθνηκε: Erbse's text reads

ᾤχετο δ᾽ εἰς ᾽Αΐδαο· ὑπερβολικῶς. ὡς ἤδη τοῦ Ἕκτορος κατὰ τὸν τῆς πεπρωμένης λόγον μηκέτι ἐν τοῖς ζῶσιν ὄντος

«with hyperbole, as if, in accordance with fate's decree, Hector was already no more among living beings».[29]

Let us examine closely *Il.* 13.672-3= 16.607-8

τὸν βάλ᾽ ὑπὸ γναθμοῖο. καὶ οὔατος· ὦκα δὲ θυμὸς
ᾤχετ᾽ ἀπὸ μελέων, στυγερὸς δ᾽ ἄρα μιν σκότος εἶλεν,

where the formula θυμὸς ᾤχετ᾽ ἀπὸ μελέων seems to me a variant of λίπε δ᾽ ὀστέα θυμὸς, quoted above.

The second example occurs in a direct discourse by Telemachus in the *Odyssey*, and is more problematic on the point of view of representations: the *aoidos* may evidently put in his characters' mouth representations that he himself does not share. Telemachus is talking about his father Odysseus, and the context well proves that he thinks Odysseus has disappeared for ever:

Od. 1.242-245 *νῦν δέ μιν ἀκλειῶς Ἅρπυιαι ἀνηρέψαντο·*
οἴχετ᾽ ἄϊστος ἄπυστος, ἐμοὶ δ᾽ ὀδύνας τε γόους τε

29. Erbse 1977, V. The translation is our own.

κάλλιπεν· οὐδέ τι κεῖνον ὀδυρόμενος στεναχίζω
οἷον, ἐπεί νύ μοι ἄλλα θεοὶ κακὰ κήδε' ἔτευξα.

It seems to me that the euphemic value «he disappeared» instead of «he is dead» is excluded, since Telemachus actually regrets that Odysseus did not suffer a usual death with official funerals and a tangible corpse, becoming ashes in an urn: such a death, occurring on a battlefield,[30] would have been glorious for him and for his son,[31] and have led to a legal succession by inheritance. On the contrary his disappearance (in the proper meaning) is not glorious for him since nobody got any news or talked about him (ἄϊστος ἄπυστος: note the asyndeton stressing the assonance),[32] and brings about many of the problems told in detail in the *Odyssey*.

As well as in the first case, an ongoing commentary taking the context into account avoids the mistake found in lexicographers' definitions: Stanford writes «The present tense of this verb has a perfect force = "has gone", sometimes with a suggestion of bad fortune».[33] Ameis-Hentze already wrote (1879) «οἴχεται er ist fort, dahin, explicatives Asyndeton». The recent commentary on the *Odyssey* (Heubeck-West-Hainsworth 1988) draws attention to several stylistical features of those verses (ἀκλειῶς, ˝Αρπυιαι ἀνηρείψαντο, the asyndeton ἄϊστος ἄπυστος) but says nothing about οἴχετ'.

Some other expressions seem to have similar uses, like αἱρέω ἁλίσκομαι 'catch vs. be caught' meaning 'kill vs be killed', see the formulaic phrase

30. On the «beautiful death» in epics, see Vernant 1982, 1989. On the passage of the *Odyssey* quoted here, 149-150.

31. Telemachus' regret is explicit in the context, v. 234-240
νῦν δ' ἐτέρως εὐόλοντο θεοὶ κακὰ μητιόωντες,
οἳ κεῖνον μὲν ἄϊστον ἐποίησαν περὶ πάντων
ἀνθρώπων, ἐπεὶ οὔ κε θανόντι περ ὧδ' ἀκαχοίμην,
εἰ μετὰ οἷσ' ἑτάροισι δάμη Τρώων ἐνὶ δήμῳ,
ἠὲ φίλων ἐν χερσίν, ἐπεὶ πόλεμον τολύπευσε.
τῶ κέν οἱ τύμβον μὲν ἐποίησαν Παναχαιοί,
ἠδέ κε καὶ ᾧ παιδὶ μέγα κλέος ἤρατ' ὀπίσσω.

32. Ameis-Hentze 1879 already noted the rhetorical look of the verse.

33. Stanford 1947, *ad loc.*

ἕλεν ἄνδρα,[34] and for the passive value the alternative expressed in the *Odyssey* 15.300:

ὁρμαίνων ἤ κεν θάνατον φύγοι ἦ κεν ἁλοίη.[35]

3.2. After Homer

An occurrence in Sappho 114.1 looks at first sight ambiguous:

[νύμφη] παρθενία … ποῖ με λιποῦσ᾽ ἀποίχηι;
οὐκέτι ἥξω πρός σε † οὐκετ᾽ἥξω

the metrical problem makes the verse 2 *desperatus* for Page.[36]

As we understand further in the poem, it is a song occasioned by a wedding.[37] Therefore we think of the proper meaning, excluding the euphemism of death. See Page's translation:

Maidenhood, maidenhood, where have you gone, deserting me?

No more will I come to you, no more will I come.[38]

The use of οἴχεται «he is gone» in speaking about a dead man thereafter considerably increased in poetry. For all that, it is not necessarily an euphemism. In Tragic poetry, the use of οἴχεται (in the third person, sometimes second person when the speaker talks to the dead, with evident

34. 6 occurrences in the *Iliad*, 1 in the *Odyssey* (*Il.* 4.457, 5.541, 8.256, 15.328, 16.306, 16.603, *Od.* 24.441) with different metrical schemas: … *ἕλεν ἄνδρα κορυστὴν* x 3
ἕλεν ἄνδρας ἀρίστους
ἔνθα δ᾽ἀνὴρ ἕλεν ἄνδρα ... x 2
… *ἕλεν ἄνδρα ἕκαστον.*

35. I owe these remarks to Prof. D. Frame, whom I thank very deeply. He also remarks that this usage is not an euphemism but an ellipsis of θανάτῳ, 'to be caught by death' is equivalent to 'be killed', cf. *Il.* 21.381 νῦν δέ με λευγαλέῳ θανάτῳ εἵμαρτο ἁλῶναι 'I was fated to be caught by death' equivalent of 'fated to die';

36. Page 1979, 122, note 114: «The second line is beyond hope of restoration, particularly since we cannot be certain what the metre was.»

37. Page 1979, 122: «It is equally evident that Fr. 112-117 all come from poems designed for formal occasions, wedding ceremonies, though it is not possible to discover what particular stage of the rites they accompanied». See also Calame 1977.

38. Page 1979, 122.

dramatization) is made explicit by the aorist participle of the verb "to die" in Sophocles:

Phil. 414 *ἀλλ᾽ ἦ χοῦτος οἴχεται θανών*
Aj. 999 *… ὡς οἴχῃ θανών*
Fr. Nauck 624 *ἔζης ἄρ᾽ οὐδὲ γῆς ἔνερθ᾽ ᾤχου θανών*

and Euripides:

Alc. 472 *Σὺ δ᾽ ἥβᾳ νέᾳ προθανοῦσα φωτὸς οἴχῃ*
Troj. 395 *δόξας ἀνὴρ ἄριστος οἴχεται θανών*
Hel. 134 *Λῆδαν ἔλεξας; οἴχεται θανοῦσα δή.*

In Euripides, we see several variations:
– with ὀλόμενος instead of θανών

Hel. 204 *Ὅδ᾽ ἐμὸς ἐν ἁλὶ πολυπλάνης*
πόσις ὀλόμενος οἴχεται

with the negative participial form of «to be» instead of θανοῦσα

Iph. T. 519 *Φασίν νιν οὐκέτ᾽ οὖσαν οἴχεσθαι δορί*

where the instrument of death is expressed by the instrumental dative δορί, the meaning of the infinitive is doubtless «pass away through the spear».

with the negative participial form meaning an explicitly violent death in the same play

Iph. T. 55 2 *δεινῶς γὰρ ἐκ γυναικὸς οἴχεται σφαγείς.*[39]

All in all, one avoids saying that the dead *died*, while expressing as strongly as possible how he/she died, who was the killer, and beginning with an axiological judgment (δεινῶς). Or else one does not *avoid* anything, if there is no euphemism here, but an expressive and even crude expression of the disappearance through death of beloved persons.

39. Compare this example with Aisch. *Ag.* 177.

Aristophanes mimics and mocks funerary inscriptions[40] using the participle ἀπολιπών με apposed to ἀποίχεται in *Ran.* 83:

Herakles asks Dionysos about the poet Agathon:

Ἀγάθων ποῦ ᾽στιν ;

Dionysos answers: *ἀπολιπών μ᾽ ἀποίχεται*
ἀγαθὸς ποητὴς καὶ ποθεινὸς τοῖς φίλοις.

Heracles And where is Agathon? Dionysus Oh, he has left us; a decent poet, lamented by his friends. (transl. M. Dillon in Perseus).

A similar commentary seems to hold for οἴχεται used with a prepositional complement meaning «in Hades»:

Soph. *El.* 833 *τῶν φανερῶς οἰχομένων εἰς Ἀίδαν*
Eur. *Med.* 1235 *κόρη Κρέοντος, ἥτις εἰς Ἅιδου πύλας*
οἴχῃ γάμων ἕκατι τῶν᾽Ἰάσονος
Eur. *Phoen.* 1055 *ὅς ἐπὶ θάνατον οἴχεται / γᾶς ὑπὲρ πατρῴας*
Eur. *Hel.* 518 *... ὡς Μενέλαος οὔ/πω μελαμφαὲς οἴχεται/ δι᾽ἔρεβος ...*

Sophocles also supplies us with an interesting use of two expressions of the absence, the first in the negative form, the second in the positive one,

Soph. *Aj.* 973-4 *Αἴας γὰρ αὐτοῖς διοίχεται οὐκέτ᾽ ἐστιν. ἀλλ᾽ ἐμοί*
Λιπὼν ἀνίας καὶ διοίχεται

Note the similitude between οὐκέτ᾽ἐστιν here and οὐκέτ᾽ οὖσαν in Eur. *Iph. T.* 519 quoted above.

In the tragic plays of classical times, the use of this verb referring to dead people appears without any explicating term in the context: the participle οἰχόμενοι seems to refer usually to the dead, and the expression looks quite as worn and hackneyed as «nos chers diparus» in French churchyards, or « the missing» in English:[41]

40. See further, particularly Kaibel 71, 77, 90.

41. This use of the participle οἰχόμενοι seems limited to poetry, but is found in the fu-

Aisch. *Per.* 546	*κἀγὼ δὲ μόρον τῶν οἰχομένων*
	αἴρω δοκίμως πολυπενθῆ
ibid. 916	*εἴθ' ὄφελον … κἀμὲ μετ' ἀνδρῶν / τῶν οἰχομένων /*
	θανάτου κατὰ μοῖραν καλύψαι
Soph. *El.* 146	*… τῶν οἰκτρῶς / οἰχομένων γονέων*
Eur. *Hel.* 1306	*πόθῳ τᾶς οἰχομένας / ἀρρήτου κούρας*
Eur. *Alc.* 414	*… οἰχομένας δὲ σοῦ / μᾶτερ, ὄλωλεν οἶκος*
Eur. *Hec.* 139	*… Δαναοῖς / τοῖς οἰχομένοις ὑπὲρ Ἑλλήνων*

In Eur. *Suppl.* 795, translating with "the dead" or "missing" in an euphemistic use appears inescapable:

Ἀλλὰ τάδ' ἤδη σώματα λεύσσω
τῶν οἰχομένων παίδων.

Also numerous are the uses of second and third persons of the indicative without an explicit contextual complement:

Soph. *El.* 809	*Ἀποσπάσας γὰρ τῆς ἐμῆς οἴχῃ φρενός*
Eur. *Hel.* 219	*μάτηρ μὲν οἴχεται*
Eur. *Alc.* 516	*πατήρ γε μὴν ὡραῖος, εἴπερ οἴχεται*
Eur. *Andr.* 1083	*Πῶς δ' οἴχεταί μοι παῖς μόνου παιδὸς μόνος;*

In several cases, the subject of the verb is not an individual person exposed to death, but a group of individuals or an entity, which could attest

neral epigrammatic tradition, for instance *IG* 12.309,7 (inscription from Paros dating to approximately 100 B.C.)

ἦν γὰρ ἀποιχομένοισι νέμειν θέμις ἦν γονέεσσιν υἷα, κόνιν ταύτην παιδὶ γονεῖς ἔχεαν,

IG 12.9,289,11 (inscription from Eretria, 2nd or first century BC)

σοῖς δὲ πατὴρ ο[ἰ]κτρ[ὸ]ν Ποσειδῶνος
ἦμαρ ἀσεῖδεν μήτηρ τε
Εἰρήνη σε[ῖ]ο κατοιχομένου

IG 5,2 *σῆμ' εἰσορᾷς, ὦ ξεῖνε, κατ' Ἄιδος οἰχομένοιο*
Πρὶν γλυκεροῦ γήρως ἐπύνομ' Ὀνασικλέος (inscription of Tegea that seems of the Roman era). Κατοιχομένῳ and κατοιχομένοις occur also in a late inscription from Aigialea, *IG* 12.7.394,14 and 394, 41.

one degree further not usage as an euphemism but the idiomatization of this verb:

Aisch. *Choeph.* 636	*βροτῶν ἀτιμωθὲν οἴχεται γένος*
Eur. *Heracl.* 14	*… καὶ πόλις μὲν οἴχεται, ψυχὴ δ᾽ἐσώθη*
Eur. *Hec.* 1231	*χρυσοῦ τ᾽ ὄνησις οἴχεται παῖδες τέ σοι*
Eur. *Suppl.* 712	*οἴχεται τὰ Παλλάδος*

The conclusion is clear enough: in the classical period, the frequent use of οἴχεται concerning a dead person already had much weakened this expression. Therefore it was necessary to strengthen it with a new lexical feature, like the addition of another movement verb with "centrifugal" value,[42] generally βέβηκε. Thus in the tragic corpus, the emphasis is very evident (repetition of the verbal form, rejection of the subject) in Eur. *Or.* 971

βέβακε γὰρ βέβακεν, οἴχεται τέκνων
Πρόπασα γέννα Πέλοπος …

More subtle perhaps is Eur. *El.* 1151 since the use of οἴχεται about Agamemnon is isolated in an independent proposition without a link to the context: the brutal stylistic effect might contradict euphemism:

Νῦν δ᾽ἐκλέλοιπε ταῦτ᾽ἐν ἡμέρᾳ
Θύελλ᾽ ὅπως βέβηκας· οἴχεται πατὴρ
τέθνηκ᾽ ἐγὼ σοί· φροῦδος εἶ θανών

The perfect of βαίνω, in the second person, refers to Orestes. Electra believes in the fake news of her brother's death, and uses the expressive perfect βέβηκας with the simile of the tempest, then the participle θανών, "dead". About their father, actually dead, she uses οἴχεται, and for herself, the emphatic form of the perfect τέθνηκ(α), strenghtened by its position in the beginning of the line. This example might lead to the hypothesis that one prefers to say "to depart" for talking about others' death, possibly

42. Létoublon 1985.

euphemistic for the dear ones, and "to die" for talking hyperbolically about oneself.

We saw "I am dead", in hyperbole,[43] linked here to "you disappeared, he disappeared" in the context. But the alleged euphemistic use of οἴχομαι also gives place to the same kind of hyperbole, and the high number of examples in Tragic theater might hold good as a proof of its idiomatic status in the classical period:

Aisch. *Suppl.* 786	*… οἴχομαι φόβῳ* «I am scared to death»
Ibid. 738	*παροίχομαι, πάτερ, δείματι*
Soph. *Trach.* 85	*… ἡνίκ᾽ ἦ σεσώσμεθα*
	κείνου βίου σώσαντος, ἦ οἰχόμεθ᾽ ἅμα;
Ibid. 1143	*Ἰοὺ, ἰοὺ δύστηνος, οἴχομαι τάλας*
Soph. *Aj.* 1128	*θεὸς γὰρ ἐκσῴζει με, τῷδε δ᾽οἴχομαι*
Eur. *Méd.* 226	*… οἴχομαι δὲ καὶ βίου*
	χάριν μεθεῖσα κατθανεῖν χρῄζω, φίλαι·
Heracl. 602	*Ὦ παῖδες, οἰχόμεθα*
Phoen. 976	*ἄν δ᾽ὑστερήσῃς, οἰχόμεθα, κατθάνῃ*
Ibid. 1136	*οἰχόμεσθ*
Or. 181	*διοιχόμεθ᾽αμ οἰχόμεθα*
Ibid. 305	*εἰ γὰρ προλείας μ᾽ ἦ προσεδρείᾳ νόσον*
	Κτήσῃ τιν᾽, οἰχόέσθα …
Ibid. 734	*οἰχόμεσθ᾽, ὡς ἐν βραχεῖ σοί τ᾽ἀμὰ*
	Δηλώσω κακά.
Ibid. 763	*… καὶ γὰρ αὐτὸς οἴχομαι*
Andr. 1176	*διολώλαμεν, οἰχόμέθ᾽·*
Her. F. 1187	*οἰχόμεθ᾽οἰχόμεθα πτανοί*
Iphig. A. 888	*οἴχομαι τάλαινα Παλλάδος*
Suppl. 123	*σφαλέντες οἰχόμεσθα*
Hec. 822	*αὐτὴ δ᾽ἐπ᾽αἰσχροῖς αἰχμάλωτος οἴχομαι*

43. Well known are the strong effect that some great dramatic authors draw from this use, e.g., Shakespeare's *Hamlet* or Molière's *L'Avare*.

Fr. nova Austin 65.43 *Οἰχόμεθ' 'χόμεθ*
65.52 *οἰχόμεθα*

and in the compound verb with δι(α)- in

Eur. *Or.* 855 *αἰαῖ διοιχόμεσθα*
Ion 765 *διοιχόμεσθα τέκνον.*

Aristophanes probably parodies this stylistic fad of Tragic authors in *Thesm.* 609 διοίχομαι.

Since the use of the first person of οἴχομαι in its proper meaning is linguistically impossible, I talked formerly of a «metaphor in the second degree»: I thought then that a metaphoric or euphemistic idiomatic use of οἴχομαι was supposedly first.[44] Now I would say that idiomatization is certainly necessary, but that maybe there was never an euphemism: as long as one believes that death consists in a departure of the soul towards the Underworld, the phrases meaning «Such or such's soul is gone» or else «such or such disappeared» are expressions of death quite as strong and direct as «such or such is dead». If there is no more belief in a travel to the Underworld, for all that there is neither metaphor nor euphemism in the use of «he disappeared»: the phrase became a commonplace and then needed strengthening means to obtain expressivity again.

An extensive reading of funeral epigrams in Kaibel's collection,[45] and of some recent publications about epitaph and epigram[46] allows us to reach some precision about Greek uses, but as witnessing representations, those texts, though numerous as they may be from the third century, seem to be more entitled to stylistic sophistication than the Homeric epics that they often imitate. At the most ancient period funerary inscriptions contain only the identity of the dead (name and patronym). In the VIth centu-

44. Létoublon 1985, 102.

45. Kaibel. I limited myself to epigrams occurring prior to or during the Alexandrian period.

46. Particularly Day 1989, Laurens 1989, Walsh 1991.

ry appear in some epitaphs the mention of the dead as such (generally with the participle θανών)[47]: the proper verb meaning "to die" does not seem to be avoided, it is even used in the third person of the indicative in 71.5 (Athens, IVth century):

θρεφθεὶς δ᾽ἐν χθονὶ τῆιδε θάνεν μέγα πῆμα φίλοισ[ι

Since the archaic period, the dead are also currently called «destroyed» with the passive participle of φθίνω (Vth century: n° 1, 2, IVth-IIId century, 54, 62, 84, 86, 88B 4, 89), and we meet once more an example of the aorist indicative: 77,3 (Athens, IVth century)

ἃ ποθ᾽ὑπ᾽ ὠδίνων στονόεντι κατέφθιτο πότμῳ

Of course, one could claim that the use of θανών is stylistically normal whereas φθίμενος would be "marked" and euphemistic. But for me they both allow a reuse of Homeric formulas,[48] and since this last verb was not in use in classical language, it appears much stronger characterized as poetic. The epic formulas are intended to enhance the dead to the dimension of Homeric heroes. Kaibel 87.4 (Athens, IVth century), that adds an Homeric hemistich[49] to the dual participle, seems to me a good clue to this conclusion:

οὕνεκα ἀποφθιμένω βήτην δόμων Ἄιδος εἴσω.

Inscr. 2 in the same collection (VIth century also), after having identified the dead, Xenophantes, as ἀποφθιμένωι, goes on with a Homeric formula:

τὸ γὰρ γέρας ἐστὶ θανόντων

«it is the privilege of the dead».

47. Kaibel, for instance n° 11, 13, 45 for the VIth century, 22 for the Vth, 77, 79 for the IVth.

48. For instance *Il.* 8.359 χερσὶν ὑπ᾽ Ἀργείων φθίμενος ἐν πατρίδι γαίῃ
or 20.322 οὐδ᾽ εἴ κεν τοῦ πατρὸς ἀποφθιμένοιο πυθοίμην.

49. Kaibel noticed this: «clausula homerica».

In this corpus, maybe too short to be considered representative of the genre, one sole epitaph entails οἴχεται. It seems to confirm the hypotheses expressed above about the fixation in phraseology of the formulas saying the destruction of the body and the depart of the soul, 90 (Athens, IVth century)

Ὀστέα μὲν καὶ σάρκας ἔχει χθὼν παῖδα τὸν ἡδύν,
Ψυχὴ δ᾽ εὐσεβέων οἴχεται ἐς θάλαμον

As for bones and flesh, the earth encloses the sweet child,
but the soul is gone to the bed of the Blessed Ones.[50]

The increase of the uses of οἴχομαι depends on the beliefs about death: this verb meaning «to be missing» functioned as an expression of death, at times idiomatic and poetical, which did not seem contradictory for the Ancients. It also seems directly linked to the «Said over the death» that I deem one of the mainsprings of Greek poetry,[51] which might explain why it was not used in prose. The amount of examples in the Tragic corpus of the classical period attest to the frequency of this habit of language in poetic style, since there is a need of making it strong again through several stylistic means, and since we meet many hyperbolic uses of the first person.

The Ancients probably believed that the use of οἴχομαι for the dead came from Homer, especially from both examples analyzed above, where it is used about actual dead individuals, or those who are believed to be dead. For all that, I think I have shown that those uses have actually nothing in common with euphemism, and that the epics generally deal with death without periphrases.

After Homer this verb is used very frequently about the dead, but so far as one believes in the travel to the Otherworld, no euphemism can be proved: the verb refers to the soul departing for Hades, and it seems that

50. Litteral translation of my own.
51. Létoublon 1995.

this expression, much used in funerary poetry, therefore became a kind of poetic commonplace.

These remarks, apart from linguistic analyses, might open a study of historical anthropology and a study of the evolution of mentalities: the epics describe the spectacle of death, not with complacency, it seems to me, but in order to show that epic glory, κλέος, is won at the price of the horrors of war. In tragic poetry, probably due to the famous occurrence of οἴχομαι concerning Hector's departure to the Otherworld, this verb became a poetical idiom.

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