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In memory of Michael Steinbacher, a geologist of the era of Venus and Mars; and Bill Mullen, who now dances with the Muses.

The Shield of Achilles

Remembering Homer, Literally

The Greco-Roman composers of epic begin by invoking the Muse. They announce her as the source of their inspiration and their veracity. The Muse is the daughter of Memory. Homer asks



her to sing ‘for me’ (*Odyssey* 1.1). The epic invocation therefore seems as much an insurance against forgetting, as a call for memorable inspiration. So I also begin by calling on the Muse, lest we forget.

What is it that these composers may have felt at risk of forgetting, that they pressed their narratives into the phrase-harmony and ever-repeating dactylic rhythm of the dance of the Muses? Why the fixation on remembering, revealed or ‘outed’ in the poet’s call to Memory’s

daughter? Other storytellers depend on the stories themselves to embed in the memory, by telling memorable ones. Homer has done this too, but not, ostensibly, on an author's authority. The stories hold their own in prose translations, and even films. So why the plea to the Muse, in the strange and rhythmic language created by its marriage to long-short-short verse? As historians who seek source material in epic are well aware, the daughter of memory can also be a crucible of amnesia.

I am going to discuss a celebrated passage in the *Iliad*, the Shield of Achilles, and what it appears to remember about the visible cosmos. The dialectics of shield and mirror are no more at play than in this polished metal-work, which is at once literally a protection against a hostile and yet familiar reality, and literally a reflection of the cosmos, and the human idyll that is lost to one bronze warrior fighting another to the death under catastrophic skies.

If you did Humanities in the U.S. in the latter part of the 20th Century, when I studied Greek in the Committee on Social Thought—where, believe me, giants still walked the earth—you likely heard a lot about epic as a genre. I was put off by this, as soon as I realised that the *Odyssey*, a most early exemplar, did not fit the definition. It is not that one objects to the lingo of genre altogether. There really is something to tragedy and comedy. These are patterns of action, and the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* are its earliest and among its purest archetypes. I used to give the nub to students in the following way: comedy ends in marriage; tragedy begins the morning after. Think of the tragedies that begin with the wedding dishes being cleaned up, or on the night after an elopement. Now try to think of one that doesn't. It is not generally good to be married at the start of a play. Poor Oedipus.



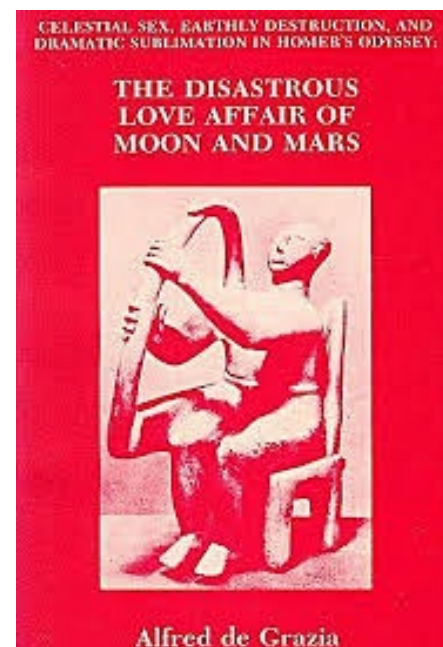
Edmund in *Lear* speaks of his brother Edgar as the ‘catastrophe of the comedy.’ This term is a dramaturgical reflex of an original terrific reality, the humanised transference of a cosmic marriage. The world turns upside down, καταστρέφειν, at a fateful moment, but in comedy, this means that the downtrodden hero in hiding, rises to get the girl—who tends to stay above the fray—and all and sundry, yokels and villains, fall into their proper places within a single Judgement Day. Edgar, the catastrophe or world-upturning

solution to *Lear*, is uniquely unfortunate in that he inhabits a tragic universe instead of a comic one. (This was so disconcerting that for a considerable period, Shakespeare's ending was abandoned in performance, substituted by one where Cordelia survives and marries Edgar. It is strange to think that for many, this was the only *Lear* they ever knew.)

According to St. Thomas Aquinas, interpretation can be literal, or analogical, allegorical, or most intriguingly, anagogical. This latter applies to a text that itself contains the power to lead an initiate on a mystic's path to truth, or better, to the marriage to truth, the cosmic marriage. I believe that the *Odyssey* intends to be such a text. Many treat Hebrew and Greek Scripture in this way, as concretions that do not, like mere words and language, serve only to refer to realities outside themselves. But at the bottom of this distinction among distinctions, lies the literal. One associates this level with fundamentalism—and with stupidity, to put the matter less politically. But there is perhaps a way in which the anagogical, in the ritual concreteness of its path, closes a circle and meets its tail in the literal—forming an *ouroboros* of literary criticism—whose basis must always be the literal. What is the bread and the wine, literally?

Among the first things one learns about epic, and that one learns about not sounding stupid, is that the thing cannot be taken literally. My aim in this essay is to take epic literally. Sometimes, you see, a shield is just a shield.

For me, this is a matter of unlearning things that once buttressed the personality of a university graduate. It involves a kind of soul-quake that many experience upon reading Immanuel Velikovsky. But my first experience of such a way of reading epic happened when I was scouring the shelves in 1987 in search of insight into Homer, whose *Odyssey* I had just read in Greek. I found there in that Regenstein Library in Chicago an odd-looking red book by Alfred de Grazia: *Celestial Sex, Earthly Destruction, and Dramatic Sublimation in Homer's Odyssey: The Disastrous Love Affair of Moon and Mars*. It is about the love story of Ares and Aphrodite, an episode which is sung in the *Odyssey*. It was that book that ultimately led to a reputation I gained as a professor: 'Mr. David thinks the gods are real.' This is as far as I dared in that world and at that time. I did suggest to students that the gods might be the



planets. I regret that I was too shy to thank Mr. de Grazia for his inspiration, while he might have enjoyed the gesture. At the bottom of his pages were quantities of footnotes referring to Velikovsky. Once I had ingested the Ares and Aphrodite book, I sought out Velikovsky's works, secretly, in point of fact.

The fact is, however, that the gods *were* planets. Mainstream humanists say this literally, perhaps despite themselves, when they acknowledge that most ancient religions were 'astral'. In modern times, many ancient theological personalities are reduced to the sun and the moon, as these are the only effective bodies that scholars find operating in our skies, along with meteors and occasional comets. Moderns assume that the ancients in their childish fearfulness must have worshipped these bright, pleasant bodies that do not bother punters today. But ancient peoples and writers openly associated the gods with planets. Their interest in the human significance of the motions of these beings is dismissed as 'astrology' (itself a perfectly respectable term). The term 'planet' signifies a body that wanders, veers or strays. It does not suggest a random motion, but motion off course. The norm was a fixed orbit and a clockwork rate, much as we experience of the planets now. The wish was that the god returned to his orbit, or 'house', rather than express his will (as it appeared) in acts of wrath, taking sides by favouring one army over another, and decimating populations with thunderbolts and earthquakes. In Plato's *Timaeus* we hear of repeated catastrophes upon the earth by flood and fire, including the myth of Phaethon, explained by an Egyptian sage: 'the truth of it is a deviation of those beings in the sky that go around the earth, and after long periods a destruction occurring upon the earth through quantities of fire.' (*Timaeus* 22d, tr. David) The great river, the Nile, was somehow a protection against the unleashed electromagnetic forces of the cosmos. These destructions alternate with floods brought on by the gods, who are in apposition to the astral beings that 'go around the earth.' The gods were planets who expressed a will against the clockwork, which ultimately resulted in a perishing upon the earth through alternating fire and flood. One assumes this happened when planets in newly unstable orbits encountered the plasma envelope of the earth. (This eventuality is somewhat confusingly called 'collision' by Velikovsky.) Predicting these events like a prophet involved close astronomical observation of the displaced bodies, to determine when they might visit close enough to the earth's electromagnetic environment that there might be an exchange of potential, a thunderbolt that altered mass, orbits and spin, and hence shook the earth like a guilty thing.

One danced the epic circle dance, which included steps in retrogression, in mimetic sympathy with the motion, as seen from the earth, of the outer planets when they are on good behaviour.

There is therefore worship but also wish fulfillment in the human dance of the interplanetary muses, which measured time in a beautiful and orderly rhythm. One hoped that Jupiter, Mars and the rest would also remain beautiful and orderly in response to the sympathetic gift of human dance and chant.

So what does it mean to take epic literally? To begin with I think it is about recognising that in current usage the term ‘epic’ waves a hand at texts that contain a bunch of fabulous stuff that primitive people, including modern literalists and fundamentalists, thought actually to have happened. Anything, really, that now seems larger than life. It is not as helpful or useful an idea for criticism as comedy and tragedy are, although these are equally about upside-down times and catastrophic resolutions. We are taught about ‘epic motifs’. When Homer says, for example, that



this hero picked up a rock that ten modern fellows could not lift, we clever people know that that was just an exaggeration, endemic to the genre.

But is it not now possible to speculate that perhaps the so-called force of gravity has not been a constant in our planet’s experience; that the lifting the rock may have actually happened, and routinely—after all, routines become motifs—as surely as a dinosaur must have been able to

breathe through its impossible neck? Might not Homer’s motif be remembering, at some level, rather than gratuitously resorting to the Special Effects department? Cyclopean walls all around the earth bespeak a level of reptilian strength, mechanical ingenuity and power, that can at least be partly explained by a lower gravitational environment amongst some of our ancestors. To my sort of mind, the lost cranes, lathes and chisels that may have aided the extraordinary precision of the stonework and construction of the Great Pyramid, far from possible today, are at least as worthy of awe and wonder as the finished product. More so in fact. There is no telling the original dimensions of the structures at Tiahuanaco, now catastrophically elevated from the level of the sea toward the southern stratosphere.

There are ice ages at the poles today, a most magnificent one over Antarctica. The poles are classified as deserts, with respect to rainfall. How did ice accumulate there? There had once to have been intense heat to evaporate moisture, precipitately followed by cold to allow the water to fall as snow. In the aftermath the ice would recede, as now, retreating to the coldest regions. At the end of the last ‘ice age’ Siberia was temperate, and sustained populations of pachyderms.

There was no ice age in Siberia. These mammoths were frozen instantly, so that their meat is still edible; their stomachs contained temperate plant matter though they are frozen into barren tundra. Meanwhile the Great Lakes were under a vast ice sheet. The earth's rotational pole has clearly shifted. That is, the pole did not simply tilt in another direction, but shifted geographically. As we shall see, both things seem to have happened at different times in the earth's history. It should not be a surprise if on at least one of the two Antarctic islands, under mountains of ice, evidence of human populations and commerce will be found.

The dinosaurs' demise itself bespeaks repeated catastrophes upon the fauna of successive worlds; their fossils bespeak the rapid alternation of flood and intense heat and pressure. Uniformitarians have never produced a fossil. The extraordinary childishness of the hypothesis that only gradual changes still visible today were responsible for the record of the past, fractured, transformed and entombed in our rocks and canyons, can only be explained as a kind of self-protective denial, equally from the terrors of catastrophe and the visions of the religions born of the Flood. The behaviours studied in plasma physics only seem to be miraculous.

Homer's language is supposed to be paratactic, rather than syntactic. He tends not to subordinate his clauses, and thereby imply causality. It is supposed to be a mark of his primitive consciousness. But note that parataxis is merely a tendency in his style. Homer *does* also subordinate clauses and ascribe causes. Just not always. A famous example occurs right at the beginning of the *Iliad*:

Anger sing thee, Daughter of Memory: Peleus' son Achilles' wrath,
 A towering damned indignance, that set ten thousand griefs upon 'men of woe,' Achaeans;
 So many and so mighty the souls, jettisoned to the invisible realm—
 Ghosts of heroes—they themselves left as takings for jackals,
 For ominous birds a dinner—and from Zeus it was coming to fulfillment—his will,
 Right from when first they stood apart, paired in strife:
 Atreus' son, a lord among warrior men, and radiant Achilles! (translations by the author)

The wrath of Achilles caused all kinds of calamities, *and* the will of Zeus was being fulfilled. (Note that the impersonal, unwilled quality of a physical catastrophe is excluded from the narration. Such a possibility is not conducive to interesting drama.) Translators often subordinate the clause: 'thus' the will of Zeus was accomplished, or 'and so,' although there is no basis for such a spin in the Greek. For my part I have grown to see paratactic expression as a child of truth-telling, without the childish Enlightenment arrogance about causality. There is the wrath of

Achilles, and there is the plan of Zeus. How they might be related becomes a question for the audience, but poet and audience share the understanding that both must be real. In the 20th Century, we condescended. Even Velikovsky, who taught me that myth was history, sat on the high seat when he juxtaposed the description in that most impossible story, the standing still of the sun for Joshua and his trumpets, with the nearby passage describing the fall of meteoritic ‘stones of *barad*.’ We feel nicely superior, with Velikovsky, when we imply that the composer in that case did not see a connection. The fact, however, is that this person did not presume to *explain* a connection. There were the trumpets, and there were the stones. Somebody remembered these things, that they were both there. The literal level is the key to the truth-telling, and hence to the parataxis.

Velikovsky wrote on the relation of amnesia to repression and the unconscious reenactment of trauma. This part of the theory drove *Mankind in Amnesia*, his book on the subject. What I found original in Velikovsky’s argument is something so disconnected from the psychoanalytic programme as to be called ‘scotoma’ rather than amnesia or repression. This is a blindness to what is in fact in plain sight. The texts tell it like it was. They are unrepressed. I find this to be particularly true of the American materials that Velikovsky, Ev Cochrane, Rens van der Sluijs and others have studied and cited. Any amnesia is in this case a pathology of the interpreting audience, innocent in that we can no longer find referents for words that describe catastrophic dramas, and often for the names of the protagonists. There need be no violence or repressed trauma in this very real problem in hermeneutics; it can turn Jesus’ prayer to Big Daddy in the Sky, into ‘Our Father, which art in heaven.’

Who, or what, is Achilles? Let us begin by considering this matter literally. Here is Homer's opening line:

μῆνιν ἄειδε θεά, Πηληϊάδεω Ἀχιλῆος
The wrath/sing/goddess,/of Peleus’ son/Achilles

The first word μῆνις or wrath is a divine force; this is how the term is used in Homer and in Greek generally; merely human anger is called *χόλος*, sometimes described as a kind of black fluid that fills the lungs. The last words of the line ascribe this divine anger to Peleus’ son Achilles. Peleus is a mortal. But his son is the son of Thetis, a goddess, and he is perhaps thereby capable of fatal, effective, divine wrath. So what does this make Achilles? Let us say this literally, by which in this case I mean biologically: he is an hybrid. He belongs to the age of the

sons of God who went into human women, in the way that *Genesis* describes those times and those men: the mighty men of renown. Now, when exactly were those antediluvian times?



And who was Thetis, literally? Dave Talbott prefaces his presentations with the idea that the ancient sky did not look like the sky we see today. I follow this thesis, and find it indisputable. But the Homeric picture is not one of our current sky merely rearranged. It is overpopulated. Velikovsky and most of the comparative mythologists he inspired are obliged to use alter egos, and other devices, to explain the Homeric and other pantheons in the terms allowed by the objects humanly visible in the heavens today. To compound the problem, ancient peoples seem continuously to have assimilated past actions and agents in

their local forms under unifying rubrics, so as to make sense in their present. Some of the figures who ruled the skies in more ancient times, for example, may not have been the same as the ones that later bore the same names. By the Classical period, the name 'Zeus' functioned in daily speech much in the way that 'God' functions in Anglo-American phrases and imprecations, even among atheists. Jupiter the great planet is not being invoked.

Much of the modern mythologists' work is ingenious on a comparative level. Many proper names from different languages and language families are made to point to single entities with peculiar identifying sets of attributes. But a number of the Homeric agents, including Thetis, and Apollo, 'he who shoots from afar,' have ceased to trouble our telescopes. (Thetis is said to be a daughter of the sea, but she also manifests visibly on Olympus. We should not assume that we know what is meant by 'the sea' or by 'Olympus'; they both may well have been celestial phenomena.) Even Cronus, a key figure in many reconstructions, has become not only inactive but invisible in Homer. It should be noted that although he is invisible, he is most decidedly not inaudible: he constantly manifests himself aurally in Zeus' own patronymic, Κρονίδης. In one of Pindar's stories, he presides over the Isles of the Blessed, where the heroes go; in Homer they go to Hades, a realm which is (literally!) invisible. How then do we go about connecting the planet we call Saturn, to which Ptolemy referred not as 'Cronus' but as the 'star of Cronus', and which is obviously visible, to the Κρόνος of Homer?

There are many friendly folk who understand that celestial catastrophe has played a crucial part in shaping human memory. The Muse is with them. I offer an Homeric question to their various

schemata and chronologies: yes the sky used to be different, but not merely rearranged. The Homeric data must be taken seriously, in the manner that Homer took them seriously, before an ancient history can be complete. Often reading something literally is thought to be in conflict with taking it seriously; this is a line where one must walk watchfully.

So Achilles is naked. He has lost his armour. His beloved Patroclus has worn it into battle, pretending to be Achilles with his blessing, to help ward off the enemy threat while the chieftain



sulks by the ships. Patroclus feels compassion for his comrades. He is a nice guy. He is killed in this endeavour by another nice guy, Hector of Ilium, husband and father, who begins to wear the armour of Achilles as his trophy. Iris wings down from Olympus, sent by Hera, with the message that Achilles should appear by the great artificial trench, separated from the troops and battle, but merely to show himself, unarmed, as a way of panicking and

breaking the Trojan rally which followed in the wake of Patroclus' death. Naked on the trench he appears covered in a golden cloud; Athena holds her tasseled aegis above him; from his head there shoots a blazing light into the sky. He shouts three times like a trumpet while Pallas herself cries out from afar in response. The sickened Trojans fall into terror, chaos, and rout.

That there is a cosmic dimension to this epiphany seems clear. Perhaps Achilles without his armour is like a looming planet with a disrupted plasma sheath, whose electric potential bursts forth in a great equalising thunderbolt. He is thrice associated with Pallas Athena at the event, visually in her stupendous fluttering aegis, audibly in her thunderous call and response, and it is said that Pallas fires the flame that blazes up from his head. Perhaps a sometime audience that knew the historical cosmic apparition would see Achilles in his epiphany as a metaphor for Athena, whom Velikovsky identified with the planet Venus. (Venus is still unnaturally hot, in his view because of its natural birth, as Athena from the head of Zeus.) The odd thing about the Homeric scene is that both Athena and her avatar are present at once. This by itself undercuts the otherwise economical reading by way of metaphor.

What then is the relationship between Achilles and Athena here? Is he an avatar or surrogate of

some kind? ‘Avatar’ and ‘surrogate’ share a deep structure semantically, but they ought not be conflated. Neither of them is an alter ego. An avatar is a genuine manifestation of the deity, a true substitute; whereas a surrogate can be a false substitute, an impersonator or impostor. Achilles’ unarmed epiphany seems actually to have been an action of Athena. Epic remembers in this way, by turning a spectacular and dangerous cosmic agent into a Superman, mankind’s friend; in this case no particular friend to either the Achaeans or the Trojans, but to Patroclus, our own human and kindly surrogate within the narrative. Through this pair we enter the story as something other than the hapless slaughtered souls who we are. That is the disclosure that we cannot countenance and also stay sane, the sinking fact of our true role. Therefore the transmission through epic and epic heroism is an amnesiac way of remembering, as though our only record of World War II and the atom bomb had to be gleaned from a Godzilla movie.

One wonders what to make of Achilles seeming to have joined the battle, because someone in his armour was going berserk, who is proved in the fight to be a surrogate; and of this armour being won or stolen by another surrogate. The climax comes when Achilles comes face to face with this other, dressed in

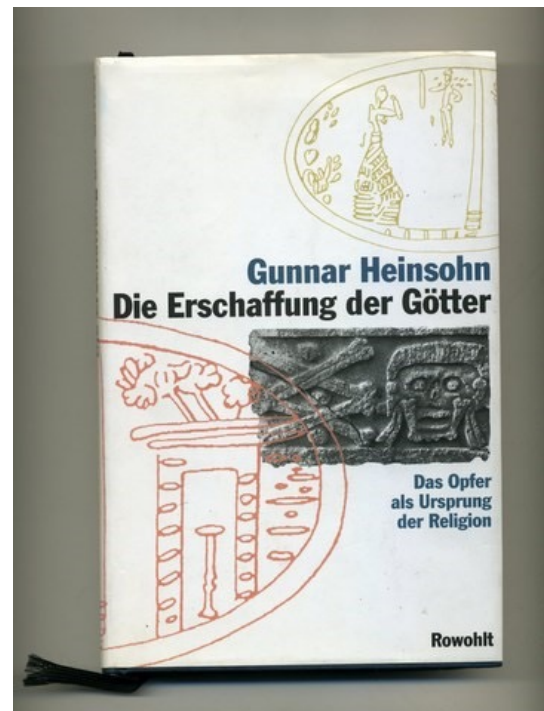
his old armour, himself resplendent in his new sheath. It is more than tempting to psychoanalyse the warrior hero confronting his externalised old self in internal combat. He chases Hector three times round the citadel of Ilium before spearing him in the throat, allowing him



one last rasping speech of prophetic insight. But Hector’s voice is lost, and no trumpets sound. The transferring of the armour may be metaphorical of the stealing of an atmosphere in a cosmic collision, so that one body deceptively appears as another, while the stripped original sprouts a new plasma sheath. But it must be said, Homer seems drawn purely on the human level, as many storytellers from epic to opera are, to the dramatic idea of a surrogate. In other words, one does

not need to discover our interest in the dramatic ruse in a cosmic drama; rather, it is the fact that there were apparently surrogates and agents in disguise in the heavenly events, that helps allow humanity and its poets to see these events as a drama in the first place.

There is a cosmic history played out here, in an agonisingly humanised narrative to which I have done short shrift. But humanising the cosmic drama is a reflex in both story-telling and ritual and ultimately in the bloodthirsty role-playing of kings. I owe a debt here to a brilliant work by Gunnar Heinsohn, *The Creation of the Gods*. Heinsohn performs a Copernican shift in one's understanding of how and why a human protagonist takes on the role of terrifying cosmic agents in hierarchical ritual practices, but to my mind also in epic and in Scriptural art. In these latter, the poet or performer himself takes on all the parts, including the narrator. He is a soloist, a singer-songwriter, who stays himself but can impersonate the lines of a god, or a man, or a woman. But ritual, which is the seedbed of drama, creates a compelling illusion, where an actor transforms behind the mask of a role, and seems to become the will, the person, the agent. He or she becomes a star, as we still say in Hollywood culture. The narrator disappears. There is only the God-King, the Defender of the Faith, the Christian President, the *imitatio Christi*, here present, enacting what must be done. I suppose the difference between drama and ritual has to do with the shedding of real blood. But it seems that the epic narrative comes first, and that it itself originates in making human agents out of cosmic ones. This is the amnesiac step, which builds illusions of human efficacy, as does the dogma of anthropogenic global warming, but which allows a profoundly unstable world, survived by a poet and an audience, to become psychologically, humanly liveable. In the magic space of ritual and theatre, we mortals can become Athena or Achilles, ourselves become the agent of their immortal wrath. And our hearts go out feelingly to the widows and the nice guys.



Meanwhile, as Achilles has his epiphany by the war dyke, his mother Thetis visits Hephaestus the smith in his self-built domicile, filled with stars. It is said to be conspicuous even among the other gods' houses. Velikovsky and others take Hephaestus to be an alter ego of Athena, although

he is male, lame, and a mother's boy, who all the same suffers greatly at the hands of mater Hera; while Athena is female, a mighty warrior, sprung only from Zeus the father. She is of course a virgin, while Hephaestus is married to beautiful women: in the *Iliad*, to Charis; in the *Odyssey*, to Aphrodite herself. Both these wives can be things or persons in Greek. While smile-loving Aphrodite is also an aphrodisiac, grace is an effluent of some kind, like an atmosphere, or a cometary plasma envelope in glow mode. Her epithet, unique to her in Homer, λιπαροκρήδεμνος, 'veil with a glistening sheen,' perhaps reflects this state of roused plasma. Pindar's poetry sees this substance, χάρις, shed upon and from the victorious athlete. No one explains why Hephaestus has different and beautiful wives in the different stories, but in the *Odyssey* Ares cuckolds him with Aphrodite. One wonders if Hephaestus ends up bitter and alone at the bar.



But tonight he is in his smithing element, in the middle of a project, and he turns his attention to Thetis' request for new armour. He owes her one; she had once helped save him, after he had been cast out (literally) by his mother, ashamed of his lameness. After his fall he was hidden with Thetis and Eurynome for nine years in a cave, surrounded by the Ocean stream, one presumes before he made his cosmic reappearance, recognisable as himself. But the being hidden by the Ocean stream, in a cave with Thetis and Eurynome, seems also to be a cosmic apparition. Hephaestus went back to the egg, like a child in the bosom of the Madonna.

First he builds the shield. It takes five lines to describe the design and the materials. Then he starts to adorn it:

Ἐν μὲν γαῖαν ἔτευξ', ἐν δ' οὐρανόν, ἐν δὲ θάλασσαν,
 ἠέλιόν τ' ἀκάμαντα σελήνην τε πλήθουσαν,
 ἐν δὲ τὰ τεῖρεα πάντα, τὰ τ' οὐρανόσ εἰστεφάνωνται,
 Πληϊάδας θ' ὕαδας τε τό τε σθένοσ Ὠρίωνοσ
 Ἄρκτοσ θ', ἣν καὶ Ἄμαξαν ἐπὶ κλησὶν καλέουσιν,
 ἦ τ' αὐτοῦ στρέφεται καὶ τ' Ὠρίωνα δοκεῦει,
 οἷ ἄμμορόσ ἐστί λοετροῶν Ὠκεανοῖο.

(*Iliad* XVIII.483-9)

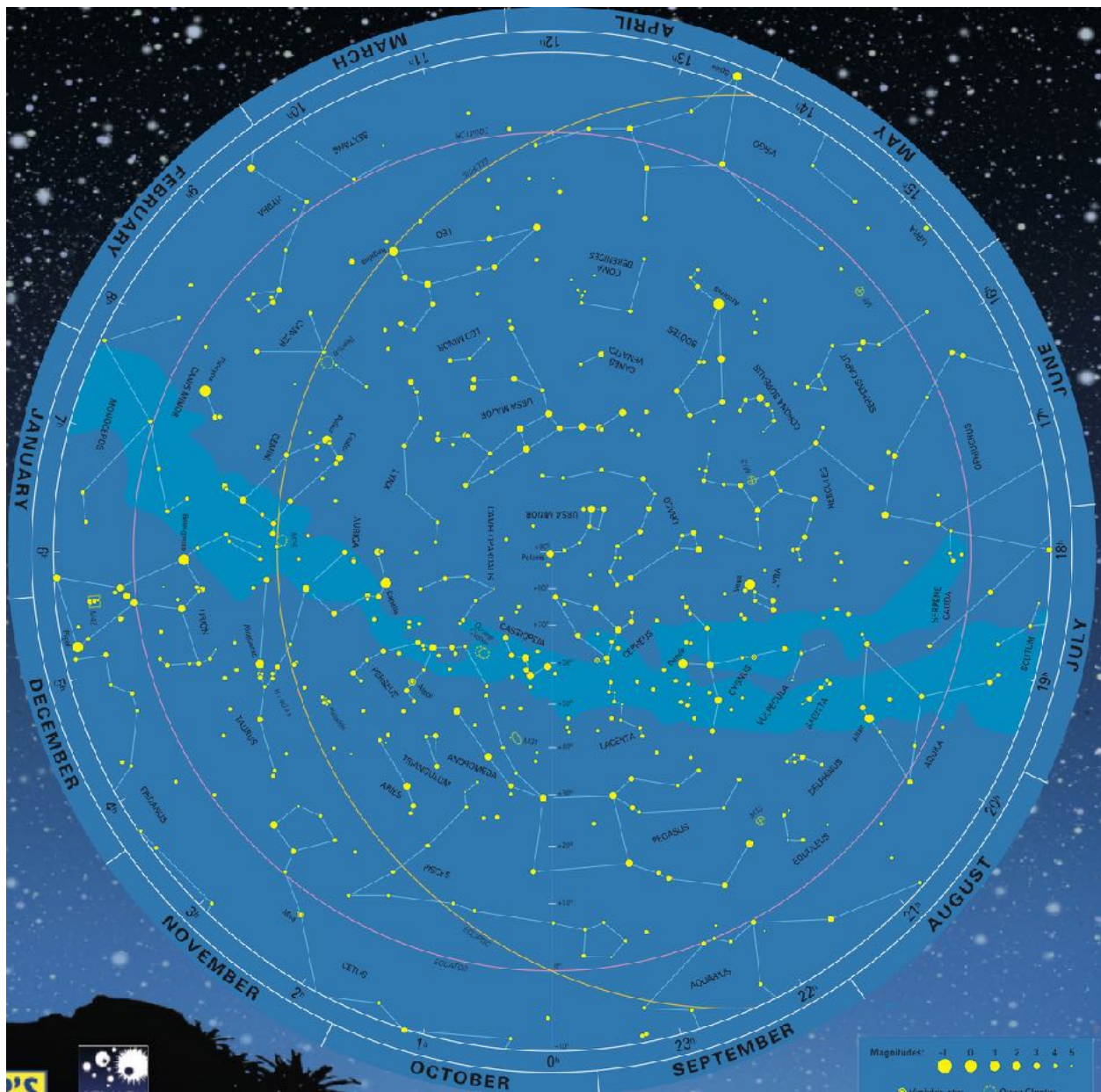
He crafted in there the earth, then the sky and the sea,
 The sun unwearying and the full moon,
 And in he put all those signs which crown the sky,
 The Pleiades and Hyades and the might of Orion,
 And the Bear, which they also call the Wagon,
 She who circles in the same place and keeps watch on Orion,
 And is alone without a portion in the baths of Ocean.

The lines are beautiful and this alone justifies their ekphrastic place in the *Iliad*. They reoccur in the *Odyssey*, where they receive a different justification. About which more later. As best we know, these lines were part of the poems that were transmitted to us by the classical Greeks. This shield is likely the original for Plato's mirror held up to the world, to which he ascribes the power of a poet's mimetic art in *The Republic* (596d-e). So, very likely, Plato and the generations preceding and succeeding him, knew these lines.

The problem is, they are false. Homer describes the Bear as circling in its own same place, and, alone among the constellations, not dipping into the Ocean. This means the Bear was at the pole in the era when Homer sets his story. Whether the north or south one is not clear. But this situation did not obtain in the Ptolemaic cosmos. Nor does it obtain now. When was the pole in the Bear? That uniformitarian bastion, the alleged regular precession of the equinoxes, would have spun the pole into the Bear an impossibly long time ago. At the very least, these lines about the constellations that we still see describe real frogs in the imaginary garden of Homeric epic.

Nowadays there are many bright circumpolar constellations in northern latitudes, and among them is the Bear or Wagon. I have always found the W of Cassiopeia, on the far side of the current pole from the Bear, at least as striking a grouping. At most latitudes in Greece, the Bear does in fact set. It is patently false to say that it alone does not bathe in the waters of Ocean. The pole now resides in the Little Bear, an inconspicuous constellation that has only been recognised as such because of its polar position, and which does not merit a mention in the sky of Hephaestus and Homer. If, however, one looks at a star map, and imagines the pole centred within the Great Bear, it becomes straightforwardly apparent there is something of a barren spot surrounding this pole compared to the current one. The Bear would indeed dominate the polar sky, and would be the only major constellation that never set at temperate latitudes.

When the lines occur in the *Odyssey*, the constellation Boötes also gets a mention. It is described



as ‘late setting.’ (*Odyssey* 5.272) It is adjacent to the Bear, and would therefore have been more prominent in the polar sky than today. Indeed it is sometimes considered the Ploughman to the Plough, and it contains a bright orange star now called Arcturus. The name means the ‘Bear-Watcher’. But note that in Homer’s lines, it is the Bear that does the watching; she keeps an eye on the hunter Orion, who, it seems, was as mighty a signpost in the sky then as now. And note also that Boötes sets late in this cosmos. From the perspective of our sky and the classical sky, it is bizarre to distinguish Boötes from the Bear in this way. From Greek latitudes, both constellations set; and Boötes is to the south, so that it can only be perceived to be circumpolar

by observers within the arctic circle. Arcturus' declination is less than 20° . So in temperate latitudes, it can set pretty early. But this would not be the case if the pole was in the Bear. Boötes could set briefly and late.

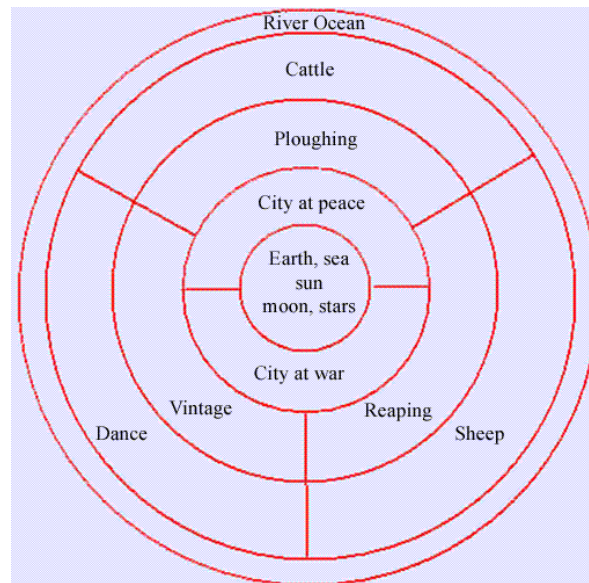
These asterisms belong to a period of myth that Homer is not interested in retelling. They are not, like the Titans, suppressed but still potent. They have become a mere backdrop for most people, from that day to this. They are the wallpaper in Hephaestus' house.

There is a gulf that separates us, including the ancient Greeks, from Homer. Nobody knows who he or she was. That gulf was catastrophic. Not just her identity, but her culture and economy and society have vanished into the ekpyrotic air. But there may also be a gulf between the composer of the *Iliad* and the time that she describes. (By the way, I am not simply alternating pronouns. There are good reasons to believe that the composer of the *Iliad* was female. But that is grist for another mill.) There may have been an understanding between her and her audience, who were clearly not the classical Greeks, that the epic events belonged to a 'before' time, when the pole was in the Bear. So it may be necessary to distinguish three eras: the time of the events, the time of the telling, and the time of the reception of the mysterious texts, which is essentially our time. I have not heard it claimed that the more recent Heinsohn horizon, in the conventional 1st Millennium, involved a shift in the direction of the geographical pole. There are gyroscopic and electromagnetic mechanisms that appear able to explain the restoration of the earth's axis after a disruptive electro-plasmic encounter. But the tilt of this axis from a pole somewhere in the Bear has so far been a permanent change, as was the shift of the geographical location of the axis towards Siberia at the end of the last ice age. (Shifts within the Bear should not have falsified Homer's lines; Homer does not know a North Star.)

Hephaestus goes on to adorn the shield with scenes of a sort of feudal-civic idyll, as far removed as can be imagined from the bizarre horrors of the war around Ilium. There are scenes of marriage, of a court dispute about a blood price, of an intercity battle over herds, of gathering the vintage for the king, of the Linus song and youth and maidens in a circle dance that spins like a potter test-spinning his wheel, and then resolves itself into rows. Here is a version:



It is however, inaccurate. Much less pretty, but more useful, is the following schema:



Most extraordinary is the simile Homer deploys to describe the shining impression of the shield as Achilles finally arms himself:

As when out of the sea deep, a gleam appears to sailors
 From a blazing fire, which burns high up in the mountains

In a solitary farmstead; but against their will the storm winds
 Howling over the fish-filled sea, bear them away far from friends:
 So from Achilles' shield the gleam reached the aether,
 A shield both beautiful and cunningly worked. (*Iliad* XIX.375-80)

The dashed hopes of the oarsmen, as they see the light of salvation but are swept back out to sea, seem to reflect on the human idyll wrought on the shield by the god; it is a world never to be known by Achilles, and perhaps a world that is lost simply and forever. But it may also be the world that Homer knows, and serves to offset by contrast the disturbed Trojan times that she depicts. She and her audience share a bond of experience that includes the night sky and civilised life in a nature with its changes, where there are autumns and vintages—that is, not a golden age, in an environment without seasons of dearth. Many of the Homeric similes, that bring the weirdly unfamiliar into comparison with the familiar, draw on scenes from winter. Perhaps then she belongs to the era when the pole was in the Bear, and is not merely singing about it to her audience. But let me stress that poets do not compose in isolation; it is she and her audience who saw that the pole was sometime in the Bear. To say otherwise would be to contemplate a mass delusion.

But did no one in classical times comment on Homer's incongruity with visible reality? It was pointed out to me by my friend van der Sluijs that Strabo in Roman times attempted to save Homer from the obvious charge of blindness, although the lines in question did not seem to trouble the imaginations of Aeschylus, Herodotus, Plato or Aristotle. On this interpretation, the Bear or ἄρκτος refers not to the constellation, but to a region, which we still call the Arctic. In private communication, van der Sluijs defended this interpretation, that it is the 'Arctic circle' that turns about itself. Apparently it offends some who reconstruct ancient chronology in light of comparative mythology and plasma physics, that as allegedly recent a figure as Homer knew a pole somewhere in the Bear. The literal Homeric fact is denied. There are many difficulties with Strabo's apologia, however: the lines clearly refer to well-known constellations; in Greek latitudes—if these signify at all when it comes to Homer—large parts of the Arctic circle set nightly, and so on. But the lie is ultimately given by the use of these lines in the *Odyssey*.

Let me emphasise the sense of 'use'. I shall point in passing to the most salient point of difference I know between the aesthetic sensibilities of the poet of the *Iliad* and the poet of the *Odyssey*. In the *Iliad*, *objets d'art* all involve the adornment of a functional thing. Helen weaves a web and embroiders it with depictions of the battles men have fought over her, a Bayeux



tapestry dedicated by herself to herself (*Iliad* III. 125-28). Andromache, more modest, is embroidering *fleur de lys* on her web, when she hears of her husband Hector's death (XXII.440-1). And of course most extravagant of all

is Achilles' new shield. There is actually a rather funny moment when it takes a spear in battle, and its layers of metal and hide protect the hero. But just imagine: what a nightmare for the art crowd.

In the *Odyssey*, by contrast, there is an almost American aesthetic of pragmatism and function.

Crafted objects are pure of purpose and express their beauty through their usefulness. Where the *Iliad* has the Shield of Achilles, the *Odyssey* has Odysseus' raft, lashed together of timbers that he himself felled—with advice and hardware from Calypso.

There is also his famous bed, fashioned from a tree that is perhaps still alive. He built a bedroom about the bed, and a house about the bedroom. Penelope tricks him into revealing himself by

suggesting that she have the bed moved out of the bedroom so that he might sleep on it, a thing as impossible to do as to shift an axis. In both cases we get detailed, wonderful hexameter lines about the carpentry. Even the waiters made of gold in the fabulous land of Phaeacia, actually serve as waiters. What adornment there is in the *Odyssey* has to do with growing fruitful gardens





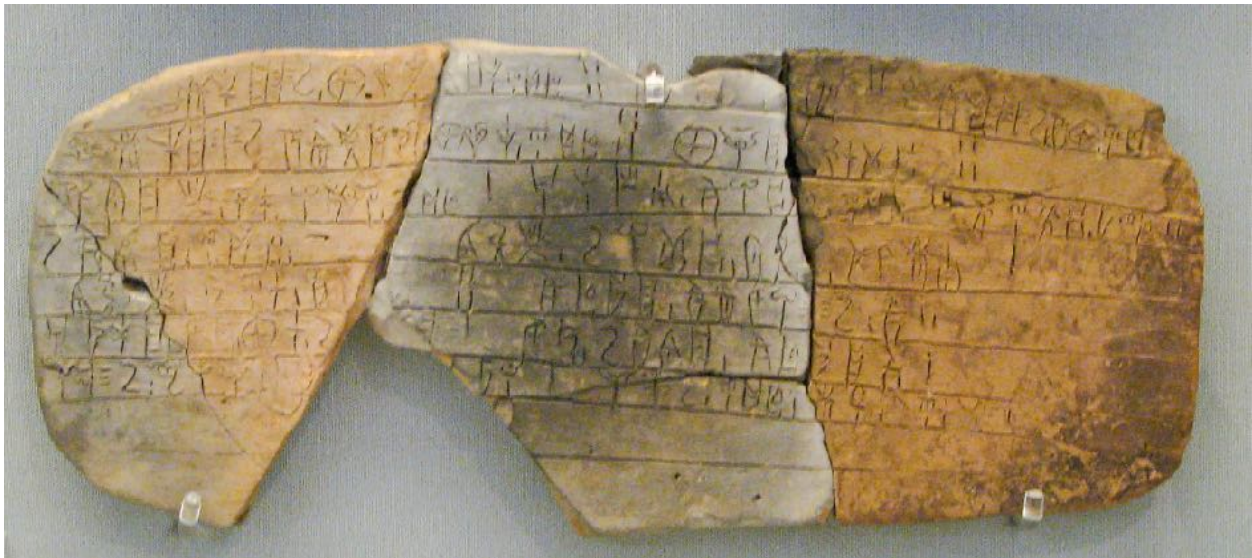
and fencing pig sties. It is impossible for me not to feel a critique of the other poem's view of art in this.

But what does this difference in aesthetic taste and sensibility have to do with the lines about the Bear at the pole, and Strabo's inept attempt at an Arctic interpretation? The lines are reused in the *Odyssey*, because they have an actual *use* there. Calypso advises Odysseus to keep the Bear, alone without a portion in the baths of Ocean, on his left as he sails back towards civilisation. In other words, she tells him to navigate by the Bear. One cannot navigate

by the Arctic Circle. One can only navigate by the pole. Although I am not a sailor by any means, I should think that this is too obvious to require explanation. The pole was in the Bear. So when might this have been?

Homer's Greek is that rarest of things, an actual missing link: the pipe dream of evolutionary biology. It fits in the historical development right in between Mycenaean and archaic Greek. The verbal forms show this most clearly, in exhibiting an intermediate stage in a process where Greek speakers eschewed a sibilant as a stop between vowels. The loss of so-called 'intervocalic sigma', which resulted in the surrounding vowels fusing and contracting, is at an intermediate stage in Homer, where the vowels have not yet contracted but the sigma is all the same not represented in the text. In Mycenaean, the sigma of Indo-European stock is still there; in later Greek the loss of the stop resulted in a fusing of the vowels, so that two syllables became one. The number of syllables and their length have a crucial role in the crafting of metrical (that is, danced) verse. The Mycenaean syllable count was still there, but the sigma (and the more famous digamma) had dropped out in Homer in the 2nd person singular and other forms.

You may remember that all the linguists and philologists knew that Linear B could not possibly be recognisable Greek. This was because they accepted the conventional 2nd millennium date for the Mycenaean era, and trusted their judgement about the pace of a language's development. Velikovsky alone predicted that Linear B was Greek, because of his own chronological synchronisms, before the decipherment was published. But these linguists and philologists went all quiet in the aftermath. They yielded their own judgement to the tyrannical Egyptological



chronology. But they were right in that judgement: Linear B could only be Greek if it was much closer in time to the archaic period than 600 years. I see this sudden silence as a shameful abandonment of the strength of their discipline.

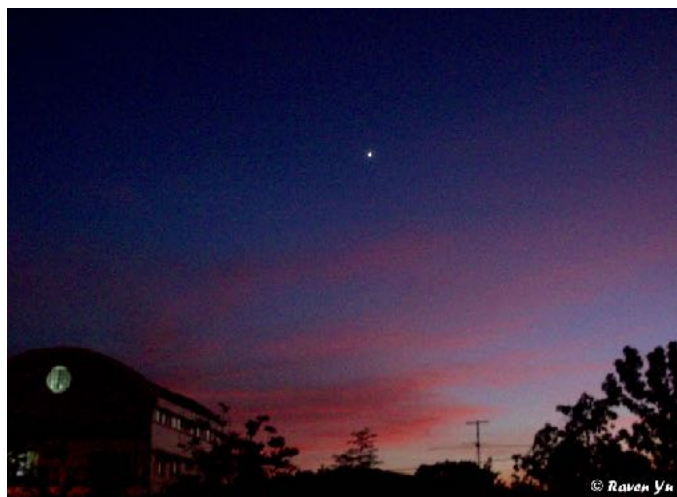
Linear B turned out to be an invaluable tool in the reconstruction of Indo-European; it was itself a missing link between the proto-language and Homeric Greek. Mycenæan, Homeric and archaic Greek succeed each other in relative time, and relatively hard upon each other. Synchronisms are the key to chronology, and Velikovsky offered us synchronism via disparate descriptions of catastrophic events. But linguists and stratigraphists, not to mention art historians, also offer genuine insights into the problem, at least when it comes to relative dates. In the face of puerile scientific attempts at absolute dating, via C14 and other decaying substances, these older methods need to stake their claim. The nature of Homeric Greek is a piece in a puzzle that has yet to be unraveled. It plants a flag as to relative dates. I think it makes impossible the more radical and mathematical schemata that one finds floated, where the war in Troy was, for example, a Mediæval war. But these schemata are of a piece with the number line dating by BCE and CE, initiated in relatively modern times, which seems to have become ingrained in the modern consciousness. The Heinsohn horizon, the suspected global catastrophe that destroyed Rome, and concertinas 700 years of the 1st Millennium, does not affect relative dates, and in fact depends on them in the reasoning.

As for Homeric poetry, as against Homeric Greek, it springs fully formed and perfect into history, like the Old Kingdom Egyptian script, or Athena from the head of Zeus. Things go

downhill from there. Its origins, its traditions, cannot be explained. Here in itself is evidence of strange interventions and catastrophic gulfs that characterise the course of human history, while in our waking sleep we imagine simply that it is 20-something CE.

We are told that the ancient religion was astral, that the planets were gods and the gods were planets. This cannot seriously be disputed by anyone, let alone catastrophists. Hephaestus puts in the sun, the moon and the conspicuous stars,

things whose general regularity help to tell the time. But this Shield is the mirror to the cosmos: where are the planets? We live in an age when people don't generally notice the planets, even Venus at elongation, so no one remarks on this omission in the artwork of the Shield. Even St. Augustine lived in an age when the planets didn't do anything, and so he made fun of planet-



worshippers. But it should be noted, that any representation that includes the sun, moon and stars, ought also to include the planets, those most conspicuous wanderers, unless not only Homer but his audience was blind. This would be true even if the planets were not active and fearsome. Venus and Jupiter are today brighter than any star.

One perhaps obvious thing to note is that it is Hephaestus who is making the image; one presumes he is a god-planet; and his artistic focus is on capturing the pastoral human, as well as the heaven that serves as a backdrop not just for the human scene but for himself and his kind. Planets are planets, wanderers, in relation to what is fixed, and the portent of fixedness in human experience has been the celestial star sphere. It is the gods that alter; the rhythms of the sun and moon, the diurnal and annual rotations, and the rhythms of harvest, conflict, and marriage in the

human realm remain and reemerge. So he and his kind are not part of that picture.

There is a curious moment, however, in one of the vignettes Hephaestus builds into the shield. There is a city besieged. The details are not completely clear; sometimes it is hard to tell to which army the pronouns refer. But the city's men march out:

...

and it was indeed Ares who led them, and Pallas Athena,
Both of them gold, and they wore golden clothing,
Beautiful and grand in their armour—seeing as they were gods, after all—
Conspicuous all round. The people beneath were smaller. (*Iliad* XVIII.516-19,)

Here at last are the planets. But they are gods in a sense that extends Heinsohn's thesis: fully fledged here is the representation as a mimetic persona. Heinsohn focuses on the god-king or priest-king, who becomes the victorious cosmic agent and vanquishes the sacrificial victim, himself become the loser in a ritual theatre of the catastrophic cosmic struggle. But at least in Greece, this transference appears to extend to the statue, or the wearer of the mask on a stage. As the Hindus still say, the statue is not an icon, but the god in repose. These golden totems, not larger than life but larger than human life, are Ares and Athena. It is possible that Hephaestus is merely following an artist's convention, humanised, armed and tall—'seeing as they were gods, after all'—and that it is the sky gods who are being represented in this way; their being made of gold could merely be a mention of the material he used to distinguish the divine figures. But truth can be stranger than fiction. Herodotus tells a tale, which embarrasses him for what it says about the Greeks' otherwise imperious intellect, about how Pisistratus the tyrant of Athens retook the city for a second time by entering it with a very tall Paeonian woman posing in armour in his chariot. The word went round that Athena herself was backing his return—and the stratagem worked! (*History* 1.60) The Athenians offered prayers to the woman, and accepted the tyrant. So however it was contrived, in the artwork or in life, golden anthropomorphic images of Ares and Athena are depicted on the Shield as leading the troops.

The epic style of representation is manifest in other figures who enter the fray: Strife, Rout and baneful Death. It is said that they commingled with the fighters as though they were living mortals. The only reason these concepts are capitalised as proper names is that they are explicitly personified in the art. But I think we again need to extend Heinsohn's insight into the function of this *mimesis*. The explicit humanising of dreadful forces was also an artistic as well as a ritual mechanism. Human figures take on the roles not only of the planets but of their forces, and other

abstractions besides, as in a Mediæval morality play. The terrific power of this mimetic representation seems still to have impressed Plato; indeed his *Republic* seems in large part to be an attempt to break free from its power, to free the mind of its unconscious but coercive effects.



Persons are different from personifications, however. In the war at Troy Ares and Athena are manifestly on opposing sides, Athena with the Achaeans, Ares with the Trojans. Neither of their names are transparent as Greek. I have never understood how cosmic figures in conflict in the common sky could be seen to be choosing human sides. But the fact remains that one immediate response to such celestial battle was human migration and war, including exodus, where different peoples believed that one or the other of the combatants was their champion, and that the direction of their champion's motion was to be a guide to the travel. The Romans were Martians and the Athenians were—well. But what I infer from this part of the picture is that only two gods, and so only two planets, were perceived to be potent enough to lead men into war, in the era that Homer and Hephaestus describe. Zeus or Jupiter was king, but he does not get a spot on the shield; this was the era of Ares and Athena, known also as Mars and Venus. Aphrodite was also involved. De Grazia identifies her with the moon. In the *Iliad's götterdämmerung*, Aphrodite comes to the aid of Ares, and both end up horizontal, floored upon the earth by a mocking Athena. In the *Odyssey* as well, Ares and Aphrodite end up horizontal, but there they are trapped in bed by the cunning fine plasma web of the cuckolded Hephaestus. If one looks to the structural elements, played in one case for tragedy and the other for comedy, it is possible that the same event is being described. This would also buttress the idea that Hephaestus was an alter ego of Athena.

But in the war among the gods, they are separate agents. In Book XX of the *Iliad*, Zeus has Themis call together all the gods and nymphs and rivers—excepting Ocean, it should be noted—to a gathering on Olympus. If Olympus is the great plasma column, as some believe, what this



might mean when it comes to the nymphs of wood, spring and meadow, and the rivers, is not entirely clear. He is afraid that the rage of the bereft Achilles will cause an early destruction of Ilium, 'beyond fate.' So for some reason his policy is to sit still himself, but to set on all the others to descend and take sides in the conflict. So they line up against each other, championing the Achaeans or the Trojans: Poseidon versus Apollo, Athena against Enyalios, Hera against Artemis, identified as Apollo's sister, Leto against Hermes, and Hephaestus against the river Scamander, whom the gods call Xanthus. It is difficult, if perhaps intriguing, to see this visceral display as some sort of meta-combat of alter egos.

The battle among the gods comes close to upsetting the order of the world. This is a peculiar world that has been divided between three brothers by sky, earth and underworld, where the dispensations go to Zeus, Poseidon and the invisible one, Hades. This dispensation may be peculiar to the Homeric era. Certainly Poseidon has a more ancient pedigree, and I believe that this is reflected in the *Odyssey*, but that is matter for a different argument. (The Velikovskian community does not help me to identify Poseidon. His name in Greek, Ποσειδῶν [this is Eric Hamp's re-construction, given in class in Chicago], bespeaks a connection to Δαῖς-μητὴρ or Demeter, who represents a stratum of divinity that is either non- or pre-Olympian.) Hades is highly worried that his world will be exposed to the light, because of the tumult caused by the battle among the gods. It almost happens.

The ‘almost’ is key. There is a striking and recurrent motif we have already met with, particular to the composition of the *Iliad* but not to epic—and hence an actual motif—that things would have happened ‘beyond fate,’ ὑπέρμωρον, had not such and such a one intervened. (The word translated ‘fate,’ μόρος, is the same word used in the phrase that the Bear has no ‘portion’ in the baths of Ocean.) Examples are numerous. It is an aesthetic affect of the way the story is told, a kind of serial cliffhanger. But nothing ever happens ‘beyond fate’ in the *Iliad*; one is always led to the brink, and let off. The river Xanthus almost overwhelms Achilles, but is prevented at the last moment. This is part of the affect the composer is seeking, a buildup of tension and anxiety about something that is on the verge of happening, but that is finally relieved by a non-event.

In the opening speech of the *Odyssey*, on the other hand, Zeus declares that Aegisthus has murdered Agamemnon on his return home, ‘beyond fate.’ Beyond fate. This immediately changes the terms of the transaction between poet and audience in the later poem, as to what might be possible and expected to happen. It is a most unsettling change, that cuts the moorings out from one who navigates by the *Iliad*. Literally, anything goes.

But there may be a significance here for the catastrophist historian as well. The *Iliad* certainly portrays a cosmos in tumult, but it is the destruction and the threat of it that drives the narrative, not the fact of an alteration in the bearings of the cosmos. There is, however, reason to believe that something actually changes in the cosmos in the *Odyssey*. If one steps back from the narrative, the way that comparativists are wont to do, and we have done, the homecoming of Odysseus is a terrific catastrophe. The narrative is of course on the hero’s side. But the return of Odysseus, literally ‘he who pisses people off,’ is the return of an epic monster to the streets of Poughkeepsie. It results in the decimation of the flower of the masculine youth of Ithaca and the surrounding islands, killed in his house by the arrows of a sort of Apollo. His son Telemachus is a mundane fetishist and penny-pincher who belongs in our world, not the world of his father’s comrades. A simply awful boy.

The reunion with Penelope is a conjunction; one must intend the astronomical sense. Often the female figures who take Odysseus’ interest descend a stair, and stand by a pillar when they talk. (A nod for this observation to my friend Jack Melsheimer.) This is an Odyssean motif. They seem to be some sort of axial figures who also seat themselves by the hearth. This includes Nausicaa and Penelope. But the most extravagant axial figure is surely Calypso, with whom Odysseus is ensconced at the beginning of the poem. She is the daughter of Atlas, he who holds

the pillars that separate the very earth and sky. The Titanic figures seem to be embedded within the Homeric world, still potent as kinds of natural forces or laws, but subservient to the new political triumvirate that I mentioned, of Zeus, Poseidon and Hades, along with the other Olympians. Calypso is banished to solitary confinement on an island at the navel of the world, so that (one presumes) she cannot bear offspring. Thetis



was supposed to bear the successor to Zeus, according to external stories; that is why she was married off to Peleus. Perhaps that is also why Achilles has an existential indignation, that he was meant to be the ruler of the cosmos, not an hybrid primate who feels his weight. He is a proto-Hamlet.

Odysseus returns to Penelope after nineteen years. There is a suggestion here of the Metonic cycle, which still holds for the sun and moon. And there is a clarion description of an eclipse, in the form of a vision by the odd little seer Theoclymenus, who foretells in gory detail the demise of Penelope's suitors as the sky darkens. But for what it's worth, I favour the idea that the conjunction involved is between Mars and the moon, rather than moon and sun. This is de Grazia's reading of the love affair between Ares and Aphrodite. Helios is there to keep watch for Hephaestus, to let him know that Ares has got himself in the back door. Odysseus is supposed to arrive home at the *λυκάβας*, a word that the ancients did not know how to translate. The lexica suggest 'this year' or at the 'going of the light.' I hear in it the 'passage of the wolf.' Perhaps the wolf was an apparition of Mars. But I am unclear on the role that catastrophists ascribe to Mercury at this time. Let it be said that when Hephaestus traps Ares and Aphrodite in his bed, Hermes, Apollo and Poseidon all come to see the embarrassing scene. It is hard to identify these players, but the Homeric evidence seems to insist that they were separate agents. Some reconstructive theorists conflate these three: Hermes, Apollo, and Ares. Homer does not. But perhaps it should be noted that it is Hermes and Apollo who engage in locker room talk, willing to suffer Ares' fate if they could but sleep with Aphrodite. Is this what one should expect, in the

fantasy-life of an alter ego?

The steeds of the sun are restrained from rising by Athena, so that Odysseus and Penelope may enjoy a lengthened night of storytelling—and whatever else needed doing between them. Nothing like this happens in the world at war around Ilium. It is a datum that perhaps synchronises with the impossible story about Joshua. If it is the same event, then this places the action of the *Odyssey* in a region of the planet that was in the dark of night while the sun shone at Jericho.

Bear in mind that there is no real provenance for the stories told by Homer. Only the language of the poetry was Greek. Most of the proper names of the human or hybrid protagonists cannot be parsed in Greek, whereas Classical Greek names are generally transparent. Plato's name, for example, is likely a wrestling-school nickname for a boy with a thick penis. The usual solution is to postulate a lost indigenous population whose habits of naming persevered; this is after all the way that North American rivers kept their names. People seem to have a feeling about not messing with the names of rivers, in contrast with airports and streets. Physical rivers seem to survive cosmic catastrophes, just as their names survive human invasions. Many names of Greek cities have no Greek meaning. It is possible that the Homeric poems came first, and that the names of a desolate and decimated region, mainland and islands, were named after the epic story the new settlers brought with them, just as the landscape of America is filled with European names amongst native ones. The difficulties locating the cities mentioned in Homer's Catalogue of Ships become easier to understand, if the places were named for the poems rather than the other way around. The Greeks themselves speak an Indo-European language, but it is not closely related to the languages of any of their Indo-European neighbours. It is its own family, to stretch the concept of a language family. There is an untold story there, about the provenance of the Hellenic speakers, for all that their speech was already highly localised when they appear on the historical stage. Homer is well-known for plundering all the local dialects for word forms.

Both poems seem to remember, however, that the pole was in the Bear. So if there was a shift, it happened after or during the event that marks Odysseus and Penelope's reunion in that bed. Now, Velikovsky cites lines from Seneca's *Thyestes*, which describe the descent of the Bear from its vaulted place at the pole. Velikovsky seems not to have been aware of the repeated lines from Homer. That this event may have happened in the time of Thyestes, generally thought to be the generation before Agamemnon and the war at Troy and the homecomings, will be confusing to those who believe that there is such a thing as 'mythology' for the classical Greeks. To be sure,

the word is Greek, it is actually coined by Homer, but the literary genre that has become a dried out staple of modern classical exposure has its origin in the Hellenistic period. What we have in the Greek mythic legacy are poets, who wrote poems, as the authorities when it came to myth. Herodotus says that Homer and Hesiod told the Greek speakers everything they knew about the gods. Mythology is a late and failed attempt to bring order to the Greek stories told or implied by the Greek poems, as the Bible was to its literary inheritance. To see this failure one need only ask the mythologist, did Agamemnon have a daughter named Iphigeneia? Homer says no. Did he kill her, sacrificed like Isaac, in a civilisation's foundational act? Yes sir, says Aeschylus. Did she actually survive the attempted sacrifice? Why not, says Euripides. The matter stands this way: the pole was in the Bear during the Homeric era. Homer is our authority, not the Roman Seneca, or Velikovsky for that matter.

The era of the Polar Bear does indeed become a problem for chronologists once the Homeric evidence is weighed. Seneca was no doubt imitating a Greek original in that tragedy of *Thyestes*. Perhaps one should revisit what Velikovsky said about the Argive tyrants, whom he thinks left us the Mycenaean citadels. Thyestes was one of these. The records left from that era, because they



were on tablets baked in an atmospheric conflagration, contain the Linear B that was used by Greek-speaking accountants. Their lists and records may well have played a prosaic role in the origin of epic poetry, with its memory anchored in genealogies and catalogues. Linear A, the aristocratic script which was also on those tablets, has not yet been deciphered.

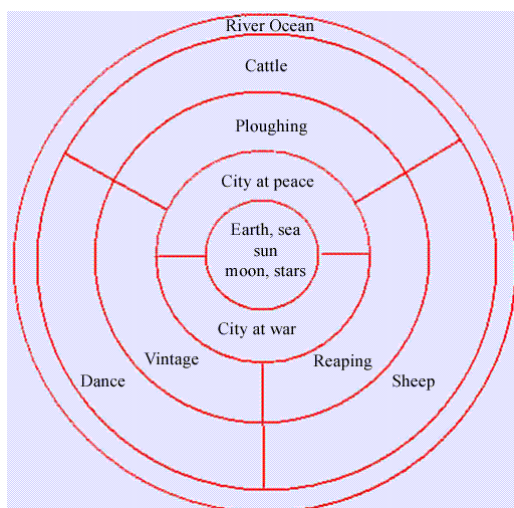
Perhaps it was the mysterious

Etruscans, who suddenly appeared fully formed in Italy, in the aftermath of the conflagration, who abandoned these citadels. Unfortunately I do not think there is enough data about Etruscan to contribute to a decipherment of Linear A. And there is even less data in this region of the earth, or the Dardanelles, to link them to the location of any actual Trojan War of the type described by Homer. But there are other geographical candidates.

The end of Homer's interlude about the Shield of Achilles reads like this:

And he put in the river, the great might of Ocean
By the outermost rim of the shield, close-packed in its making.

We encounter this concept of ‘Ocean’ several times in the narration of the Shield. First is in the line about the Bear having no part in the baths of Ocean. Homer has already said that Hephaestus has put in the sea (θάλασσα), and generally these two are taken to be synonymous. Previously Hephaestus had spoken about the stream of Ocean encircling the cave which hid him, after he had been cast out by Hera. The Ocean stream there seemed to help with the concealment, which was not only from the other gods but from mankind as well. I have heard different theories about this Ocean stream. A favourite is that Homer is a proto-pre-Socratic: the stream is the Heraclitean flux, the Sea of Becoming from which all things spring.

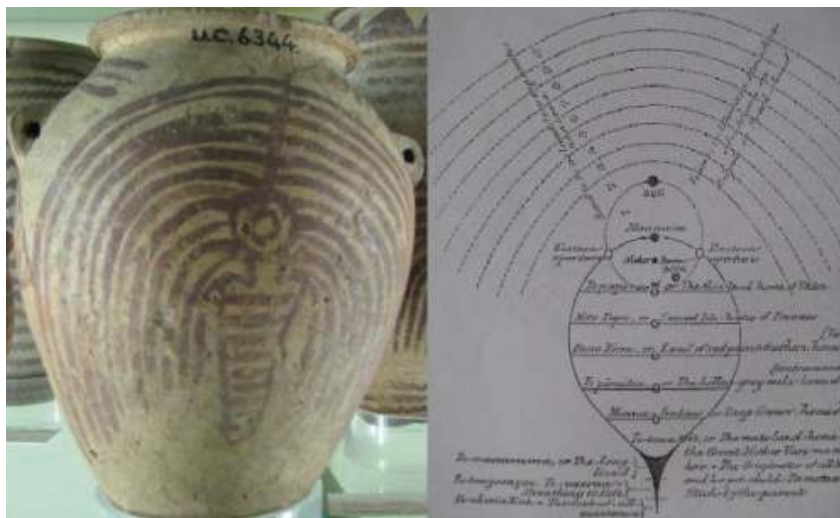


But what is this river literally? It is not the sea. There is no sea at the outermost rim of the world. It is a ring. It is in motion, it literally flows, like an aurora but with a direction, so it seemed to be fluid and a river; this is the cinematic wonder of the Shield; but it is also the outermost ring in a work of art that encompasses the cosmos. I am not aware of such a fluid apparition in the cornucopia of modern astronomical observations. Even Saturn’s rings are discrete upon inspection; they braid in marvelous ways, but they cannot be said to flow. The ring was in visible motion, some kind of plasma doughnut perhaps. I wonder if it might be

related to the zodiacal light, which was still visible in the 19th Century, a century highly active with comets in a way that makes our times seem barren. Perhaps there are times when the heliopause, in the plane of the solar discharge or wind, goes into ‘glow’ mode, excited by whatever it is that powers the whole system.

Jno Cook has written most instructively about the *Absu* or *Abyss*, which he takes to be a set of particulate rings that once encircled the earth. He suggests that wave-like forms, which have been observed in the case of Saturn’s rings, may have made earth’s rings look like a vast sea in the sky. (See, e.g., J. Cook, *Recovering the Lost World*, Bk. 1 Ch. 5) This idea is perhaps compatible with Homer’s depiction of the river Ocean. One issue has to do with the all-

encompassing nature of the ring. A ring around the earth, where the fixed stars were still visible as on the Shield, should not be thought to be all-encompassing, whether it was opaque or transparent. The worldwide iconography that Cook draws on suggests that the *Absu-*



Duat-Abyss of rings would have obscured the southern horizon on a given night. But the stars reemerge daily; hence they ought to have been thought to be outermost. But they entered this ring, all except the Bear, as though stepping into a bath. Perhaps they seemed to emerge cleansed, fading as they approached the object but later reappearing elsewhere fresh and bright. This appearance might suggest that the River Ocean was an outermost, generative thing. Appearances on Galle Face Green in Ceylon once upon a time suggested to me that the sun sank into the ocean, and that the world was quite flat.

Achilles declares in a vaunt over the fallen son of a river that he was descended from Zeus, mightier even than Deep-Flowing Ocean. He says that all rivers and ‘every sea’ (θάλασσα), all springs and wells have their source in Ocean (*Iliad* XXI.166-9). In other words, he thought this Ocean stream was the source of all the water on the earth. Perhaps this was almost literally correct. The breakdown of a plasma instability is not different in nature from a cloudburst. An electric stimulus that disrupted the ring of material could be expected to produce copious amounts of fresh electrochemical water in our environment. Achilles adds that even Ocean was afraid of Zeus’ lightning when it crashed down from heaven. Because of the gnomic, declarative quality of his statement one may speculate that an electric discharge from Jupiter, disrupting the form of the Ocean Ring, and perhaps producing a torrent of rain, had at least once been a witnessed event.

The detected presence of water (along with hydroxyl) in the coma of a comet, whose silicate surface ‘sputters’ oxygen in the solar wind current of hydrogen ions, contributes in the astronomical mainstream to an unfortunate abductive reasoning with respect to its source. (The

water is supposed to come from within the comet rather than in the electrochemical interactions that produce the coma.) Such pure iced water has been observed recently dribbled on a comet's surface. It is much more likely to be a precipitate from the coma rather than a leakage from a rock, and this may be true also of a portion of the earth's fresh water. The origin of the earth's salt water is another matter; it is not yet explainable in uniformitarian terms. One of the words we translate from Homer as 'sea' is ἄλς: salt. The chlorine in this compound does not come from the geosphere.

While Ocean is the ultimate source of all the still and flowing bodies of water, it seems that he alone among them has no human children. He is a ring disconnected from the earth; it would seem that even if he is to be a parent of water sources, he must precipitate under the electrochemical action of cosmic lightning. What does it mean, however, to be the son of a river? I have never understood this. It happens often in people's ancestry. Homer is as explicit as his modest language allows. The couple literally 'mix with' each other; in a similar way, we speak of 'intercourse'. Perhaps what is referred to, is illicit liaisons by a river. If a noble daughter slept with a buff shepherd secluded on the river bank, this may have been a way to explain the pregnancy: the river did it. Odysseus fishes up naked and exhausted from a river, only to meet Nausicaa. But there is no nod and a wink among the descendants. Asteropaeus, the man over whom Achilles makes his boast, is proud of his ancestry. He is one generation removed from a grandmother who lay with, or was laid by, a river, the handsome Asius.

Perhaps something less obvious is meant; I do not trust that all the circumstances that can cause pregnancy are things we apprehend. De Grazia points out how few are the generations to which the heroes of the *Iliad* can point in their ancestry. Armour and sceptres are handed down, not crafted in the smithy. The means of production are not part of this world; the warriors drive used cars and wear hand-me-down armour. Agamemnon's kingly sceptre is said to have been re-gifted amongst the gods, once Hephaestus had manufactured it for Zeus; but after it is given to the mortal Pelops, it has finally passed to his grandson Agamemnon. There is no memory of an human generation prior to his grandfather. This is the common story. Some fairly recent upheaval clearly divides the Iliadic era from a preceding one, in which its valuable equipment was made.

Perhaps one can speculate about an electrical or radioactive environment around this catastrophe; apart from the obvious human decimation and general social chaos, one of its effects may have been a spontaneity in pregnancy, where the rivers themselves express, or in fact repress and contour, the flow of unimaginable telluric currents. Non-conductive fresh water rivers would

have acted as buffers between zones of opposite charge. While I do not here advance a theory, it is not simple parthenogenesis that I have in mind. Electrical inducement of parthenogenesis in higher mammals has been documented, but the nascent embryos are not viable; it appears that a second set of genetic material is essential at a certain stage. Mary is said to have been made pregnant by the Holy Spirit. The role of electricity in many aspects of biological development seems to be a burgeoning study. Amidst catastrophe and heightened radiation, many forms of life may have experienced a male agency. As they say in *Jurassic Park*, Nature finds a way. This is meant at the literal level. It is not yet possible to study the effects on human meiosis in these environments. What is required is something that can perform the function of the deformed y-chromosome, so that a male child results, in other ways a clone of his mother. The sexualising y-chromosome is the most obvious example of a degenerative mutation in the human genome. (We only hear of ‘sons’ of rivers in Homer.) The matter-of-fact way in which Homer treats sex with, and descent from, a freshwater river, calls forth this more-or-less literal interpretation, no doubt expensively for many.



When he attended to the Grand Canyon, Michael Steinbacher came to think that the river came first. The Colorado left no delta or excavated material. There is literally no evidence that it gradually eroded a canyon, and plenty that it didn't. But it served as a physical barrier to the tornadic vortices producing solid rock out of dusty plasma and piling up layers of material into its stupendous banks, which are the canyon walls. The Grand Canyon is neither an eroded thing

nor a simple electrical scar. Consider this video of an experiment performed by Billy Yelverton, at Steinbacher's behest: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CWMAe9zM-JA>. The flowing fresh water meanders between the electrodes, while the suspended dust forms a canyon as it encounters the river from both sides.



A later passage about the Scamander (*Iliad XXI*) serves as one of the greatest challenges to the literal reading of Homer. Achilles routs the Trojans, choking the river with their corpses. Xanthus complains mightily to the hero that his course to the sea is being dammed by the bodies. Why not do the decent thing and drive the Trojans on to the plain and kill them there? Achilles gives him the finger. It is said that he jumps into the river's midst—perhaps

that means into the water—but it is not clear that he gets wet. He is not, after all, dressed for swimming. He keeps killing Trojans and the river has had enough: he rushes at him, and casts the corpses onto the land, while somehow preserving those still alive within and beneath his eddies. The river then stands up as a dreadful wave swollen around or on both sides of Achilles: the scene is so surreal as to recall the passage of the Israelites through the Red Sea. The stream



rushes and falls upon the Shield that Hephaestus made; hence from above; he is dry and underneath his shield. How to picture this? Achilles cannot keep his feet, he grabs a mighty elm which rips out from the root and serves to dam the river, while Achilles leaps out and sprints away in a panic.



But the river does not let up: he pursues Achilles and floods the war plain, harassing him from above, until Achilles begs help from his divine allies. Xanthus calls on his brother the river Simoīs, the other great river of Troyland, also to rise up in counter-flood, amidst a torrent of trees and erratic rocks, so that they may bury Achilles under the whole plain in shingle and sand, sepulchred in peat. The threat remains unfulfilled, which is the Iliadic affect, but the vision

should represent familiar topology to a modern geologist. Such terrain replete with erratic boulders was more efficiently caused by sudden and immense flood, it is suggested, than by slow-moving glaciers.

Finally Hephaestus is summoned to take on his prescribed enemy Xanthus—recall they were matched off in the Battle of the Gods—and Hera instructs her son to rouse dangerous winds from the west and south, from over the sea, driving an evil fire before them to burn the trees and attack the river himself. This is how the battle ends: the Scamander is literally aflame.



This is a massive deadly flood that litters a battle plain with corpses, while some chosen fragment of humanity manages to survive, apparently by the water's grace; while the catastrophe by flood is followed hard upon by a catastrophe by fire, where *water* is attacked by a fearsome atmospheric conflagration, and *fire wins*. It would seem that the airburst caused by Hephaestus—who may be an alter ego of Athena—results in a rain of naphtha. Here it seems to me the

catastrophic event that underlies the humanising transformation through mimetic agency and role-switching, is barely concealed. A god named Xanthus who caused a deadly flood is become a local river named Scamander who somehow saves the survivors. The real agent of that human destruction, instead of the river, becomes the man newly costumed in armour, Achilles—also human, albeit a divine hybrid. A god Hephaestus, anthropomorphised, sends an atmosphere on



fire that can set a river ablaze—from over the watery sea, no less—which is supposed to *save* our Achilles. In some ways it has become a catastrophe littered with salvation.

We are not here reading Homer allegorically. Nor are we reading her strictly literally. In looking at and exposing what the narrative in this passage really says, including in the unfulfilled threat-wish of a destructive river, we come to a concretion that can point the way toward *what really happened*. There is not the distance between narrative and meaning that exists in allegory, nor is there the formal proportion between them, as in an analogy or simile; rather, the purposeless catastrophic fact is fused into a concretion by a humanised narrative that is replete with will and thwarted will. One wonders what effect such a telling might intend, or might have been meant to intend, for those who remembered what the events really were, who perhaps even survived them with the loss of nine out of ten. Perhaps there is the empowerment that fuels narrative at all levels, from the conceit that agency and will, including human agency and will, play a significant part in the tapestry that is woven to become fate and *fait accompli*. This empowerment is perhaps therapeutic even for those survivors of Hiroshima who watched Godzilla movies. At our distance we can simply admire the extraordinary imaginative achievement of Homer's poetry. Aesthetic rapture is the remnant of that therapeutic achievement that is *our* pleasure. It is therapy for



amnesiacs.

Post-Newtonian science seems to treat cosmology as a solved thing, and yet almost every single new observation comes as a surprise to gravitational theorists. They prepare rhetorical ways to link parts of any new observations to the sanctioned theory, and ignore the rest. (I am speaking here of their press releases.) The varieties of plasma phenomena, however, need to be observed before they can even begin to be analysed. (Yelverton is a pioneer in such inductive work.) In this respect plasma physics seems closer to zoology than to mathematical physics. It is impossible to take in all the data, in this or many lifetimes. But catastrophists and the Electric Universe movement find a rich resource of observation and measurement in the records and storytelling traditions of countless generations of humans from all over the planet. At the heart of this treasure are the world's epic poems. The comparative method can extract data from this epic and iconic treasury about things that are no longer observable, at least at close range. Epic literature, however, demands many levels of interpretation at a direct, non-comparative level. One needs to be able to be able to read things



before one can compare them, and one must be able to compare things before one can sort them,

and one must be able to sort things, as apples and oranges, before one can count them. This is the hierarchy of learning and understanding that makes mathematical physics last in the sequence, and makes it in any sense possible. Reading comes first. And so we have attempted the most basic and yet novel kind of interpretation of Homer: to take literally the meaning of the Shield of Achilles, from its outermost ring to its depiction of the Polar Bear and a human idyll, which is actually the work of a divine smith's art, which is literally an episode or interlude in a poem in epic verse.

The Muse remembers. That is why there is epic verse. She remembers the complete horror of catastrophe by means of a transformative, imaginative, anthropomorphising process. Thus remembering and amnesia are a Janus coin. Very likely there used to be something therapeutic in the result, something more than the aesthetic catharsis that Homer's readers still experience. But a backstory and a spine in literal truth are always there. The pole was in the Bear. Hybrid men of renown walked and did battle on the earth in pursuit of their Helen; the planets collided while forces conceived as feminine guarded the hearth and the axis. Perhaps even the bucolic life of mankind, turning with the seasons and the generations, was sometime a thing to try to remember. Maybe the Muse can be heeded in a new way, that does not treat the literal prejudicially in favour of more sophisticated readings. Perhaps she should be taken literally.



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