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AGON: THE ILIAD

HOMER IS TODAY at many removes from us; a classic, foundational or canonical, whose original text or meaning no one seriously believes we can recapture. The interminable oral or McLuhanite arguments at best propose the idea of a reading which by definition they set out of reach; while anthropology is there to warn us against identifying its content with the same rages, points of honour, enmities, snap decisions, alertness to disrespect, burning ambitions, with which we ourselves are only too familiar. Are not these Achaeans (as I will henceforth call them) just as alien to us as the Aztecs or the Tupinambás, with their murderous gymnastics, their taste for blood sports, their vendettas, their never-ending ritual insults and inexhaustible self-promotions? The choice itself is anachronistic, inasmuch as such concepts of savagery and irrationality are modern and our own; and based on constructions of Western rationality and Greek classicality projected onto an archaic past rapidly turning into a Kantian *Ding-an-sich* before our very eyes.

I. MISREADINGS OF THE SECULAR

Only they are not archaic, these people. Despite the prodigious memory of their bards, the Homeric characters themselves at best remember recent grudges and distant ancestry. To be sure, there are moments in which the truly archaic breaks through. So it is that the shaman, his plea rebuffed, mutters his ritual curses and prayers for vengeance to a god much older than the Olympians (and is heard):

... He came as night comes down and knelt then
apart and opposite the ships and let go an arrow.
Terrible was the clash that rose from the bow of silver.
First he went after the mules and circling hounds, then let go
a tearing arrow against the men themselves and struck them.
The corpse fires burned everywhere and did not stop burning.¹

This god has nothing in common with the Apollo of the same name who acts out his assigned role in what is essentially a comic subplot, the frivolous court drama of the Olympians, with their rivalries, their intrigues, and their apprehensive subservience to the Sun King. In a work which has little room for anything but the state of exception, the siege and the provisionality of the camps, the beached ships, the gods offer a glimpse of what used to be daily life: strong and assertive women, marital disputes, adulteries, seductions, days and nights. Here the Elizabethan double plot is inverted, and it is the transcendental realm, rather than that of peasant buffoonery, which affords comic relief. (To which we shall add shortly that Homer possesses a third register, namely the animal savagery of the similes.)

What is then the function of such deities, who still to be sure insist on the appropriate rites and sacrifices, in their too-human relish for the delicious fumes of broiling meat and fat? The answer is at one and the same time narrative and philosophical: they dispel contingency, they rationalize chance in those innumerable hand-to-hand combats, in which, inevitably, someone will live and someone will die, and yet in which there can be little satisfactory narrative explanation for the outcome. The gods replace it. Their intervention rarely involves the supernatural or even the improbable: Patroklos will still stumble, Hektor reach in vain for his second spear; but the gods lend a cover to the stumble, the unlucky throw, the damaged shield.

In narrative, Occam's razor must also foreclose the unwanted questions, in this instance that of fate itself. As a theological matter, indeed, fate only threatens to absorb our attention once, when in Book Sixteen Zeus wonders whether he should not save his own son Sarpedon from a death foretold. The ultimate question—the power of Zeus himself—is then deflected by the resourceful Hera, adept in argument and debate, who slyly reminds him:

if you bring Sarpedon back to his home, still living,
think how then some other one of the gods might also
wish to carry his own son out of the strong encounter;
since around the great city of Priam are fighting many
sons of the immortals. You will waken grim resentment among them.²

¹ I have used the Lattimore *Iliad* translation throughout (Chicago and London 2011); hereafter L. References are first to his page numbers, then to Book and verse of the poem. L, p. 76; I, 47–52.

² L, p. 363; XVI, 445–9.

(It is a lesson Aphrodite learns only too well when she is wounded trying to save her son Aeneas; the rescue of the *cavaliere* Paris having presumably a sounder narrative justification.)

'Secular' is then a characterization preferable to terms like realism or anthropomorphism, for it simply designates the absence of the religious in the most general sense. This paganism is not a religion, however impious Plato may have felt it to be, and however much critics of the monotheisms, from Julian the Apostate to Jean-François Lyotard, have longed to revive it. The literary advantage of secularity for us lies in the insufficiently acknowledged fact that interpretation (of whatever kind) is most often validated by a religious or metaphysical interest however deeply concealed. A text that carries its own religious or metaphysical (ideological) investment will then tend to promote interpretations all too often dated or outdated. I say this not to denounce interpretation as such, but rather to promote its multiplicities, indeed its promiscuities, which may then serve as substitutes and consolation for the polytheisms we have lost. The secular Homer stands open to all the interpretations we can think of, from the neo-Platonic to the postmodern. Let's not celebrate the inexhaustibility of the text: secularity is rather its zero degree, the reduction to the closest we can imagine of the non-ideological. This is indeed what the classicists celebrated as its 'noble simplicity'; and it may give us pause to remember that for the etymologists, the word 'simple' is very complex indeed.

Secularity must indeed be approached and defined in a new way, one not to be limited to religion and transcendence (we shall see another component later on). It is better to think of it in terms of immediacy—an experience which can for the moment bracket the ultimate metaphysical issues and in particular the question of reality. Immediacy is a term which posits the possibility of some direct access to the real in the sense that it does not require the mediation of a meaning or interpretation. Its practical experience does not depend on the (overt or covert) intervention of representations, themselves necessarily ideal and constructed. Clearly the theological is just such a mediation, just such a meaning and one of the most 'idealistic' varieties imaginable, at least in its intellectual and philosophical forms. The secular, then, means the subtraction of that mediation or intervention (to use a term popular in current theoretical discourse).

Why not then simply call this realistic remainder 'materialism'? Because materialism is itself a metaphysical position and as elaborate a

mediatory construction as the idealism we have just subtracted; it presupposes a philosophical statement about reality and our relationship to it. But we have just taken Occam's razor to the complications of another such metaphysical mediation: why complicate matters by reintroducing terms such as materialism (or realism) which revive all those unnecessary questions? Indeed, why bother to question ourselves at all about the nature of this 'objective reality' to which secularity gives us some direct access? And in any case, we are here dealing with an unmediated 'text' and not reality itself. (Still, I will caution us that our account of secularity is not yet complete and that there will be another dimension to 'subtract' before it is.)

The implication is no doubt distressing for criticism, which, rightly assuming all interpretations to be misreadings, nonetheless fatally ends up prioritizing some of them over others. Not to worry: the contradiction lies in Kant's theory itself, which, having impeccably argued the case for the unattainability of the *Ding-an-sich*, that is, for any genuine objectivity (or even reality?), has never had the slightest impact on practice or daily life, where the immediacy of the real has always 'gone without saying'. The reason for this strange disregard in practice (which should have left us long since in a Baudrillard-type irreality), lies in the historically dual function of Kantian ideology: not at all to subvert our conception of objectivity, but rather to produce a new experience of subjectivity as a closed individualism, a monadic and relativistic dimension of purely private experience. What Kant was able to construct as a representation was a duality in which the world was objective and accessible in its immediacy, while our experience of it remained 'purely subjective' and relativistic. In much the same way, then, we read Homer: an objectivity whose experience is absolutely relative in time and space, and varying with the 'prejudice' of the reader, as Gadamer puts it.³

2. BEFORE GENRE

Whatever else it is, however, the *Iliad* is also not an epic. I take this word in its generic sense, and its problems are clarified by the agreement that most of the poems conventionally assigned to this genre are to be

³ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, London 2005, pp. 301ff.

qualified as 'artificial epics'. Virgil was remarkably straightforward when asked about his aim in composing the *Aeneid*: 'To imitate Homer and to glorify Augustus'.

Perhaps the distinction implied by the word 'artificial' is less relevant generically. An epic—signed or anonymous—evokes a world-historical moment in order to produce a hero for the collectivity in question. It is not clear that Achilles is that hero, although generations of Greek youth down to Alexander the Great himself may have thought so. The effective function of the *Iliad* was not to promote an ideal of conduct or public identity but rather to unify Greece; just as the system of Chinese characters continues to unify the multiple populations and languages we call Chinese.

A genre—even that of the epic—can only exist within a generic system. I will suggest that such a system only emerges later, after 'Homer', although the shadowy outlines of various genres to come (including that of the epic itself) can be discerned here and there throughout the *Iliad*, as we shall see.

But we must now add that, in that sense, genres today no longer exist either. The title of Lukács's *Theory of the Novel* is misleading, for this speculative work proposes a wholesale breakdown of generic systems in modernity; and their historical replacement by the novel—an event which can itself be grasped as one moment in the emergence of modernity as such—yields a unique form of narrative which can have no theoretical definition of the older generic type. As readers, however, our subjectivities are formed by genres and even more by the novelistic itself, and we will see that the temptation of any (modern) reader faced with the *Iliad* is to translate it into just such anachronistic terms and categories.

Yet the *Iliad* boasts a perfect plot, far more unified than any of its imitations: Achilles withdraws from a war that depends on him; when his surrogate is killed, he finds new motivation to reenter the battle and to defeat his rival. We can even detect a remarkable irony presiding over this plot: Achilles is fated to die if and when he wins; he withdraws and lives, reenters the battle and triumphs, only to die (beyond the end of the poem itself) at the hands of the man who started the war in the first place.

Barthes taught us that modernity begins with the discovery of the primacy of the sentence:⁴ after that, modern literature has had to confront over and over again, in agonizing forms, the tension—not to say contradiction—between plot and sentence; that is, if you like, between temporality and the present (of which Kierkegaard astonishingly remarked that it was not a temporal category). But this is a form-problem that Homer also faces, more acutely and perhaps less self-consciously: for the plot we have resumed here is an imaginary construction based on the experience of a fifteen-hour recital whose individual moments—the dactylic hexameters that relentlessly succeed one another during that time—are not even individual sentences. I will then propose a category of a different type than generic convention to account for the obvious unification of this work, for which we have no useful term (it can probably be approximated as an episode in some immense and no longer extant cycle).

That category—the *agon*—is a peculiar one; and although traces of it can be found elsewhere once we identify it, in its original form it is as alien as the dual in verb forms or the middle voice:

since that time when first there stood in division of conflict
Atreus' son the lord of men and brilliant Achilleus.
What god was it then that set them together in bitter collision?⁵

This, and not some 'anger' of a psychological individual, is the true beginning of the *Iliad*; and its various translations betray the difficulty of conveying some original unity founded on the two rather than the one: based in other words on the incomplete nature of the individual. The Loeb proposes 'parted in strife', where 'parted' suggests some original unity; while 'brought them together to contend' seems to presuppose an original separation. A more literal translation of the Greek—'stand together to contend'—might better convey the implication that it is the *agon* itself, the duel, which is the fundamental unit, and not the named individuals; and that the *agon* is a form rather than an event.

'Strife'—the divinity Eris in Homeric Greek—is to be sure not the only form the *agon* can take, inasmuch as the latter is itself a narrative category and not a narrative 'realization' of that category. It is ontological rather than ontic, and can take a variety of other forms; as in the version:

⁴ Roland Barthes, 'Flaubert and the Sentence', in Susan Sontag, ed., *A Barthes Reader*, New York 1982.

⁵ L, p. 75; I, 6–8.

a mere child, who knew nothing yet of the joining of battle
nor of debate where men are made pre-eminent.⁶

His old tutor Phoinix here describes the young Achilles, in the process reminding us that for these Achaeans, debate—the exchange of speeches—is no less a necessary endowment than athletic strength. Speeches take up almost half a poem unremittingly given over to hand-to-hand combat. Language is not yet rhetoric, to be sure, any more than the *Iliad* is yet an epic; but it is certainly an acknowledged and well-nigh corporeal property, as in that remarkable moment when Priam's chief counsellor interrupts Helen in her famous account of the Achaean heroes, in order to recall Odysseus's peacemaking embassy to Troy before the war. At first, Antenor tells us, standing alongside the bull-like Menelaos, Odysseus cut a poor figure staring down, 'eyes fixed on the ground beneath him . . . like any man who knows nothing . . .':

But when he let the great voice go from his chest, and the words came
drifting down like the winter snows, then no other mortal
man beside could stand up against Odysseus.⁷

Speech is thus also a form of the *agon*, and the *Iliad* is nothing less than an interlocking succession of just such figures of the category of physical or verbal confrontations which are, as Heidegger might have put it, the ontic manifestations of the *agon's* ontological reality. Or, if you prefer a different language, the two levels make up the double inscription of form itself, in its latent and manifest versions. Both these distinctions, however, make it clear that the very concept of the *agon* as a category has philosophical as well as narrative implications, to which we now turn.

3. SPECIES-RECOGNITION?

The biologists tell us that for most living species symmetry is a strongly marked characteristic: eyes here come before left and right; and anything resembling a pair of eyes is the signal for alarm, alerting the organism to the presence of another sentient being and arousing it to conduct of a responsive nature (fight or flight). This electrifying perception, which Hegel calls 'recognition', at one and the same time activates or, better still, constructs the ecosystem (or what Heidegger calls 'Welt') of the

⁶ L, p. 228; IX, 440–1.

⁷ L, p. 123; III, 217–23.

organism. It is this primordial experience which is at the heart of one of Hegel's most famous philosophical excursions, the so-called Master-Slave episode (as well as its modern version in the Sartrean Look, or, in a different version, in René Girard's notion of the mimetic), whose motivation we must now examine.

Hegel's story, indeed, surfaces in a rather unexpected place, in the middle of a chapter of the *Phenomenology* devoted to the analysis of self-consciousness or reflection, notoriously the centre-piece of all philosophical discussions of consciousness as such. Indeed, it may be conjectured that a philosophical discussion of consciousness is never complete without some account of self-consciousness (with or without the mirrors); in which case the presumptuous inference might be drawn that in the long run there is really no difference between the two, and that all consciousness must be fundamentally self-conscious in one way or another; so that indeed—applying Occam's razor—a separate concept of self-consciousness is quite unnecessary.

I suggest therefore that this supplementary concept serves a different purpose altogether: not merely to distinguish the human from the non- or sub-human—do angels really have to be self-conscious?²—but above all, to entitle the individual human organism to a certain autonomy; ideologically to ensure the free-standing independence of the individual thinking body, of the person, or identity of individual consciousness, as a self-sufficient organism. Hegel himself will do this by describing self-consciousness as the presence within the mind of the two initially warring consciousnesses confronting one another; and this is clearly why he needs his origin fable of the Master-Slave in order to designate the later autonomous state, so-called self-consciousness, as its interiorization.

But the individual consciousness is not self-sufficient and neither is the individual body; much of modern philosophy and theory is devoted to describing the gap, the lack, the break, the cut, which prevents any so-called individual consciousness from achieving this state of absolute autonomy (which religions then attribute to God). Nor do we need to call for testimony as to the prematurity of human birth and the lateness of maturation; for what we are most interested in here is the narrative unviability of the individual character, something only modern literature, with its inner monologues and points of view, its novelistic 'psychology', has attempted to assert in practice if not in theory (thereby training us in a different habit of reading).

The *agon* in Homer has a different message for us, namely that there are no individual characters as such: they emerge only in combat with another, their very existence (as characters) is dual. Achilles in his solitary tent is miserable, or perhaps it would be better to say that he requires his mother Thetis to experience or express (they are the same) the misery of his rejection.

But we may return to Hegel's narrative, not only to understand its larger implications, but also to observe the form-problems it entails. The implications of Hegel's language (*Knecht* means serf rather than slave) stage a vaguely medieval scene, a forest primeval, *à la* Brocéliande, in which two sentient creatures discover one another: we may wish to assert that neither is human; before this discovery, their species-being could not yet have been determined. What is more obvious is that neither is as yet social: society does not yet exist, so that the humanistic narrative or interpretation of an individual against society is excluded along with the narrative of the isolated individual we have already disassembled.

They will then fight with each other: but for what? Hegel calls it recognition (*Anerkennung*), and the meaning and political usefulness of this term has been a matter of contemporary dispute. Liberal political theorists have argued that the very concept of recognition presupposes, in advance, that it is possible; and that society can overcome its antagonisms by way of a politics of universal recognition. This is not quite what Hegel shows: for in his version of the myth one of the parties to the deadly joust must win and the other must lose.

It follows then, that, for Hegel at least, the recognition must somehow precede the combat and is presupposed by it: the organism's discovery of symmetry is in and of itself its recognition of the other. What both sides demand is rather the acknowledgement of that recognition, the secondary act of conceding a reciprocity which is hierarchical submission. This is what Sartre means by the acknowledgement of the other's freedom in his version, which, in a return to the biological drama, posits an *agon* of the Look where looking and being looked at or reified are incompatible and indeed incommensurable. This also seems to me the deeper situation of Jacques Rancière's notion of a universal equality on which alone inequalities can be posited, or imposed and articulated. In narrative versions of this *agon* the conflict includes the recognition in advance, or presupposes it: the contest must take place on the basis of some prior recognition.

That recognition cannot take place as a result of the contest is then logically demonstrated by Hegel's myth. As with Homer, the outcome of the battle itself is contingent. Hegel has no gods to justify the victory of one of these opponents over the other, indeed, they as yet do not even have names or individualities. But at this point Hegel, unlike Homer, introduces a new character, Death, 'the supreme master': and he accounts for the outcome of the battle as follows. One of his combatants, the master-to-be, has no attachment to life, to materiality and the body: we may say that his motivation is spiritual or idealistic, it is prestige—the securing of that new form of 'recognition' with which victory is supposed to reward it. The other, the future 'slave', is too committed to life and bodily existence to be willing to lose those things: he is a coward in the sense of Brechtian materialism, a well-nigh heroic unwillingness to lose the real in the service of any ideal. Homer's heroes are not cowards, and so they die fighting. Hegel's more medieval losers survive, and become the subjects or slaves of their new feudal masters: the reward for their materialism is a life-long labour on matter itself and on the transformation of the world, in the production of luxury goods for a master whose only loyalty henceforth is to Death itself, to the profession of warfare.

As far as 'recognition' is concerned, Hegel now has an ironic surprise for us: for by virtue of his victory, now only the master is a genuine human being; a true Sartrean freedom. He has no equals, the slave is sub-human, and thereby unqualified to 'recognize' him. Whence the desolate outcome: 'The truth of the slave is the master; but the truth of the master is the slave'. Only the slave knows what freedom really is, and the master is little more than a drone. It is thereby to the slave that the future of history, the future of labour and the transformation of the world and the self, belongs; yet that, in some far future at the end of what Marx called pre-history.

4. ONE WHICH IS TWO

This philosophical excursus on the implications of the *agon* will now serve to introduce its form-problems, namely what can be imagined as the narrative possibilities of this seemingly limited duel form (we have just touched on its political aporias). The principal formal dilemma of the *agon* as a category lies in its reproduction.

I have always appreciated the advice given by an older colleague to that admirer of Descartes who was the youthful Sartre: Everything begins with the *cogito*, provided you can get out of it! Something similar could certainly be said about that extremely narrow and limited form which is the *agon*: for it bears within itself its own immediate cancellation:

Odysseus struck him with the spear, in anger for his companion,
in the temple, and the bronze spearhead drove through the other
temple also, so that a mist of darkness clouded both eyes.
He fell, thunderously, and his armour clattered upon him.⁸

Such is the unlovely refrain that accompanies this narrative relentlessly from beginning to end:

And first the lord of men Agamemnon
hurled tall Odios, lord of the Halizones, from his chariot.
For in his back even as he was turning the spear fixed
between the shoulders and was driven on through the chest beyond it.
He fell, thunderously, and his armour clattered upon him.⁹

The transformation of mortal temporality into the music of this metallic clangour is the sign and symptom of the *agon's* most acute form-problem: the duel is always over too fast, while narrative demands time in its very structure. The gunslingers of the old West, despite the most ingenious *retardements*, still take but a few moments to dispatch their adversaries. The rounds of the boxing match, the varied thrusts of the duellists, have but a limited *combinatoire* from which to draw their variations; and so do classical funeral games.

It is true that Homeric combat is not limited to the death blow: for the true reward of the victor lies in the armour of his adversary, which he proceeds to strip from the dead body. By killing Patroklos, Hektor has inherited Achilles's borrowed armour and will henceforth wear it up to his own death. (There ensues a scene worthy of the *Mabinogion*: two Achilles fighting each other, a magical illusion on which Homer does not comment.) Still, even without his new armour, Achilles is capable of generating a light that frightens the Trojans away from the trenches:

from the head of Achilles the blaze shot into the bright air.¹⁰

⁸ L, pp. 143-4; IV, 501-4.

⁹ L, p. 147; V, 38-42.

¹⁰ L, p. 402; XVIII, 214.

The vanquished body itself, then, in a barbarous aftermath, is often the object of a protracted struggle between the two sides, the one seeking to maim and desecrate the corpse, the other to rescue it for burial with honour (troops who do not leave their dead behind!). Still, this process cannot be protracted at any length; and the inner logic of the *agon* thereby dictates that its fulfilment will be its own abolition as a form.

This is, however, to reckon without the other manifestations this structural category can take. We must at once disqualify a Christian reading, in which ‘recognition’ is possible on the narrative level, or in which the final scene of the *Iliad*, when Achilles grants Priam’s request for his son’s body, denotes the emergence of some new figure of mercy and pardon:

and Achilles wept now for his own father, now again
for Patroklos. The sound of their mourning moved in the house. Then
when great Achilles had taken full satisfaction in sorrow
and the passion for it had gone from his mind and body, thereafter
he rose from his chair, and took the old man by the hand . . .¹¹

The scene is not one of any form of reconciliation; rather, each sinks into the rumination of his own grief, Priam for his son, Achilles for a father of whom he knows, not that he is deceased (he is not), but only that he will never see him again. That Priam is only too suspicious of the latter’s generosity is demonstrated by the care he takes to depart unannounced in the middle of the night, a caution amply dictated by Homeric psychology, as we shall see. Indeed, Homeric language has no word for pity in this modern sense.¹²

Still, it seems possible that other modalities, other forms of narrative realization of the *agon* might offer more productive narrative outcomes. We might, for example, have consulted Hegel’s earliest version of his Master–Slave fable, which took the form, Peter Bürger tells us, of the battle of the sexes rather than the medieval challenge. In that case, the *agon* might have been expected to develop in the direction of that love-death that Wagner imagined for Tristan and Isolde (of whom we tend to forget that they began as mortal enemies); or else, for marriage, in the direction of Strindberg, if not of Lacan’s affirmation that the ‘sexual relationship’ does not exist. But clearly gender does not figure either among the registers of the *Iliad*.

¹¹ L, p. 511; XXIV, 511–5.

¹² David Konstan, *The Emotions of the Ancient Greeks: Studies in Aristotle and Classical Literature*, Toronto 2007.

There remains that continuation of battle by other means, namely by means of language and speech, of which we have already shown that its achievements were among the strengths required by a Homeric leader. That at the outset the adversaries shout invective at each other indicates the terror that for some cultures the violence of language, like that of masks, can inspire. But the transfer of the *agon* from the modality of the body to that of discourse is a more momentous shift and seemingly requires more elaborate mediations. Indeed, it is precisely at just such a nodal point that we come upon what is perhaps the most famous intervention of a god, and the most striking, namely Athene's appearance in Book One at the moment in which the furious Achilles is about to draw his sword against his commander. The goddess has been sent by Hera ('who loves both of you'), but for one long moment we are no longer in the intrigue of the Olympian court and Pallas Athene is no longer one of its stock characters:

The goddess standing behind Peleus's son caught him by the fair hair,
 appearing to him only, for no man of the others saw her.
 Achilles in amazement turned about, and straightway
 knew Pallas Athene and the terrible eyes shining.¹³

Or, in Chapman's 1598 translation:

He, turning backe his eye, amaze strooke everie facultie,
 Yet straight he knew her by her eyes, so terrible they were
 Sparkling with ardor . . .

Or again in Pope's:

Behind she stood, and by the golden hair
 Achilles seized; to him alone confess'd;
 A sable cloud conceal'd her from the rest.
 He sees, and sudden to the goddess cries,
 Known by the flames that sparkle from her eyes . . .¹⁴

The primordial glare of Athene's eyes, the Look in its most apotropaic and terrifying power, inspiring an amazement in Achilles which Plotinus read as the sign of elevation to the third level of awareness¹⁵—all this is surely, like Apollo's 'nameless' visitation of the plague on the Achaean

¹³ L, p. 80; I, 197–200.

¹⁴ The comparisons are drawn, first from Chapman's *Iliad* of 1598, Princeton 1998, p. 29, and Alexander Pope's of 1715–20, New Haven 1967, p. 8.

¹⁵ Leonard Muellner, *The Anger of Achilles: Mēnis in Greek Epic*, Ithaca 1996, p. 8.

camp, the mark of an eruption of the archaic into a recognizable daytime world. Homer disposes, as we shall see, of many words for subtle gradients of visuality, but none quite so intense as this one, which he must supplement with the peculiar gesture of the seizing of Achilles's hair: that the distance between the well-nigh irresistible physical impulse and the satisfaction of speech and verbal vilification is a difficult barrier Athene herself thereby underscores, when in this current conflict she recommends the worst insults Achilles can think of, provided they do not proceed to a fatal *passage à l'acte* (he follows her advice).

5. ANGERS

In that case, however, inasmuch as what both words and deeds share and express is anger in however strong a form, would it not be preferable to grasp their underlying category as an emotion rather than a structure, and to posit anger as such as the fundamental form of all the encounters we have theorized as the *agon*? Anger is, to be sure, the most anti-social of the emotions, the one Aristotle calls *orgé*, and for which he could find no opposite in his great treatise.¹⁶ Not to speak of the obvious fact that it is the first word in the poem (and its sometime demotic title)—*mênis* . . . I think it is essential to argue this alternative out, for it posits psychology as the ontological level of the narrative, and thereby confirms the deeper assumptions of a properly modern subjectivity.

Psychology indeed is a discipline organized around the individual and necessarily requires individual autonomy as its foundational presupposition. Even if Homeric reality is not as inaccessible to us as a Kantian *Ding-an-sich*, the very dual structure of the *agon* demands a version of inter-subjectivity scarcely available in modern psychology (which finds its limits in the notion of collectivity as a mob *à la* Le Bon). The choice of Identity or Difference is to be sure an unavoidable preliminary decision, Kierkegaard's 'leap in the void', which no evidence can support, inasmuch as it is in the light of that initial choice that evidence is evaluated in the first place. I will suggest that interpretations of the *Iliad* in terms of modern psychology are projections of an essentially novelistic reading which constitutes the initial barrier to this text, whose fundamental

¹⁶ In the *Rhetoric*, Aristotle defines anger as a response 'to a conspicuous slight directed towards what concerns one's self or towards what concerns one's friends'.

study, indeed, must be just those barriers and not ‘the text itself’ to which we have no access.

In any case, the anger proposed as an alternative to the agonistic structure must first be appreciated, in all its strangeness and its radical difference from what we psychologically experience, as an impersonal and free-floating entity. The first word of the poem: ‘Rage, goddess, sing the rage of Achilleus . . .’—the translation, by Stanley Lombardo, which seems best to capture the spirit of the original syntax—is a term, *mênis*, which is only one of a number of Greek alternatives, and is, in fact, quite rare in Homer’s own usage, and not normally used for human emotions, for which two other alternatives are given in this same first book.

This initial word seems rather to have a properly cosmological force, and to register a sudden disequilibrium, the sense of ‘time out of joint’:

In other words, *mênis* is not a word for a hostile emotion arising in one individual against some other individual, as we may spontaneously understand it. It is the name of . . . a *cosmic sanction*, of a social force whose activation brings drastic consequences on the whole community . . . *mênis* is incurred by the breaking of basic religious and social tabus . . .¹⁷

This authority compares the effect of the *mênis* to Mary Douglas’s notion of pollution as something which, like the plague, unsettles the whole social order and thereby violates the mandate of Heaven. That this term, reserved for Zeus, is here attributed to Achilleus would then mean only that Achilleus is here the instrument of fate rather than its master.

It is an account which is confirmed by the way in which, throughout the opening book, some first anger—which is, incidentally, not that of Achilleus but rather of Agamemnon himself—perpetuates itself like a viral infection, passing first to the priest who is its object, then to Apollo and thereupon to Achilleus and finally the very gods themselves. In this sense the *mênis*, the cosmic anger of a Zeus who is for the moment more than the named Olympian character, is at one with its own punishment, an individual disorder that causes universal chaos; and it is no accident that this first book, which begins with the word, ends by reminding us of the unhappy Hephaestus and his apparently unmotivated and capricious punishment by Zeus himself in his anger:

¹⁷ Muellner, *The Anger of Achilles*, p. 8.

... thrown by angry Jove
 Sheer oer the crystal battlements; from morn
 To noon he fell, from noon to dewy eve,
 A summer's day, and with the setting sun
 Dropped from the zenith, like a falling star
 on Lemnos, th' Aegean isle.¹⁸

(We will return to this guilty architect later on, of whom Milton has omitted the most touching details.)

We do not, however, need to wait for philologists to discover the two more common Greek synonyms, for they are used and elucidated at once in Book One by the great seer Kalchas in a prudent attempt to protect himself against the more immediately dangerous anger of the moment, namely that of Agamemnon:

For a king when he is angry with a man beneath him is too strong,
 and suppose even for the day itself he swallow down his anger,
 he still keeps bitterness that remains until its fulfilment
 deep in his chest.¹⁹

The speech distinguishes two forms of anger: a duality which does not include *mēnis*, and which we may go so far as to call a construction of subjectivity.²⁰ One is a long-term grudge—*xolos*—which Lattimore translates as 'anger' per se (and where we may note that class overtone—'a man beneath him'—which the Greeks were always careful to include in their psychic definitions). For modern readers the evocation of repression is particularly interesting, here associated with a physiological action, the swallowing back down of bile. The alternative term for anger—*kotos*—is closer to a short-term irritation, capable of reawakening the more deeply held resentment and reactivating it. Lattimore's translation—'bitterness'—tends to conflate the two in a way consistent with their immediate meaning (the *kotos* reawakens the *xolos*) but which obscures their distinction. It is perhaps more visible in Chapman's version (Pope ignores it altogether):

When a king hath once markt for his hate
 A man inferior, though that day his wrath seemes to digest
 Th'offence he takes, yet evermore he rakes up in his brest

¹⁸ John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, Book I, 741–6.

¹⁹ L, p. 77; I, 80–3.

²⁰ Thomas Walsh, *Fighting Words and Feuding Words: Anger and the Homeric Poems*, Lanham MD 2005.

Brands of quicke anger till revenge hath quencht to his desire
The fire reserved.²¹

(Chapman has added in the fire.) That this is not some mere characterological trait of Agamemnon as a stock comic figure is demonstrated by the transfer of the distinction and its psychic mechanism to Achilles himself, for whom the very mention of Agamemnon's name—as in Phoinix's later exhortation—will trigger the *kotos* that threatens to awaken that deeper *xolos*:

Stop confusing my heart with lamentation and sorrow
for the favour of great Atreides. It does not become you
to love this man, for fear you turn hateful to me, who love you.²²

We have said that for Aristotle 'anger' has no opposite; now we can perhaps suggest that it carries its opposite within itself in a temporal modality—the short-lived irritation at the offence or else that long-termed resentment Chapman translated as hate.

But it may also be of interest to grasp this duality in the framework of a larger system. In this spirit I will hazard the guess that anger can take on a productive form as well, a proposition which requires some conjecture about the mysterious entity named *thumos*, sometimes translated as spirit (but in the sense in which one speaks of 'spirited racehorses'). What seems to be peculiar about this term is that it is both the seat of emotion and the emotion itself. Homeric psychology assigns a variety of places for human consciousness: the so-called 'psychic organs', the lungs, the chest, the head. This is not altogether alien to English: we speak of 'taking heart', 'putting your heart into it', etc., where heart is as much the spirit or contents of the emotive organ as the bodily placement or housing itself.

But there are more immediate examples in the Greek: in that sense, *thumos* is the anger of the warrior in Homer's Greek, in which it has a far richer and more complex meaning and use than in Plato's and Aristotle's later philosophizing reductions. The multiplicity of uses is reflected in modern translators' attempts to assign a single psychological term for this quality—for vitality, which can mean life itself (as it departs the slain body), for courage as a feeling, for the mind as a place in which various

²¹ Chapman, p. 26.

²² L, p. 232; IX, 612–4.

emotional reactions are weighed. *Thumos* is thus the dialectical obverse of that Homeric nominalism we shall encounter shortly, a non-abstraction which by virtue of its very concreteness and immediacy is apt to do duty for a variety of strong and essentially energizing ‘feelings’.

The question that interests us most immediately however is the degree to which *thumos* can be associated with anger;²³ and it is to affirm this synonymy that I register the role of *thumos* on the battlefield. To be sure, the warriors must take heart, they must be energized for combat, and indeed the gods are often called on to infuse this or that listless, discouraged or even bruised warrior with *thumos*:

So he spoke in prayer, and Pallas Athene heard him.
She made his limbs light again, and his feet, and his hands above
them,
and standing close beside him she spoke and addressed him in
winged words:
‘Be of good courage now, Diomedes, to fight with the Trojans,
since I have put inside your chest the strength of your father
untremulous, such as the horseman Tydeus of the great shield
had; I have taken away the mist from your eyes . . .’²⁴

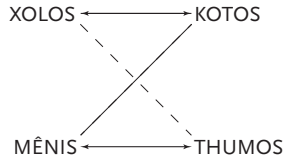
But this *thumos* is anger against the other, the opponent, the whole Trojan species: the warrior, who will at first express it in that alternate form of hostility which is words, in speeches and *haka*, must be endowed with a special form of anger or fury. The Scandinavian epics reinforce us in the view that this *thumos* can go as far as the condition called the berserk; and the greatest warriors become berserkers, who cut down everyone in front of them indiscriminately (and are often, clinically, a danger to their fellow warriors as well). This ‘blood lust’ is a condition far more important and effective than mere bodily strength or physique: Hektor has it in his prime, as will Achilles later on; even Patroklos is given his *thumos* for a time until it deludes him into overestimating his destiny and imagining that he will himself take Troy, and is capable of assaulting the walls.

Is it possible then that *thumos* may partake of the same kind of cosmic indeterminacy as *mênis*; and that this new pair may well consist in

²³ But see also Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man*, New York 2006, for whom *thumos* is a form of Hegelian recognition; and Peter Sloterdijk, *Rage and Time: A Psychopolitical Investigation*, trans. Mario Wenning, New York 2010, who sees it as a civilizing sublimation of rage.

²⁴ L, p. 149; V, 121–7.

something of an ontological level to the ontic pair of *xolos* and *kotos*? In that case, *mênis* would be the cosmological version of the long-lasting *xolos*, *thumos* would reflect the immediacy of a *kotos* which comes and goes:



This is perhaps the moment to confess that I find more kinship with the *Iliad* in the Norse sagas than in the more conventional or ‘political’ epics—slights, offences, vengeance, bloodshed, endless feuds, *kotos* versus *xolos*—all these are vivid Homeric events quite unlike the killing of monsters or the inauguration of the Roman empire. *Thumos* is a different kind of rage than anything in the *Aeneid*; and piracy also allows us to grasp the family likeness between the *Iliad* and the Icelandic sagas, surely its closest blood relative as far as slaughter and feuds are concerned. The archaic Scandinavian world is distinguished by the absence of a feudal hierarchy of the medieval type: difficult to say whether its powerful figures are really nobles in our conventional sense, or whether their ‘henchmen’ (Lattimore’s interesting translation of *therapontes*) are in any way vassals. There is the institution of king (*basileus*), but as we shall see later on, that of *anax* (supreme leader, emperor) is wrongly attributed to Agamemnon.

Other differences between cultures are also instructive and they centrally involve money (which finds in the *Iliad* a single mention, to be examined later on); this then inevitably generates a different kind of social system, which, if not bourgeois, is at least non-aristocratic and more egalitarian than the narrative distinctions of the *Iliad*. Indeed, one may guess that it is precisely the absence of money—dictated by the frame of the raid—which gives the *Iliad* its unique qualities, as in Hegel’s famous tribute:

This is a state of society which we have already learnt to recognize as the Heroic or, preferably, the ideal Age. The Heroic Ages are no longer restricted to that idyllic poverty in spiritual interests: they go beyond it to deeper passions and aims; but the nearest environment of individuals, the satisfaction of their immediate needs, is still their own doing. Their food is still simple and therefore more ideal, as for instance honey, milk, wine; while coffee, brandy, etc., at once call to our mind the thousand intermediaries which

their preparation requires. So too the heroes kill and roast their own food; they break in the horse they wish to ride; the utensils they need they more or less make for themselves; plough, weapons for defence, shield, helmet, breastplate, sword, spear, are their own work, or they are familiar with their fabrication. In such a mode of life man has the feeling, in everything he uses and everything he surrounds himself with, that he has produced it from his own resources, and therefore in external things has to do with what is his own and not with alienated objects lying outside his own sphere wherein he is master. In that event of course the activity of collecting and forming his material must not appear as painful drudgery but as easy, satisfying work which puts no hindrance and no failure in his way.²⁵

We can now rephrase his analysis, not as an evocation of some ultimate human nature, but rather negatively, as that absence of money ('communicational noise', as Habermas calls it) which allows the poet to focus on forms of immediacy. Indeed, I will now add this absence to my definition of secularity, along with the absence of religion; for these are the two forms of noise—in the base and in the superstructure, as it were—which make for the in-mixture of abstraction and a non-immediacy of representation. For it may well be that there is historical accuracy in considering that the so-called Trojan War (even if it did take place in some form in reality) was nothing but a raid by pirates on a then wealthy city, perhaps even a raid involving much preparation and many alliances and including the chiefs of outstanding clans and cities. If so, the very simplicity of the sordid original reality solicits the idealization which already for the Greeks themselves allows the episode to be transmogrified (*à la* Quixote) into a world-historical event. Secularity leaves its realities open to sublimation as well as to satiric reduction.

6. PARTS OF SPEECH

Speculations of this kind necessarily once again bring us to that barrier to understanding and interpretation which seems insurmountable. Nor is this merely a foreign language, whose 'untranslatables' certainly pose interesting problems in their own right! Not Greek as such, then, but Homeric Greek as the expressive form of an extinct culture, about which one philologist has quaintly admitted that its meanings remain obscure 'because no native speakers survive'. The translations convey the comfortable feeling that we are inside this language; in reality, as the

²⁵ Hegel, *Aesthetics*, volume I, Oxford 1975, pp. 260–1.

philologists show us, we stand outside it and can at best conjecture its operations and imagine its structure.

The key word is 'imagine', since I can scarcely claim to offer a properly linguistic theory, one which not only takes into account the various types of scientific linguistics on offer today but also, and more significantly in this context, confronts the philosophical problem of linguistic relativity, which is to say the famous Sapir-Whorf hypothesis. The latter becomes operative when the form of the language is posited as determining a whole ontology, if not a world-view. The falsifiable side-issues—they have predominately taken the seemingly testable form of colour-schemes (did the ancient Greeks distinguish between blue and green?)—are not so relevant as those which, like Daniel Everett's attack on Chomskyan recursivity,²⁶ posit a wholly different and 'non-Western' way of living reality, which is reflected in (or imposed by) a language for which only an unmediated experience in the present has words.

In a sense, the argument for some linguistic determinate of culture and consciousness (the heart of the famous Sapir-Whorf hypothesis) is also a literary gamble. The analyst must be able to crystallize the alien world-view in a vivid synthesis, otherwise it reduces to a few random observations, a list of unrelated exceptions. Thus Everett, in his striking argument for the uniquely non-recursive language of the Pirahã, is able to characterize it as an 'immediacy of experience principle' in both time and space: only what exists in the here-and-now can be articulated, and as a result, only that immediate dimension of experience can be thought. It would be tempting to be able to frame Homer's language in such a formula: perhaps Auerbach comes the closest, in what must be one of the most famous contemporary literary judgements:

to represent phenomena in a fully externalized form, visible and palpable in all their parts, and completely fixed in their spatial and temporal relations . . . this procession of phenomena takes place in the foreground—that is, in a local and temporal present which is absolute.²⁷

It is a principle suggestive enough of Homer's style but not generalizable to his whole, far more complex linguistic system: I propose a more

²⁶ Daniel Everett, *Don't Sleep, There Are Snakes: Life and Language in the Amazonian Jungle*, New York 2008.

²⁷ Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, trans. Willard Trask, Princeton 2013 [1946], pp. 6–7.

limited description, a kind of phenomenology of that syntax, which (like Everett's) gives us a means of imagining that other world without asserting a scientific or even scholarly hypothesis.

But how does one go about imagining a language about which one has decided in advance that it is alien to us? I propose to do so in the more limited form of a phenomenology of narrative syntax, in which we experiment with a characterization of the various units of language deployed in the narrative Homer undoubtedly tells. We might begin, for example, with the question of nouns and verbs, which are normally for us the bearers of generality (the action) and singularity (the actor, and at the outer limit, the name itself). But we must be prepared for an unusual redistribution of these functions.

Singularity, for example, suggests a nominalistic tendency, in which shades of difference acquire their own unique names: it is a tendency which can go as far as that 'pensée sauvage' (or 'primitive knowledge') described by Lévi-Strauss, in which species are keenly differentiated without any corresponding genus. We have indeed seen something of this process of differentiation at work already in the various types of anger recognized by Homer.

Bruno Snell, however, detects a remarkable nominalism at work everywhere in the realm of the Homeric verbs; and in order to get a full sense of the specificity and the unnatural precision of this language (so distant from our own speech and in that respect superior to it), it is worthwhile quoting his account at some length:

Homer uses a great variety of verbs to denote the operation of sight: *ὄραν*, *ιδεῖν*, *λεύσσειν*, *ἄθρεῖν*, *θεᾶσθαι*, *σκέπτεσθαι*, *ᾄσσεισθαι*, *δέρκεσθαι*, *παπταίνειν*. Of these, several have gone out of use in later Greek, at any rate in prose literature and living speech: *δέρκεσθαι*, *λεύσσειν*, *ᾄσσεισθαι*, *παπταίνειν*. Only two words make their appearance after the time of Homer: *βλέπειν* and *θεωρεῖν*. The words which were discarded tell us that the older language recognized certain needs which were no longer felt by its successor. *δέρκεσθαι* means: to have a particular look in one's eyes. *δράκων*, the snake, whose name is derived from *δέρκεσθαι*, owes this designation to the uncanny glint in his eye. He is called 'the seeing one', not because he can see particularly well, not because his sight functions exceptionally well, but because his stare commands attention. By the same token Homer's *δέρκεσθαι* refers not so much to the function of the eye as to its gleam as noticed by someone else. The verb is used of the Gorgon

whose glance incites terror, and of the raging boar whose eyes radiate fire: *πῦρ ὀφθαλμοῖσι δεδορκῶς*. It denotes an 'expressive signal' or 'gesture' of the eyes.²⁸

If indeed one entertains the stereotypical narrative of the historical emergence of philosophy in ancient Greece, then it will be the birth of abstraction and its apotheosis in Plato's doctrine of the Ideas that one is celebrating: in that case, Snell's Homeric verbs begin to convey something like a pre-philosophical state in which abstractions (and the philosophical 'essences' and 'substances' to which they correspond) are not yet fully formed as such.

We would expect to find more 'rigid designations' among the nouns and names: but this is not quite the case, and to the extreme reduction at work in the specificity of the Homeric verbs corresponds a marked expansion and inflation in its 'nouns' which soak up the material around them like a blazon or crest of heraldry. Homeric epithets have been the occasion for a tiresome insistence on their role in prosody, filling up an empty line and enlarging an already miraculous bardic memory. Many of them are obviously transferrable—*dios*, comparable to a god but in the sense of an aristocratic title (Sir, Lord) or a military rank (Colonel, Major General). Meanwhile the patronymic probably demands more attention than it gets: Menoitios not only identifies Patroklos's father, it includes a whole genealogy which his (non-individualistic) identity necessarily incorporates and without which he would be anonymous, a stateless figure, a *sans-papiers*. But the incorporation of a variety of names within what looks to us like a simple designation goes much further than this: for among ancestors one must of course include the divine lineage of figures like the unhappy Sarpedon. In the case of Sarpedon himself, who in an earlier episode has faced Tlepolemos, the son of Herakles (and thereby the grandson of Zeus, rather than his son, as Sarpedon himself is identified), the two already know each other by name and reputation, such is the small world of this battlefield. Inasmuch as the *agon* also involves a preliminary exchange of epithets and insults, Tlepolemos assures Sarpedon (he knows he is the chief of the Lykians) that he will meet the same fate as the one dealt Troy by his own grandfather Herakles on an earlier occasion; while Sarpedon replies that:

²⁸ Bruno Snell, *The Discovery of the Mind: The Greek Origins of European Thought*, Cambridge MA 1953, pp. 2–3.

broken under my spear you will give me
glory, and give your soul to Hades of the famed horses.²⁹

The mention of horses is an allusion to the story of Herakles and thus an integral part of the identity of Tlepolemos. Sarpedon's time is not yet, and he dispatches his noisy opponent, thereby incorporating the latter's name and genealogy into his own, rather like the addition in heraldry of a new element to a coat of arms. None of these multitudinous 'named' characters is therefore an isolated individual; in the clan system each is a whole monad filled with territory and kinship, so that the apparent encounter of two individual opponents is here a meeting of worlds.

Our two initial categories seem therefore of a quite different weight and texture from each other: the verbs a naming, the 'nouns' a voluminous context (which will have the supplementary value, for the bard himself, of allowing him to adjust his material to the locality in which, that day or week, he is performing; whence the famous catalogue of the ships in Book Two—something for everybody, even though the Athenians, having achieved cultural centrality, must have smarted at the limited attention—two lines!—they get from their national bard). Still, this cumbersome identity with which the actants are endowed would seem to contradict Matthew Arnold's well-known account of Homer's attributes:

that he is eminently rapid; that he is eminently plain and direct, both in the evolution of his thought and in the expression of it, that is, both in his syntax and in his words; that he is eminently plain and direct in the substance of his thought, that is, in his matter and ideas; and, finally that he is eminently noble . . .³⁰

It will probably have been this last qualification which has alienated post-Victorian readers from this sensible advice; to reassure them I plan to offer a version of 'the noble' which will satisfy the most postmodern readers.

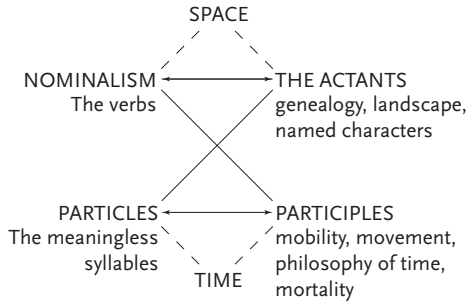
What we must first understand is that the 'rapidity' rightly assigned to this language does not only derive from the forward momentum of the hexameter: it is also dependent on the properties of the Homeric participles, so different from Caesar's tiresome and leaden ablative absolutes.

²⁹ L, p. 164; v, 653–4.

³⁰ Matthew Arnold, *On the Classical Tradition*, Ann Arbor MI 1960, p. 102.

They are the mobile parts of the sentence and, far more than repeated aorists of the enumeration of events, they propel things and people forward; peopling time with secondary movements of all sorts, the particles are truly 'swift' in the Arnoldian sense.

But they are not the only syntactic instruments to be identified here. A fourth category remains to be distinguished: the Greek language indeed has a type of 'word' for which English has no equivalent. This final component of the sentence, which is however omnipresent and swarming—as meaningless as the individual sounds that make up the meaningful words of a language, as distinct from subjects and predicates, actions and passions as the contingencies of their appearances—adds a kind of second meaningless yet indispensable layer to the double inscription of language as the body to the soul of things. The grammarians call them the particles; and anyone who has ever essayed a Greek—in particular a Homeric—utterance, knows the momentum of the particles in ways which are far more closely wedded to the spirit of prosody. Indeed they may well be thought of as a kind of link or mediation to that otherwise extra-linguistic mechanism. We may now map this system out as follows:



It does not seem quite right, however, to abandon this fanciful phenomenology of Homeric syntax without some more specific attention to that prosody within which it lives and breathes, not without some constraints, such as might be imposed by belts or corsets. That we do not have such an impression is not only the result of centuries of revision: it reflects our own failure to recognize that the skin is the outermost restraint or boundary of the human body, at the same time that it is the interface with the 'world' itself in all its senses: Homeric language is inside dactylic hexameter as within its own skin.

And yet the presence in Homeric language of both accent and length together—the beats with which we are more familiar and the long and short syllables alien to English prosody—suggest that dactylic hexameter will have represented a certain disciplining of natural speech, comparable to the curbing and muzzling, the harnessing and saddling, of the genius of a natural language, distorting its normal sounds and enlarging or abridging its syllables, in such a way as, far from encumbering or laming it, to speed it along in the form of what Homer famously calls ‘winged words’. It will be said that it is precisely this swiftness which prevents us from noticing the constraints in question. But the greatest of modern poets—Rilke, say, or Yeats, or Baudelaire—stand as examples of the way in which a prosody can be triumphantly naturalized: metre and rhyme seeming to express the very spirit of a natural language to the point where we can’t distinguish the two—other poets meanwhile thriving wilfully on that very differentiation!

Modern media theory congratulates itself, by way of its very conception of technological modernity, on detecting and theorizing the presence and operation, within contemporary communication, of a foreign body, a device alien to the organically human, which is the mediation of the apparatus or *appareil*, camera or printing press, prostheses of the human sensorium not significantly visible before modernity (or at least before writing in McLuhan’s and Havelock’s acceptance).

I will suggest that prosody is also a machine of this kind, a kind of ‘new medium’ of such essentially oral (I don’t particularly like the word ‘pre-literate’) cultures as the Homeric. Its laws are machinic; its distortions ideological; its effects—the dactylic finality of the two final syllables, the exceptional emphasis of the occasional enjambement (even in the very second line—‘oulemenen’, ‘horrible!’), the onrush, the occasional simple sentence, the grand oratorical effect of the long drawn-out polysyllabic words—are perspectival and have been tabulated by scholars. The quasi-musical effects of the hexameter are certainly accessible: witness, for example, its underground existence in modern poetic languages like that of Whitman. What renders it distant for us is not the machinery itself, but its relation to a living language that no longer exists. There is an allegoresis to be grasped here between the sparse machinery of this world and the organic fragility of the human body, between the temporalities of the living present of the line and the mortality of their past and future as the eternal hexameter drives us inexorably forward.

7. SECULARITY, AGAIN

The difficulty of imagining an alien language is a good experiment in trying to adapt Kant's categories historically. The *Ding-an-sich* remains in place, a scarecrow reminding us that we retain the impossible choice, to decide whether the past is radically inaccessible or not. Yet it is a decision which probably affects nothing, since we go ahead and read it anyway: we annex, we assimilate, we appropriate it, by means of our own historical categories.

We have already seen how the genres offer a constant temptation to make over this pre-generic substance into something our tradition recognizes. We can go even further if we mark the moment at which the genres themselves dissolve, and a new post-generic reading takes their place. This is, as I have said, the story Lukács told in his *Theory of the Novel*: the novelistic is the non-generic narrative logic that takes the place of the older rhetorical genres now becoming extinct. Its individualistic psychology, its conception of style, the notion of a life as a form, the opposition of public and private, the very notion of personal identity, of consciousness as such—all of these new prejudices, which emerge from a profound cultural revolution and from its wholesale transformation of subjectivity, dictate a new kind of rule in the absence of the rules, and shape reading methods which signify 'modernity'. Rather than to recover some unattainable original, then, perhaps a more adequate post-contemporary reading of Homer should seek, in the other direction, to subtract our own inevitable interpretive schemes from the process; to strip away the layers of anachronism that we bring to the text, removing—in order the more precisely to identify them—the ideological paradigms of later traditions (including our own), if not to glimpse some ultimate surface, then at least to come to consciousness of what we have ourselves projected upon it. One half of Kant: is that not what contemporary philosophy seeks to do, in its search-and-destroy mission to root out what is ideological, metaphysical and idealistic in the philosophical classics themselves, or at last in our stereotypes of them?

I will hazard the guess that, beyond the unabashed novelization of our contemporary versions, we will find ourselves exposing the archaeological layers of Victorian, Romantic and even Renaissance-cum-neo-Platonic paradigms, along with the now archaic genre-systems from which they are inseparable: without any assurance that we can ever

arrive at anything like the bedrock Heidegger thought he found for philosophy in the Pre-Socratics (or in Eastern philosophy).

Nor should we disregard in passing the dangers of subtraction: in a scandalously anti-modern if not nihilistic aside, Manfredo Tafuri observed that the greatest heroes of modern disenchantment—Nietzsche, Freud, Marx—might well turn out to have had the effect of bulldozing the terrain of values so as to leave it vacant and endlessly fungible for whatever a commercial late capitalism decided to erect. It was not a bad prophecy of the postmodern, and one which it is up to us to forestall.³¹

So it is that in a ritualistic scene like the embassy of Odysseus and Ajax to Achilles in Book Nine (Agamemnon has relented and tells them to offer him whatever he wants to return to the now disastrous battle), we find ourselves bringing a properly novelistic attention to the stray, now ‘meaningful’ detail.

It is a famous scene, not least for the Achilles they encounter at his unforced leisure, ‘singing of men’s fame’ on a valuable lyre, itself won in battle. Before we have time to reflect, either on the fantasies of Achilles himself as a character, or on the origins or epic this evidence suggests, he welcomes them heartily, his only ‘true friends’, and serves the inevitable welcoming feast at least one feature of which will mark our first hesitation.

For when they are full, Ajax nods to Phoinix (Achilles’s old tutor, whom they have brought with them for reinforcement) ‘and noble Odysseus took notice’ (*noese*). ‘Not unperceived’, remarks Pope, and Lattimore: ‘and brilliant Odysseus saw it’; but Chapman waxes most eloquently of all:

Ajax to Phoenix made a signe as if too long they staid
Before they told their Legacie. Ulysses saw him winke
And (filling the great boule with wine) did to Achilles drinke . . .³²

The mere translation, adding an actual look or glance to the Greek notation that Odysseus was ‘aware’, does little more than to cater to some more modern appetite for visual detail (indeed, for the visuality of the visual): but what follows is even more arresting. For now Odysseus,

³¹ Manfredo Tafuri, *Architecture and Utopia: Design and Capitalist Development*, Boston 1976, p. 15.

³² Respectively: Loeb, p. 411; I, 223; Pope, p. 164; L, p. 222; Chapman, p. 187.

complimenting Achilles on the feast, tells him that Agamemnon's was no less generous. Occasion for a *kotos* indeed! (For the very mention of his adversary a provocation, as we have seen!) Is Odysseus here merely congratulating himself and his companions on their courageous appetites (as the Italians put it), for indeed, and only too predictably, Agamemnon has just now staged a similar feast for them in honour of their mission? Or does he simply mean (rather awkwardly) to inform his host that this is an official mission? (But Odysseus is never awkward.) It cannot be, but perhaps it is, a compliment. I dwell on this point, not because it has any great significance for the narrative at hand, but because it provokes the kind of novelistic rumination that entertains the modern reader. What comes later is more significant.

Speeches and lengthy explanations, to which Achilles is insensible; a complex autobiographical monologue from his old tutor, along with other lengthy tales to which Achilles responds as we have seen earlier (do not mention his name to me!). And then, at length Achilles bids Phoinix to spend the night, as they will all leave for home in the morning; Patroklos goes about preparing a bed.

The scene has a dramatic feel to it, the visitors and the host, sitting across from each other, silent characters—Patroklos, the handmaidens moving in the background: yet the form of the *agon* preserved, two characters exchanging speeches at successive moments. Now, however, Achilles conveys his wishes with a gesture:

He spoke, and, saying nothing, nodded with his brows to Patroklos
to make up a neat bed for Phoinix, so the others might presently
think of going home from his shelter.³³

'So' ('so that', has the Loeb; Pope as usual, for a pretty rhyme, omits the gesture altogether), Chapman is most vivid, but omits the intention:

This said, he with his eye
Made to his friend a covert signe to hasten instantly
A good soft bed, that the old Prince, soone as the Peeres were gone,
Might take his rest . . .³⁴

But to be sure he adds 'covert signe' to convey the double meaning of Achilles's gesture, for the sign is surely also meant for the guests,

³³ L, p. 233; IX, 620–2.

³⁴ Chapman, p. 197.

that the audience is over and that they should ('presently'? 'swiftly'? 'might immediately think', 'as soon as?') take their leave. What even Homer himself has omitted is the implied insult: in fact, the guests are being dismissed.

But Ajax has understood: this muscle-bound hero (elsewhere addressed, 'you inarticulate ox!')³⁵ is no doubt doubly angry: at the dismissal, and also because he has himself not yet spoken, so that his intervention at this point has the effect of breaking into the silence and of thereby distinguishing his remarks from the others. He brings a soldier's anger to Achilles's lack of compassion for the fate of his (former?) comrades and fellow warriors. And he also betrays a complete misunderstanding of Achilles's grievance, his wounded honour. It is the bluff reaction of a simple man who has grasped nothing of the delicate issues at stake: there are plenty of other girls, he tells him. Most notable in this impatient response, which however is no longer a request, but rather a virtual denunciation, is the breakthrough of a wholly unexpected different kind of language, a language of the future so to speak, of money, exchange, and restitution—the language of *Wergeld*, of a post-heroic society. People take payment even for the murder of their wife or their own children, Ajax tells him, so why are you so stubborn as to refuse Agamemnon's reparations in kind? Here, in a poem celebrating the memory of a heroic past, we find the premonition of a coming order, a money system from the future, one which threatens completely to obliterate the world of the *Iliad* itself and its system of respect and personal offence, of reputation, prestige and revenge.

Besides the shadowy emergent genres occasionally visible beneath the surface of Homer's poem, one also occasionally comes upon strange angular corners and chinks through which a radically different reality appears for a moment and then vanishes again. Such was, for example, the glimpse of an archaic Apollo that put us on the track of that secularity normally associated with the daily life of the Olympians. Such is also, although we will pursue it no further, the strangely mythological duel of Achilles and the River Xanthos in Book Twenty-One; as well as the fantastic mode of the talking horses, more consonant with fairy-tales or the *nostos* of the *Odyssey*. And here, with an offhand remark of the insensitive Ajax, we come across just such another glint of light inconsistent

³⁵ Chapman, p. 313.

with the world of this poem, a ray of the future, one which offers a further clue as to the nature of that secularity we have attributed to it.

Here indeed, with money, we have arrived at the other element which needs to be accounted for before we have a full sense of what secularity entails as a stylistic concept. A juxtaposition of the Icelandic sagas allows us to see what is missing here: it is money and the commercial. And money, with this fleeting exception of the *Wergeld*, is utterly unknown, particularly in this literary state of exception which is the *Iliad*, carefully arranged so that, even if money exists in this historical period, it does not have to enter the scene of what is a piratical expedition and a transitional period between two states and stages of daily life.

But let's not make conjectures about the economics of an ancient past. It is for us, the modern reader, that the absence of money offers a singular relief. For money in that sense is the very quintessential sign of modernity; and its subtraction allows us to contemplate something unmodern without endowing it with all kinds of anthropological fictions, adornments or imagery.

Meanwhile, not only is money also the quintessential mediation of modernity, it involves the operation of extraordinary representations (never wholly successful) and a system of philosophical concepts (market, exchange, value, equivalents, etc.) no less complex in their own way than the theological ones whose absence we have already been able to do without. The representations required in order to posit money as an actor and a reality in modern narrative are fully as 'idealistic' as those required to posit the various forms of transcendence (among which, to be sure, we might as well count money itself). The difference is that the representations of money are so to speak idealisms of the base, whereas those of religion are necessary to furnish the superstructure. That both these dimensions are in the long run unrepresentable is a theoretical matter we do not have to argue here.

Theories of money are always grounded on some concept of non-money and are never really able to pass themselves off as 'materialistic'. Nor do we have to speculate about how societies without money functioned and whether they are Utopian or already presuppose something which for all practical purposes is already money or is its ontological anticipation. The text itself has been so arranged and framed that the question

never arises; Occam does not even have to wield his famous razor: in this respect also, the *Iliad* is able to be secular *avant la lettre*, so to speak, without requiring us to acknowledge this or that alternate ‘theory’ of human nature, such as innate aggressivity, power, prestige, etc.

Secularity in that sense means doing away (momentarily) with ideas of human nature; what it confronts us with is certainly itself some kind of ideological representation, but it is also ideology *avant la lettre*; we cannot escape the ideological but we can approach something like its zero degree, and this is what secularity means in the Homeric context. That such an apparent void cannot exist in the real social world then explains why so many interpretations immediately press forward to fill the gap. We will try to do without as many as possible, and to celebrate their existence *qua* ideology as it becomes necessary.

All of which makes Ajax a far more interesting and complex, a far more ‘round’ character than the *miles gloriosus* of stock characterology. It raises even more acutely the problem of psychology and of protagonicity.

8. PROTAGONICITIES

We have in effect observed something like a sliding scale where it comes to ‘minor’ characters; we can read Ajax as a simplified stock figure, even a caricature, or we can elaborate a far more complex psychology for the combination of brute force and personal aggressivity he can also be seen as embodying as a human being.

Yet surely the very premise of a minor character lies in the structural existence of a ‘major’ one and it is to the question of protagonicity that we must now turn. Nor, as it seems, should there be much doubt about the leading candidate, explicitly singled out in the epic’s first line and the model culture hero (Alexander the Great slept with the poem under his pillow). Hektor may well remain the sentimental favourite, a family man in a famously touching scene with his baby son and the dynastic heir; but after all he loses, and Troy with him; and it will not be until the *Oedipus at Colonus* (or perhaps *Prometheus Bound*) that a system is worked out whereby the loser can still win.

Still, Achilles the hero also remains an eternal adolescent, petulant, pouting in his withdrawal, tearfully complaining to his mother, with few

enough tangible achievements (the sacking of some seaside towns and the rather extravagant duels with various gods in Book Twenty-One); nor will the modern reader appreciate his moments of barbarity, as when, in honour of his dearest comrade, he slits the throats of twelve captured Trojan youths as a human sacrifice on Patroklos's funeral pyre. Achilles, like the other contenders, is more a reputation than a character. In the recital we live for the moment, and are probably willing enough to admire the untried youth who sensibly and stubbornly challenges the judgement of his supreme commander ('Agamemnon, lord of men'). But then other characters take his place and vie for our attention: Diomedes, for example, whose glorious exploits dominate the first books (along with the night raid with Odysseus), and about whom one always wonders why for the ancients he never cut a greater figure. Menelaos, to be sure, misses his chance at glory; but Ajax certainly has his moment, leaping from deck to deck in a remarkable defence of the burning ships.

Nor are any of the very few women characters really available for a feminist rewriting of the war story (along the lines say that Ursula Le Guin has proposed for the *Aeneid*—but after all the latter really did have a hero). The goddesses are not very likeable—Hera is a schemer, and Athene a rather domineering athlete. Helen apologizes too much (perhaps for secret reasons of her own—see her revelations in the *Odyssey*),³⁶ while Andromache and Hekabe are mouthpieces for standard grief and keening. Only Thetis comes to mind as an admirable and efficient divinity, and a mother with just the right admixture of praise and consolation for her troubled and troublesome son: but it would take a mighty reworking of the poem to redo it from her point of view. And perhaps one should reserve a special place for Briseus, herself the occasion of a confrontation only slightly less disastrous than that caused by Helen's. Yet in what may well be a later extrapolation she reappears to shed a tear for Patroklos, that adolescent of the same age who has been kind to her. It is one of the most touching moments in the *Iliad* (and one of the most overlooked).

In fact, each book tends to have its own protagonist, something scarcely surprising for a recital which demands concentration on the moment at hand. We therefore nominate Patroklos for such (necessarily temporary) status: he is assigned his own book (Sixteen, the so-called Patrokleiad), and offers interesting evidence for a psychological development, from his initial rather childish distress at the Achaean losses all the way to a

³⁶ *The Odyssey*, Book IV, lines 239–56.

near berserk overweening in the thick of the final battle: not, perhaps, character maturation in any modern sense, but simply what we may call the more objective and as it were medical account of a loss of individual personality in the well-nigh physical transformation induced by combat itself.

Of his relations with Achilles we need only say, with certainty, that whatever they were they clearly did not scandalize the Homeric audience. Meanwhile, the position as ‘companion’ seems to have been a socially objective one, fully as much as a generational category (it is the term Megalexandros chose to name the military retinue of his childhood friends): often fulfilling the function of charioteer to the ranking member of the pair. But it is a subordinate position, as ‘favourite’, which can also organize a Molière-style archetype: the *protégé* setting forth on his own, the *naïf* affronting unexpected dangers, the ambitious neophyte woefully unprepared for the tests he will be called upon to face: yet another plot, like so many others, generically latent in the infinite flow of the Homeric episodes; but it is in any case a plot of which character as such is a mere function.

What we do find in Patroklos, unlike most Homeric figures, is what we may cautiously call a kind of subjectivity. It is not an inner life, in the sense in which people question or debate their own identities, or their decisions: indeed, Hektor is the only character in the *Iliad* to elaborate a genuine soliloquy like the stances of Le Cid, or Hamlet’s,³⁷ perhaps because he really does face crucial choices: to remain outside the walls or to retreat into the citadel (the others simply react to the tide of battle).

But Patroklos is given a distinctive inner feeling at the decisive moment. I have mentioned that shove from Apollo which knocks his helmet off and fatally loosens his armour (I believe it to have been an awkward stumble). But now there follow interesting verses:

Disaster caught his wits, and his shining body went nerveless.
He stood stupidly, and from close behind his back a Dardanian
man hit him between the shoulders with a sharp javelin . . .³⁸

But in the fourth assay,
O then, Patroclus, shew’d thy last. The dreadfull Sunne made way
Against that on-set, yet the Prince discern’d no deitie—
He kept the prease [press] so, and besides obscur’d his glorious
eye

³⁷ See L, p. 426; XX, 1–2.

³⁸ L, p. 373; XVI, 805–7.

With such felt darknesse. At his backe he made a sodaine stand,
 And twixt his necke and shoulders laid downe-right with either
 hand,
 A blow so weightie that his eyes a giddie darknesse tooke,
 And from his head his three-plum'd helme the bounding violence
 shooke . . .³⁹

But here, perhaps, it is Pope who catches the spirit most vividly:

Loose is each joint; each nerve with horror shakes;
 Stupid he stares, and all assistless stands:
 Such is the force of more than mortal hands!⁴⁰

(This last line is to be sure completely gratuitous and lends too much weight to a divine intervention which is meant to be, as I have suggested, Janus-faced and undecidable.)

The loosening of the joints (very frequent in this recital of bloody encounters) seems to be a medical commonplace and an expression of a generalized loss of energy (joints which can be re-energized by a god, as above in v, 121–127, 143); *taphon* (xvi, 806), however, could just as easily mean dazed (it is true that English ‘stupid’ is etymologically related to stupor and stupefaction), so that in any case this account wavers between the corporeal and what we call the ‘psychological’ in an indeterminate way. Still, there is nothing comparable in this poem in the deaths of other heroes, not excluding Hektor himself. For him a very different kind of subjectivity is reserved, namely that of a dream, and designed less to give us Hektor’s inner feelings than to represent the race itself—thrice around the walls, as Hektor seeks the security of the Skaian gates in vain:

As in a dream a man is not able to follow one who runs
 from him, nor can the runner escape, nor the other pursue him⁴¹

This could be the frustration of either Hektor or Achilles himself; but figures for the reader the stillness of the frieze (Keats’s urn). Chapman tortuously tries to motivate it:

And yet, as in a dreame,
 One thinkes he gives another chace, when such a fain'd extreame
 Possesseth both that he in chace the chacer cannot flie;
 Nor can the chacer get to hand his flying enemie . . .⁴²

³⁹ Chapman, p. 343.

⁴⁰ Pope, p. 322.

⁴¹ L, p. 462; xxii, 199–200.

⁴² Chapman, p. 444.

The moment is almost as sublime in its timing as the epic reminiscence of Dante (*Inferno*, xv), who could not have known Homer's original.

But there is another feature which sets Patroklos off and which tends to make the modern reader wonder whether the true *victim* here, the central loser and pathetic centre of the poem as a whole is not Patroklos himself, rather than Hektor. It is arresting indeed to find that Patroklos is the only character in the poem to be addressed directly by the poet. Normally the fate of a warrior will be registered in the third person of destiny, and particularly when the figure in question has just addressed a plea to the gods:

She spoke in prayer, but Pallas Athene turned her head from her.

Here, however, it is the doomed hero himself to whom the poet speaks:

Then groaning heavily, Patroklos the rider, you answered:
'Son of Peleus, far greatest of the Achaeans, Achilleus,
do not be angry . . .'

So straight for the Lykians, O lord of horses, Patroklos,
you swept, and for the Trojans, heart angered for your companion.

Then who was it you slaughtered first, who was the last one,
Patroklos, as the gods called you to your death?⁴³

It is of course rhetorically important that this particular death, given its role as the turning point in the *Iliad*, be emphasized in an unusual way, in order to mark this doom or fate off from the myriad others; nor is it an accident that it should find its place in this same book in which Zeus is forced to confront his theological problem, the question of whether he has the right or power to save his son Sarpedon (about to be slain by Patroklos) from his assigned fate (xvi, 433, his lot). This book or privileged section of the *Iliad* thus exceptionally foregrounds the tragic notion of destiny itself, for the most part taken for granted in the universal slaughter if it is not, as noted earlier, 'motivated' (in the Russian formalist sense) by the intervention of a god.

But the very mode of address, the second person, suddenly, unexpectedly, seems to open up a personal dimension in an impersonal voice (spoken

⁴³ Respectively: L, p. 179; VI, 311. L, p. 351; XVI, 20–2. L, p. 367, XVI, 584–5. L, p. 370; XVI, 692–3.

by a bardic function without personality in any modern sense); to be sure, it is just the external sign of a personal feeling and involvement the poet cannot, virtually by institutional definition, express or feel: it is the sign of something impossible to conceive within this world-framework (and for which Greek will never even have a word). Yet Patroklos seems here to be singled out for the impossible, namely pity; such lines mark the shadowy emergence, behind the formality of the rigid epic verse form, of lyric language as the source of hitherto non-existent genre categories. In this case, it is the elegy which seems to be on the point of inauguration; elegy, which keeps the lost one alive for one last moment by addressing him or her in the second person.

But pity is Virgilian, and belongs to loss in the imperial world: 'lacrimae rerum', the death of Marcellus. It has no place in what we have called the absolute secularity of Homer, where only light and life, being alive on this earth of humans, counts; as indeed Achilles will tell Odysseus in the underworld. Hades is of no interest in the *Iliad*, nor has the elegiac strain any place here. Mourning is an external and physical activity; and in any case Patroklos has been twice forewarned (by Achilles and Apollo alike). The psychological complexity that tempts the modern reader is here shut down before it can develop.

9. PARIS AS HERO

I did not particularly mean to propose Paris (Alexandros) as yet another possible hero for the *Iliad*, but he is at least granted one book of which he is the undoubted protagonist, and that is Book Three, a formally and even musically complete sub-section in itself (however late and artificial the Alexandrian division of the poem into books may have been). It could be argued, indeed, that Paris is at the opening of the action off-stage, as it were, in the episode that sets the world-historical event in motion:

Were you like this that time when in sea-wandering vessels
assembling oarsmen to help you, you sailed over the water,
and mixed with the outlanders, and carried away a fair woman
from a remote land . . . ?⁴⁴

So the older brother Hektor will berate him later in this book; nor should we forget that in another sense Paris also brings this particular segment

⁴⁴ L, p. 118; III, 46–9.

of the action (equally off-stage) to a close, inasmuch as it is his arrow which kills its ostensible hero after the poem ends.

Yet it cannot be denied that Paris is an attractive figure for a post-heroic, post-moralizing age: uncautious of death but in a frivolous and non-heroic way, yet sufficiently cowardly, in the Brechtian sense, for us to appreciate the good sense of his materialism; never wounded by the harsh judgments of his fellows (with which he is always prompt to agree), and always joyous even in the worst moments, as in his dismissal of Menelaos's only momentary victory ('we have gods on our side also'). He stands for Eros in a poem only too deeply steeped in Thanatos, and where he is content to let the more famous brother stand for family, dynasty and fatherland.

Yet it is certain that the lively composition of Book Three puts him in the best possible light. It opens with the first of the great extended similes, and perhaps the most effective of them all. We may honour this occasion by carving out a separate space for the language of the simile, which is not that of modern metaphor, but also not that—straightforward, as Arnold might put it—of the various *agons*, the physical combats, the oratorical duels.

This is indeed the moment to observe that the famous Homeric similes are not to be considered mere decoration, applied from time to time for effects that may well be functional. They also constitute another layer or dimension of plot, a kind of third plot, alongside those of the gods and the humans. For the similes for the most part draw on the animal world, and dramatize the persistence of the *agon* in the predatory realm of nature. They come in several forms: the animals fight among themselves; they fight with humans (as here, although perhaps the status of the pygmies as human is ambiguous); finally, there is a complex third stage in which the actors fight over an already existent prey against each other, but in the presence of a previous struggle and conquest—here also, humans may struggle with animals for the prize or the animals struggle with each other, or, in the climactic representation in Achilles's shield, the humans come upon animals struggling for a prize whose ultimate destination is uncertain, the animals withdrawing somewhat but perhaps only temporarily.

The similes thus command a Hell, above which there lies the Purgatory of the human actors, and beyond that the Empirion of Olympus; a Hell

that most intensely represents ferocity and bestiality itself, violence in its most 'inhuman' form. They mark this world as a war of all against all, a primordial struggle to the death over the means to survival. This is conveyed, not in some ideological statement about human nature, nor in the genealogical and legendary form of the earliest revolts and struggles for power among the gods, but rather as a layer of existence itself, inescapable, remorseless, into which mortals may fall and the gods once have (and might again, with their mutterings against the overlord). Book Three thus begins with a flourish: the magnificent simile in which the battle to come is prefigured in miniature by a truly legendary assault, a ferocious hatred, in the no-man's-land between the species:

as when the clamour of cranes goes high to the heavens,
when the cranes escape the winter time and the rains unceasing,
and clamorously wing their way to the streaming Ocean,
bringing to the Pygmaian men bloodshed and destruction:
at daybreak they bring on the baleful battle against them.⁴⁵

We must also, however, note the paradoxical reversal of priorities, the chiasmus that governs the inner reversals of so many of these similes: as here, above all, where the bloodthirsty cranes, on their southward journey, designate the Trojans rather than the Achaeans, as one might expect, inasmuch as they also are most immediately defined as predatory raiders from another land and are in addition the aggressors in this first onslaught.

Meanwhile this animality will be divided between the two partners in this book's principal *agon*: for Paris will first appear, in his magnificent leopard skin, shaking his spear in defiance at the enemy; while it is Menelaos who will more truly and fearsomely embody the ferocity of the great predators ('glad like a lion who comes on a mighty carcass'), and when Paris meets him, the Trojan's sudden fright will be that of a man coming unexpectedly upon a poisonous snake.⁴⁶ It is this apportionment of animality in ornamental consumption—opposed to effective malignancy, the skin versus the muscled body—which will authorize, as we shall see, an allegorical and truly orientalist reading of the conflict as the confrontation of a decadent and effeminate East with the raw uncivilized physicality of Western invaders. (The notion of an effete and sybaritic

⁴⁵ L, p. 117; III, 3–7.

⁴⁶ L, p. 117; III, 23.

Orient is a classic trope in such encounters, from the attack of Alexander the Great on the Persian Empire all the way to the British in Bengal.)⁴⁷

The flight of Paris, his reprimand by Hektor, and in return, his surprise offer of a trial by combat to end the war—all these events furnish rich materials for psychological speculation and novelistic reading. They also initiate a musical structure in which domestic scenes (the Trojans) alternate with military ones set on the line between the two armies. But each of these thematic groups is endowed with a vertical depth as well, in which a temporal perspective, the past respective to each section, is marked and included. Such is, for example, the reproach of Hektor we have already quoted above, in which the guilty party is pointedly reminded of his ‘bravery’ in stealing Menelaos’s wife (‘you have scolded me rightly’, says the younger brother, without a trace of shame).

So also in the famous scene on the walls of the citadel (the so-called *Teixoskopia*), in which Priam asks his Greek daughter-in-law to identify the famous leaders in the enemy army below (despite the fact that the Achaean siege has already lasted nine years; but it gives the poet a chance to introduce his main characters, just as in the preceding book the catalogue of the ships allows all the allies on both sides to be named in succession—a useful device for capturing the attention of this or that local audience and reminding them of their home team).

I have complained that for the most part Helen (whose book this also is) is given the ungrateful task of apologizing for her misdeeds (apologies that can work both ways, to be sure). Where this unpromising characterization catches fire is in her passionate denunciation of Aphrodite who has once again rescued her favourite:

Go yourself and sit beside him, abandon the gods’ way,
turn your feet back never again to the path of Olympos
but stay with him forever, and suffer for him, and look after him
until he makes you his wedded wife, or makes you his slave girl.⁴⁸

Antenor’s interruption, already mentioned earlier, demonstrates the way in which a novelistic reading is encouraged by the presence of that

⁴⁷ Thomas Macaulay: ‘The physical organization of the Bengalee is feeble even to effeminacy’, *Minute on Indian Education*, 1835; Macaulay, ‘Warren Hastings’, *Critical and Historical Essays*, volume 3, London 1903, p. 80.

⁴⁸ L, p. 128; III, 406–9.

multiplicity of relationships, back and forth, present and past, of which the *Iliad* is a web.

Oddly, however, it does not offer much testimony as to the unique beauty of Helen, for which only the rapt approval of the elders on the tower, like Suzanna and her biblical observers, gives legendary voice:

ear, ear for the sea-surge, murmur of old men's voices . . .

The image of Helen is always to be distinguished from her immediate physical presence, as in Euripides's 'Egyptian Helen' (of whose Utopian content Ernst Bloch has so tellingly made use) or in Goethe's marriage of Helen and Faustus. The neo-Platonic reading of Proclus seems apter for these texts than for the resolutely non-allegorical *Iliad*:

the myths want to indicate, I believe, through Helen, the whole of that beauty which has to do with the sphere in which things come to be and pass away and that is the product of the demiurge. It is over this beauty that eternal warfare rages among souls, until the more intellectual are victorious over the less rational forms of life and return hence to the place from which they came.⁴⁹

After that, the appropriate negotiations: Priam, whose presence is formally required for the oaths, will leave the battlefield before the combat, not wishing, perhaps, to witness the inevitable discomfiture of his 'brilliant' son. But that, as we know, is not to be. For in one of the most dramatic moments and gestures of the poem:

Aphrodite caught up Paris
easily, since she was divine, and wrapped him in a thick mist
and set him down again in his own perfumed bedchamber.⁵⁰

And, in the encounter we have already cited, she summons Helen to her matrimonial duty. Homer will not leave it there, however. Paris may well brush aside his wife's expressions of contempt ('This time Menelaos with Athene's help has beaten me / Another time I shall beat him'); the stronger image is that of Menelaos stalking 'like a wild beast up and down the host', searching for his vanished prey. And it is here that we find the detail that authenticates this 'realism' with a whole reminder and dimension of the past: for the Trojan soldiers he interrogates show

⁴⁹ Robert Lamberton, *Homer the Theologian: Neoplatonist Allegorical Reading and the Growth of the Epic Tradition*, Berkeley and Los Angeles 1986, pp. 199–200.

⁵⁰ L, p. 127; III, 380–2.

no hostility to their enemy on this occasion; indeed would have pointed him to Paris wherever he was hiding:

These would not have hidden him for love, if any had seen him,
since he was hated among them all as dark death is hated.⁵¹

Here is then the last word on this particular ‘protagonist’: the cause of a stupid, pointless war, waged for a woman who is not the symbol of anything but ruin to the common people; a mirror image of Agamemnon’s own egotistical ‘mistake’ at the beginning of the epic. It is a background of long resentment everywhere among the grunts and the *demos* who are not otherwise to be heard.

Book Three then ends with a triumphant whimper, like those symphonic movements which deliberately trail off before a chord slams the lid closed: it is Agamemnon’s empty pronouncement of ‘victory’. We do not ourselves have to end this way, however: why not give Paris the benefit of the alternate ending of catching up with his illustrious brother on their way to battle:

As when some stalled horse who has been corn-fed at the manger
breaking free of his rope gallops over the plain in thunder
to his accustomed bathing place in a sweet-running river
and in the pride of his strength holds high his head, and the mane floats
over his shoulders; sure of his glorious strength, the quick knees
carry him to the loved places and the pasture of horses;
so from uttermost Pergamos came Paris, the son of
Priam, shining in all his armour of war as the sun shines,
laughing aloud, and his quick feet carried him; suddenly thereafter
he came on brilliant Hektor, his brother, where he yet lingered
before turning away from the place where he had talked with his lady.
It was Alexandros the godlike who first spoke to him:
‘Brother, I fear that I have held back your haste, by being
slow on the way, not coming in time, as you commanded me.’
Then tall Hektor of the shining helm spoke to him in answer:
‘Strange man! There is no way that one, giving judgement in fairness,
could dishonour your work in battle, since you are a strong man.
But of your own accord you hang back, unwilling. And my heart
is grieved in its thought, when I hear shameful things spoken about you
by the Trojans, who undergo hard fighting for your sake.
Let us go now; some day hereafter we will make all right
with the immortal gods in the sky, if Zeus ever grant it,

⁵¹ L, p. 129; III, 453–4.

setting up to them in our houses the wine-bowl of liberty
after we have driven out of Troy the strong-greaved Achaians.⁵²

IO. STAGINGS

These, however, have been stagings rather than interpretations: modern dress stagings, as it were, like the first modern Shakespeare, Welles's *Caesar*, in fascist uniforms, or his black *Macbeth* (which preceded, I believe, the filmed Scottish one) that heralded the exuberant excesses of the postmodern. Our examples have merely betrayed the shaping power of older traditional forms: the dramatic scene, first of all, with its reciprocal characters and roles in what is not quite yet a dialogue; then character itself, psychology as the expression of a personal identity, with its twin resultant developments in subjectivity and ethics; and finally the larger form as the unification of the rhythms and segments, as a provisional and local organization of narrative elements.

The endless hours of the oral recital, however, cannot be so easily unified, in memory or thematically: the latter in any case depends on the former, the repetition of the motif will be inscribed on some larger 'faculty', one scarcely imaginable for literate peoples, as Parry and McLuhan have taught us.⁵³ The modernizing temptation, faced with this enormous textual experience, will be to organize it in one of two anachronistic ways: genre and psychology, the older fixed forms and the psychological interiority of the novelistic that replaces them: two distinct layers of post-Homeric tradition overlapping and contaminating one another. These two modes from different moments and structures will generate two distinct kinds of interpretation; the psychological will tend to project readings which, organized around the individual subject, tend towards the moral lesson: the maturation of Achilles, his development into that ethical being who joins with Priam in communion and pardon (a reading we have seen to be utterly erroneous and inconsistent with the text itself). The emphasis on the ethical and its development, however, will inevitably find its formal expression in the *Bildungsroman*, a paradigm that begins to organize the novel and the

⁵² L, pp. 184–5; VI, 506–29.

⁵³ Milman Parry, *The Making of Homeric Verse: The Collected Papers of Milman Parry*, ed. Adam Parry, Oxford 1971.

novelistic as soon as that non-generic reading emerges from the breakdown of the older genres. These shadowy and larval organizations are what we seek to strip away (or *subtract*) from the *Iliad* in order to draw closer to its raw materials and building blocks: mindful at the same time of the counterforce with which the dactylic hexameter tirelessly imposes another rhythm on the repetitive or segmentary structure of the *agons* as they replicate one another. History and structure are the two poles of this material, but they can only be detected as forces and not in any immediate representation.

The larger period from which, as from a distant memory, the historical material of the *Iliad* is drawn, is one of an immense transition between the first great imperial cities of the Middle East (and by extension of Mycenae and Knossos) and the new migrant tribes that ultimately assault and destroy them, preparing the terrain for a variety of new 'democratic' city-states. We may grasp the privileged thematics of Deleuze and Guattari⁵⁴—nomads against the state—as a convenient myth for this process, in which the wealthy imperial and hierarchical states ruled by the 'Oriental despot' or *anax* finds itself under assault by a horde of tribes and clans under their *basileus*, an alliance of warriors and the local lords.

The situation itself reveals little more than a raid of a mixed alliance of tribes on a wealthy Asiatic and imperial city-state, a predatory assault little different from the attacks of Vikings on wealthier northern settlements. Homer's account is a garbled memory, in which, for example, the institution of chariots has been retained without any conception of how they were actually used in older warfare ('taxi to the front', Finley *dixit*). The Trojan enemies have meanwhile been assimilated to Greek speakers and endowed with the religion of the Olympians and with whatever other customs required to make of them the mirror adversaries in a genuine *agon*. Significantly the leader of the expedition, Agamemnon himself, is mischaracterized as an *anax* (king of kings), an imperial title reserved for the older empires such as that of Priam: even though he is himself little more than one *basileus* among others, and a warlord who needs to have his decisions ratified by consent. This minor event then comes down from the time of troubles in which the initial Minoan and

⁵⁴ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, Minneapolis 1987, chapters 12 and 13.

Mycenean empires, along with those of Asia Minor itself, were overthrown by new waves of barbarians. The form of the *Iliad* (about which I have insisted that it is not exactly, or not yet, an epic) can be explained precisely by its isolation, as an episode extracted from a much more extended set of legends as complex as, say the *Mahabharata*.

What distinguishes this episode from the innumerable fights and bloody feuds of the Scandinavian sagas with which it has so often been compared is the dawning sense, in Homer, of the concept of the *world-historical*. This particular episode, unlike its equivalents in the sagas, is heightened and endowed with a well-nigh allegorical foreshadowing, recalling in advance Thucydides's decision to record the great conflict of his own era, 'believing it to be a great war and more worthy of relation than any that had preceded it . . . the greatest movement yet known in history, not only of the Hellenes, but also of a large part of the barbarian world.' Even Herodotus, before him, had that sense of the world war which foretells the coming into being of a vaster world system than any for which contemporaries yet had words: 'to the end that neither the deeds of men may be forgotten by lapse of time, nor the works, great and marvellous, produced some by Hellenes and some by barbarians . . .' To be sure, it is Homer's poem itself which produces this larger world by virtue of its eventual cultural unification of the Greeks themselves; nor does the situation lack irony, insofar as it is clearly the empire of Priam which is the state and civilization, and the Achaeans who occupy the place of barbarian or nomadic raiders.

To characterize these last, it is useful to draw on a different historical parallel: no recent reading of the *Iliad* indeed has been quite so arresting as that of a psychiatrist working extensively with Vietnam veterans, Dr Jonathan Shay, whose diagnostic account of the war poem necessarily transforms our experience of the text forever, revealing the clinical universality of events we have always read for their narrative exceptionality.⁵⁵ Achilles's challenge to Agamemnon, for example, is suddenly defamiliarized and turned inside out when it is recognized as being the only too frequent experience, in Vietnam and other modern wars, of the betrayal by a commander of his own troops. We are familiar with this resentment of the troops through innumerable reports of what was called fragging:

⁵⁵ Jonathan Shay, *Achilles in Vietnam: Combat Trauma and the Undoing of Character*, New York 1994.

the revenge killing of an officer by embittered subordinates; but how else are we to understand the gesture with which Achilles is about to draw his sword on the supreme commander, forestalled only by the intervention of Athene? The crimes of these officers extend all the way from the general's mismanagement of the war as a whole to the death of close comrades resulting from an ill-advised order by an inexperienced or refractory lieutenant. The disastrous incompetence of Agamemnon as a commander persists all the way down to the *Oresteia*; while the unique qualities of wartime comradeship are certainly eternalized by the story of Patroklos. We thus also better grasp the status of the Patrokleiad not only as a grief motivated by love or friendship, but also in terms of the comradeship uniquely generated by the combat situation.

The *Iliad's* focus on its aristocratic 'heroes', to be sure, allows little glimpse of the reality of the foot-soldiers; but their feelings are certainly expressed through the person of Thersites, whose 'ugliness' clearly reflects the view of his masters and whose punishment is exemplary of their hierarchical rule. Elsewhere we glimpsed that same resentment in the hatred of the Trojan grunts for Paris, the cause of all this: it can also be witnessed in the virtual mutiny of Achilles's Myrmidons at their long-enforced immobility and loss of spoils, a dissatisfaction strong enough to force him to take it into account and to address it directly:

Myrmidons: not one of you can forget those mutterings,
those threats that beside the running ships you made at the Trojans
in all the time of my anger, and it was I you were blaming . . .⁵⁶

But for those for whom this poem pre-eminently voices the irreceivable spirit of warfare and aggressivity, indeed of patriarchal violence, Shay also has a reading for us; namely that this aggressivity is itself not even in Homer natural. It takes a form which it is not Shay's least originality to have underscored, returning us thereby one last time to the Scandinavian equivalent. That PTSD should be a generalized reaction to the poem, analogous in its effects and atmosphere to that of Aristotelian catharsis for a later form, may serve to distinguish this work from its epic successors which seek to turn it to other aims (to the glorification of the hero, for example, or the legitimation of sacrifice by established power). But it is to our reading of *thumos* that we must now return for further clarification.

⁵⁶ L, p. 356; XVI, 200–2.

For in this hand-to-hand combat one function of the gods stood out with particular force: it is the way in which a divinity was called upon to intensify the combatant's *thumos*. The latter is not a steady state: it must be heightened and intensified by that *xolos* Lattimore translates as anger (the passage has to do precisely with that death of a comrade we have discussed above):

For his killing Odysseus was stirred to terrible anger
and he strode out among the champions, helmed in bright bronze,
and stood close to the enemy hefting the shining javelin,
glaring round about him; and the Trojans gave way in the face
of the man throwing with the spear.⁵⁷

This is something distinct from what we call anger, even righteous anger; something more than either *kotos* or *xolos*. Nor is it simply the 'warlike' spirit in which one prepares for battle. This is a state which progressively intensifies, and intensifies itself: Shay correctly identifies it as the berserk condition we associate with the sagas, in which the possessed individual is not only fearful to his enemies, but a danger to his friends, as well as to anyone in his immediate vicinity. It is a bloodlust whose virtuality in *thumos* the Greeks recognized: not even an overdose but a frenzy inherent in the very act of killing and aggravated by it in a kind of mindless exaltation.

This Vietnam-era *Iliad* is then from beginning to end one long spell of madness, abetted by the closely related fury of the speeches and only intermittently relieved by other forms of the *agon*, other forms of human confrontation. But all are swept forward by a different kind of material which we have identified as the dimension of the poetic medium itself, the medium as it were of prosody, of the non-human apparatus functioning at the centre of language as the machinery of the camera apparatus dwells at the very centre of filmic visuality, itself inaccessible to sight. Twenty-four frames per second? Here too then the mechanics of the hexameter stand as the unbreakable law within the fragile mortality of the spoken language, the machine within the ghost as it were, the inhuman yet absolute constraint within this unbroken sequence of maimed bodies, sighs and death rattles. 'The sound of their mourning moved in the house.' Time—the time of this inevitable mortality—can never be represented as such, but only by way of the mediation of the

⁵⁷ L, p. 143; IV, 494–8.

clock, the metronome, the prosodic beat, and this, whether it be the time of history or the time of these short-lived humans whose brief existences make it up.

II. SMOKE

Still, one would like to know whether this self-perpetuating repetition of the *agon* as a form has any other limit or destiny than its arbitrary breaking off or onset. Perhaps we searched for it in the wrong place: it is not to be found in an opening or a conclusion of the text which, both of them, remain paralysed *in medias res* (both of them bound to Paris, at one and the same time the lover who stole the bride, and the archer who killed the hero). Perhaps, then, the hinge stands at the mid-point of the great sequence, at which the entire enormous work swings on its axis, moving, displaced, in a new direction, and in which the famous 'wrath' is diverted from its first unworthy object, Agamemnon, and finds its proper one in its own heroic mirror-image, Hektor.

We are alerted to this sea-change by one of the strangest images in a text stuffed with analogies (where even the metaphors, as one commentator has observed, are really similes in disguise). Appropriately enough, it happens—and in Homer the figures and images happen, they are events—as Achilles tries to explain to his mother the change which has come over him with the death of Patroklos. It is a change which has transformed the very central passion of the war-poem itself, the 'wrath' with which it began, and which threatens to efface the very violence of the war and indeed the war itself:

Why, I wish that strife would vanish away from among gods and mortals,
and gall, which makes a man grow angry for all his great mind,
that gall of anger that swarms like smoke inside of a man's heart
and becomes a thing sweeter to him by far than the dripping of
honey.⁵⁸

'Gall' here being once again *xolos*, we may suggest that the passage evokes 'anger, recollected in tranquillity'. But it may be worthwhile first to consult other versions. This is Chapman in 1598:

⁵⁸ L, p. 399; XVIII, 107–10.

How then too soone can hastieth death supplant
 My fate-curst life?—her instrument, to my indignitie,
 Being that blacke fiend Contention, whom would to God might die
 To gods and men, and Anger too, that kindles tyrannie
 In men most wise, being much more sweete than liquid honey is
 To men of powre to satiate their watchfull enmities.
 And like a pliant fume it spreads through all their breasts . . .⁵⁹

Chapman retains the smoke (that ‘pliant fume’) but transforms the relief into a kind of ‘tyrannie’, on the order of Donne’s evocation of love. Indeed, we can now better understand Arnold’s warning that the ‘simplicity’ of Homeric thought-content be respected. Chapman’s lengthy and tortured rhetoric anticipates those ‘metaphysical’ conceits Eliot read as harbingers of the modern, but which the Victorians detested *avant la lettre*.

As for Pope (1715), he smooths the tangle out into delightful couplets; removing the bees altogether and adding a new idea—revenge!

But oh! ye gracious powers above!
 Wrath and revenge from men and gods remove:
 Far, far too dear to every mortal breast,
 Sweet to the soul, as honey to the taste:
 Gathering like vapours of a noxious kind
 From fiery blood, and darkening all the mind.⁶⁰

Yet in a sense it is revenge which is here freely chosen, a lucid substitute for the old anger Achilles here sets free: a moment in which the temptation to an ethical, nay even an existential and Sartrean reading of the text regains some power. What interests us, however, is the fate of this now useless passion, which does not simply vanish but lingers as a kind of object floating in the mental space of memory and even retaining some of its flavour and paradoxical attachment.

Here, long after it has any practical value or effectivity, we find a genuine psychology at work, where anger is looked back on like a seductive object. Can we not then assume that in some perverse fashion Achilles has enjoyed his wounded pride and revelled in his withdrawal? One could stage it that way; but it is rather to the image itself that I want to draw our attention, for that now defunct emotion has here become *reified*; it floats before us as an object in its own right.

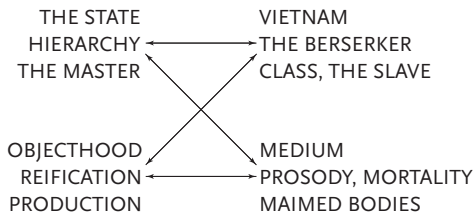
⁵⁹ Chapman, p. 375.

⁶⁰ Pope, p. 349.

The figure is obviously one in which analogy is begun with the beehive, the source of honey and sweetness: but the hive is also potentially the source of a multitude of angry bees swarming out to attack intruders, viciously to defend that source. An absent human subject is present at the heart of the image, both savouring the sweetness, and fearing the assault of the bees.

The intricate figure, a molten simile compressed to the point of metaphor, has all the inner poetic contradiction of a modernist lyric. Agitation is rendered as smoke, yet smoke is precisely (as Homer would have known, with his limitless command of craft-lore and technique) what is used to calm a beehive and to render its inhabitants listless and without danger to the keeper seeking to extract their honey. The chiasmus transfers a fury to these productive beings which has in fact already been stilled by the virtue of the figure itself; and then turns the *xolos* sweet, like a sore tooth your tongue is tempted over and over again to probe. The poetic representation is focused on the process of transformation itself, rather than its content. However much Achilles revelled in his own inner fury, and however much the confusion and intensity of the humiliation offer an unnameable voluptuousness to its subject, these verses do not represent the immediacy of the emotion but rather its reified image as it slips away into the past, taking 'strife' (*eris*) with it along with the *agon* itself.

In one sense, then, the intricate chiasmus replicates that flaw or crack we will find to be present in all Homer's similes: it is the moment in which the division-within-unity which marks the *agon* as a category and a figure is now reduced and miniaturized, reproduced as a barely visible inner contradiction. But in another sense—that of its reification—it is produced as an object; and with production we reach the properly Hegelian dissolution of the *agon*.



We have not yet paid much attention to Hegel's own solution to the *agon*, in which both parties find their proper place and fulfil their

separate destinies in a world of things. The loser, the defeated party in particular, is given a life to live on as serf or slave, preparing a world of luxury and privilege in which the master himself can dwell, in between duty and death.

The *Iliad* is a poem of metals—gold, silver, bronze, tin, the which, before the discovery of iron, must be called precious metals: and indeed, they fill up whole backrooms and attics of this world, they are the fundamental gifts, the plundered armour and weapons, but above all the tripods: innumerable ceremonial tripods serving in their useless number as lavish gifts and signs of hospitality, and serving for us mysterious and unknown purposes, like the chariots which are themselves the sign of a garbled memory of a past and its warfare that no longer exists in Homer's time, whose heroes no longer know exactly what to do with them and how to fight with them. They are, to be sure, useful vehicles from which to glimpse your comrade and charioteer as a spearthrow fells him into dust. Patroklos has himself a particularly unpleasant moment when he jeers at the fall of Hektor's charioteer Kebriones:

See now, what a light man this is, how agile an acrobat.
If only he were somewhere on the sea, where the fish swarm,
he could fill the hunger of many men, by diving for oysters⁶¹

Our scholiast adds to the unpleasantness by pointing out that oysters were to the Homeric Greeks an ignoble food.⁶² Save for such memorable gestures, then, worthy of the great vases, the useless chariots here confirm Finley's judgement ('taxis to the front'). And in the absence of the splendid metal arms, over which the soldiers fight, there remain only enormous rocks the warriors throw at each other:

Tydeus's son in his hand caught
up a stone, a huge thing which no two men could carry
such as men are now⁶³

Not very glamorous weapons for the epic hero, but doubly designating material weight and the archaic physical strength of these ancients.

⁶¹ L, p. 371; XVI, 745.

⁶² Allen Rogers Benner, *Selections from Homer's Iliad*, Norman OH 2001 [1903], p. 311.

⁶³ L, p. 154; V, 302–4.

Still the *Iliad* is not a poem of objects and descriptions: its landscapes are barren, the ships, the walls, the lone oak tree by the Skaian Gates, itself a kind of forlorn testimony of a world without religion, a world whose only true rituals are the burials of the great. Few enough dwelling spaces: we have already observed that there are really only two human interiors—Achilleus’s tent and Paris’s bedchamber—an ironic juxtaposition, but one which tells us little enough about the production of these spaces. Even more ironic, then, is the discovery that it is in the realm of the gods that production—utter absence of slaves and artisans, of streets and markets in the human world—becomes visible. Of Troy we have scarcely glimpsed the mansions of the royal family, the camera’s eye guiding us through tangled streets and alleys that lead to the tower on the walls; but Homer slyly adds some useful information about their Olympian counterparts in the person of Hephaestus, whose awkward limp, and even his attempt to console his mother Hera, will be mocked by the other gods he is serving as their wine steward (the original Homeric laughter! the barbaric medieval hilarity at cripples and victims of the executioner!). But these same gods, sated, satisfied, ready for a good night’s slumber, will slowly betake themselves to their Olympian lodgings,

. . . each one to sleep in his home where
for each one the far-renowned strong-handed Hephaistos
had built a house by means of his craftsmanship and cunning.⁶⁴

12. ENTER THE PROLETARIAN

A gigantic struggle, surging out of the grey wall, remembering its completion, sinking back into formlessness. A hand ready to grab reaching out of the raw ground, linked to its shoulder by blank space, a battered face with gaping wounds, open mouth, empty staring eyes, fringed with curly beard, with the wildly streaming folds of a tunic, everything near its weather-beaten end and near its origin . . . the altar here in our museum, she said, bringing the setup in, was the prize possession of the kings, we can stand in front of these things if we have the/time but if we/giant to understand what they mean and above all what they might mean for us, we have to catch up with everything we were never told in school . . .⁶⁵

⁶⁴ L, p. 91; I, 606–8.

⁶⁵ Peter Weiss, *The Aesthetics of Resistance, Volume 1*, trans. Joachim Neugroschel, Durham NC 2005, pp. 1–3.

In the high noon of Nazi power, in 1936, three youths stand in the great hall of the Pergamon Altar and contemplate the violent repression by the Olympians of the uprising of the giants and their mother, Gaia, last of the chthonic powers. How to appropriate the state's baleful warning, in stone, that rings down to us unchanged from over a thousand years: a warning with which these oppositional young people from working-class Berlin families are only too familiar (one of them, in Hitler Youth uniform, is in fact already a member of the underground Communist Party). Appropriation is indeed the goal of this pedagogy, as Peter Weiss sets out to plot its course in *The Aesthetics of Resistance*; more than that, how to divert and to enlist the power of the aesthetic in a struggle whose fundamental context was already, as Benjamin pointed out, the tendentially universal aestheticization of politics (and for us, of daily life itself).

The boys' discussion, which became a central text for the German student movement in the 1970s, is not without some rather surprising analogies with the seemingly alien French theory of the period. Both rhizomatic and overdetermined, it returns again and again to its central exhibit to search out new lines of flight, to uncover new overdeterminations. Husserl's *Abschattungen* (with its multiple meanings of shading, outline, aspect and sketch) remained limited to a single dimension; Aristotle's four causes have shattered into a countless multiplicity. Here, however, every 'aspect', unrelated, leads off into a historical inquiry which no matter how indirect always leads back to the centrality of production, of social class. The doomed uprising of the giants makes the materiality of state power unavoidable; but the stone of the great frieze itself leads back to quarries in which great crowds of slaves are worked to death. The delicacy and know-how of the master sculptors, secured by their guilds, stands in the service of the court; the very project of the monument is a study in propaganda and *raison d'état*; the inherited styles, which they refine, have passed through generations of city-states. No detail, no level, of this unparalleled work that does not eventually reveal its secret links with exploitation and violence.

'There is no monument of civilization', said Benjamin, 'that is not a document of barbarism.' He could have been thinking of this very building, which he himself visited often as a boy, and whose presence in the Hauptstadt is (like the Elgin marbles) a testimony to imperialism and great-power theft. When the eye becomes used to these rhizomatic paths that lead us beyond the work of art to its ultimate overdeterminations, it

becomes clear that the common soldiers and slaves whose absence we have noted in the *Iliad* are still very much present in their very absence. (Thersites alone had given us a glimpse of their deeper feelings about this expedition of their masters, a glimpse only made possible by his physical punishment.) Inescapable, the Seleucid empire pursues Weiss's young narrator to the very shores of Republican Spain, where, in Civil War, he comes upon its traces. The expansion of the intricate web of domination and production fulfils Hegel's picture of the master and the slave, from whose labour on materiality History itself emerges, and with it 'the labour and suffering of the negative' itself, the resistance of Peter Weiss's inscription and its knowledge and renewal of energies.

Nonetheless, it still remains astonishing, at the mid-point of this ancient expression of mastery and violence, to come upon the very picture of the proletarian in Homer's poem. It is a quintessentially domestic scene: the unexpected visitor ('you come to see us too rarely'), the hostess calling to the husband in his workshop, hastening to make himself rapidly presentable:

Then with a sponge he wiped clean his forehead, and both hands,
and his massive neck and hairy chest, and put on a tunic . . .⁶⁶

And they meet, effusively, and of course he will do her a favour, it is an honour, reminding her of her once and unforgotten kindness. Yet this is no mere return of a favour that Thetis requests, seeking new armour for her doomed son; it is a recall of the long period Hephaestus has himself spent in her care, saved, nurtured back to health and hidden by Thetis and her maidens, after the grievous fall from Olympus he had remembered in Book One. Arbitrary power of Zeus, and secret friendship and kindness of the underlings, who form their own resistance ('No other / among the gods or among mortal man knew about us').⁶⁷ The production of the shield, in all its glory, is a subversive act of solidarity; and its maker takes the time to fashion precisely that daily life we have so far missed in the wartime *Iliad*, along with suggestions of peace and collective fulfilment.

And as with Marx's proletarians, Hephaestus creates the world itself. Huge and ugly, the demiurge is nonetheless surrounded by the primeval

⁶⁶ L, p. 407; XVIII, 414-5.

⁶⁷ L, p. 407; XVIII, 403-4.

magic and power of the blacksmith, the master of fire (and metal) perhaps in honour of Thetis the sea nymph surrounding that world with Ocean as its ultimate boundary. The making of the armour, sword, spears, breastplate, is concluded, as we all know, by this emblematic world shield. It would be pleasant to be able to conclude on this Utopian haven of calm at the heart of the poem Goethe called 'a glimpse into Hell': the twin cities, with their marriages and festivals, their inner order and their pride in a local self-defence against the neighbours, surrounded by pastoral and the harvest rituals, the great dancing floors alive with courtships.

'Et in arcadia ego . . .' The truest pastorals must somehow also include the shadow, and mortality. Here, as in his cunning images and similes, Homer has not omitted to include the barely perceptible crack or rift, the stain that portends an inevitable discord, just as in the greatest Utopias, those of Morris or Yefremov, there are always the tragic incidents, a fatal lover's quarrel in *News from Nowhere*, the inevitable tragic accident in Yefremov's *Andromeda*: the shadow that narrative and time must cast upon the motionless frieze.

A pair of clowns scarcely mars the dancing festivities; but litigation noisily interrupts the market-place and two lions penetrate the grazing herds and hold their shepherds at bay as they fight over their prey. Finally, a calculated betrayal and ambush by enemy forces sounds the knell of these peaceful city-states, still at the stage of villages. So it is that a detail, a mere speck in the peaceful vision Hephaestus has designed for the warrior Achilleus, swiftly magnified, effaces its peaceful interpolations to revive and restore the violence which is the law and permanent life of this poem to its central place.

Fredric Jameson sent the manuscript of 'Agon' to Verso in October 2022, as the first chapter of the first volume—the last to be tackled—of his great work on literary theory, *The Poetics of Social Forms*. Volume One, which remains unfinished after Jameson's death in September 2024, was provisionally titled *Categories of the Narrative-Historical*. The others are Volume Two, *Allegory and Ideology*; Volume Three, *The Antinomies of Realism*; Volume Four, *A Singular Modernity / The Modernist Papers*; Volume Five, *Postmodernism: or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*; Volume Six, *Archaeologies of the Future*.