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1. The gods in Homer: further considerations

In two vital aspects, early Greek epic poetry exactly reflects the nature of Greek religion as far back as it can be known. The system is polytheistic, as in nearly all other ancient societies, with Zeus as merely the mightiest member of the divine family; and the gods are regarded as anthropomorphic. Both facets of this system have important moral implications, which first appear in Homer but pervade all Greek literature. The prehistory of 'Homeric religion' was discussed above (vol. ii, 1–14), where it was shown that the Greeks tended to elevate and humanize the Mesopotamian beliefs which they largely adopted. Here I will focus on the literary and moral dimensions of these beliefs, and how they are reshaped for the poetic purposes of the Iliad.¹

(i) The literary and religious aims of Homer's innovations

Like any Greek poet, Homer had the right to adapt myths as he wished, within the wide limits of the traditions he inherited. As Griffin has shown,² he de-emphasizes their bizarre and magical aspects, plays up their potential for humour and tragedy, and above all stresses his gods' human nature: they are exactly like us save for their greater power and knowledge, and their freedom from age and death (they can still alter their location and shape at will, but Homer avoids vouching in his own persona for their more bizarre metamorphoses). He widens the gulf between mortal and immortal, which not even Herakles or Akhilleus can cross; even the more optimistic Odyssey vividly depicts the insubstantiality of the souls in Hades, barely alluding to tales that Menelaos and Herakles enjoyed a better afterlife. In the Cycle mortals became gods far more readily: Athene nearly immortalized Tudeus, Dawn gained immortality for her son Memnon and Thetis conveyed Akhil-

¹ For excellent treatments of this topic and bibliography see Whitman, HHT 221–48; Lesky, RE Suppl. xi (1968) s.v. Homeros, 725–40; Griffin, HLD 81ff.; Erbse, Götter. For background Burkert, Religion is indispensable.
² JHS 97 (1977) 39–53.
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leus to the White Isle. But in Homer even Zeus can do no better than grant his own son Sarpedon a heroic burial and, it is implied, a lasting hero-cult. It is telling that at *Erga* 143ff. Hesiod blends both ideas: his race of bronze perishes in internecine strife and goes to Hades, whereas the ‘heroes who are called demigods’ perish likewise but go to the ‘isles of the blessed’ (i.e. ‘of the gods’). Homer’s dead live out an eternal death under the earth, thirsty for offerings of blood (just as the Olympians above relish the smoke of sacrifices), but devoid of even human powers. Ancient rituals known to Aeschylus, like the mutilation of a murdered man to keep him from taking revenge, or his kinsmen’s summoning of aid from the underworld, confirm that other ideas of the afterlife were current. Again, Homer has clarified the world-view of his tradition, to stress that, when life is gone, it is gone for ever.

The paradoxical result is that, precisely by widening the chasm between mortal and immortal, Homer exalts the dignity and responsibility of human beings, placed between god and beast and potentially sharing the natures of both. We may attain divine achievements, with the aid of the gods themselves, but not a divine existence. The here and now, for all the prevalence of adversity over happiness, is the only life we have, and we must make the best of it. Unlike the gods' moral choices, human ones are not trivial, since they can have results fatal for oneself or others, whereas gods cannot truly suffer. Again it is Griffin who has shown how Homer exploits the gods' interactions with mortals as a metaphor for, and a guide to, the response of the human audience. Divine spectators may dignify the battle below by deeming it worth watching, and may glorify a warrior by aiding him: thus it enhances Akhilleus' victory when Athene helps him kill Hektor. Divine involvement is a major sign of the significance of an event and of how we should view it. Conversely, when the gods turn away, bored by the trivial squabbling of these ephemeral creatures, the bloodshed gains in pathos. The gods' unknowability to the characters creates irony, their irresistible power evokes fear, their frivolous irresponsibility arouses humour, their deliberations and plots excite suspense, and their effortless superiority yields a truly tragic pathos. The gods' actions are thus used to evoke the whole range of emotions which Aristotle has taught us to expect from great literature.

It was traditional to ascribe to divine agency any otherwise inexplicable event, like a spear missing its mark, a bowstring breaking, the amazing skill of a warrior, speaker, poet or artisan, and even a sudden feeling or thought. In everyday life one could rarely specify the god concerned, and thus spoke of a θεός, θεϊ or δαιμόν, just as someone who speaks or acts oddly is ad-

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dressed as δαιμόνια; only seers or other gifted persons could state which god was involved and what must be done in consequence. Homer's heroes can even doubt whether a god has intervened, and cannot recognize particular deities, whatever shape they take, unless they let themselves be perceived – Athene has to lift the mist from Diomedes' eyes so that he can tell men from gods (5.127ff.). It takes a Kalkhas to diagnose Apollo's wrath at 1.93ff. But the bard claims a special vision, and can always say which deity is involved, showing us the world through the eyes of the gods themselves.

(ii) 'Double motivation' and human responsibility

Even aside from obvious favouritism, like Athene's dealings with Diomedes in the Iliad and with Odysseus in the Odyssey, many divine interventions in Homer appear artificial to modern readers. What is one to make of, for example, how Aphrodite forces Helen to go to bed with Paris even when Helen is disgusted by his conduct in the duel with Menelaos (3.383ff.)? Is this a mere externalization of normal human feeling – although enraged at Paris, Helen still finds him irresistibly attractive? When Athene appears to Akhilleus at 1.194ff., is this merely an objectification of prudent second thoughts? Such cases have led many to doubt the reality of the gods for the poet and his audience, and to deem them just a manner of speaking or a useful poetic convention. The view, advanced by B. Snell and prevalent until recently, that early epic has no concept of the whole personality, and objectifies mental processes as the noos, thumos and so forth, might seem to find a perfect parallel here; instead of a person's thumos or phrenes, passion or reason, taking the decision, a god decides. But it was always risky to base a complex psychological theory on the loose but conveniently extended set of overlapping terms by which the tradition described mental processes, as Lloyd-Jones has shown; and the poet always makes clear that the god physically exists. When Aphrodite breaks Paris' chin-strap so that Menelaos cannot drag him off to his death, this could be ascribed to chance; but not so her next action, Paris' bodily removal to Helen's room in Troy. Athene, equally physically, tugs Akhilleus' hair; objectified prudence might well persuade, but could not pull hair. So why does Athene urge Akhilleus to do what, given his portrayal elsewhere in the poem, he would be likely

5 Cf. Lloyd-Jones, Justice of Zeus 10; Griffin, HLD 144ff.
7 Justice of Zeus 9; cf. Griffin, HLD 144ff.; Bremmer, Soul; Fowler, Lyric 4ff.
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to do anyway, i.e. refrain from killing his commander-in-chief? And why is Aphrodite needed to make Helen yield to what is clearly a recurrent weakness for Paris?

The answer, formulated by Lesky, lies in the idea of 'double motivation' or 'overdetermination'; gods and men cause the same actions and impulses simultaneously, and both can be held responsible. In his 'apology' Agamemnon saves face by stating that a like misfortune once befall Zeus himself; thereupon he offers full restitution, 'since I suffered atē and Zeus took away my wits' (19.86ff., 137ff.). On the same pattern, Aphrodite's coercion matches Helen's desires in a psychological framework that is all too familiar, Akhilleus is already debating inwardly whether to kill Agamemnon (1.188ff.), and we understand why he is loth to do so, despite the provocation he has received. It is a remarkable paradox that nearly every important event in the Iliad is the doing of a god, and that one can give a clear account of the poem's entire action with no reference to the gods at all.

Let Patroklos' death serve as a further example. Who is responsible? Patroklos himself, who was so swept away by his victory over Sarpedon that he ignored Akhilleus' warnings? Akhilleus, whose compromise of sending his deputy into battle in his place was a disaster? Nestor, who devised that compromise? Hektor, who strikes the death-blow? Euphorbos, the first Trojan to wound Patroklos? Apollo, who strips off his armour? Or Zeus, who cast fatal blindness into him (16.685ff.), and foretold the whole sequence to Here (15.63ff.)? If the latter, Zeus' prediction still includes something he would hardly want, the death of his son Sarpedon. So is it a power higher than Zeus? Or is it all of these? Or is nobody responsible at all? Only the last question demands a negative. Moral responsibility is one of Homer's major themes. Since the Iliad is in the tragic mode, the responsibility is never clear-cut, as it is in the morally simpler Odyssey, where the gods proclaim at the outset, and the plot affirms at the end, that we increase our miseries by our own misdeeds.

(iii) Free will, fate and the gods

By leaving an undefined area between free will and supernatural forces, Homer achieves two goals: his characters are seen to suffer for their own choices, which is clearly tragic, and yet the whole outcome seems beyond their individual control or even pre-ordained, which is tragic in another way. The same dualism which applies to the heroes also applies to the gods themselves, including Zeus, who performs several roles. First, he is a per-

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sonal god, the most powerful admittedly, who can be deceived and may use or threaten force to realize his wishes (Homer of course relegates this to reminiscences by the characters). He is concerned to punish perjurers and those who wrong suppliants and xenoi (strangershostsguests); Paris’ crime against Menelaos explains why he must ultimately back the Greeks against the Trojans. But there are signs that he cares about justice in a wider sense (16.384–93n.), and his will can be taken to represent that of his entire family, since the gods collectively are omniscient and omnipotent. One might expect that nothing could occur against his will; but he has to forgo saving even his own son Sarpedon, when he is reminded that this would be contrary to ‘fate’. This ancient idea is expressed by words for ‘lot’ or ‘portion’ — κλήσα, cf. Oscar aetēs, ‘part’, μόρος, κλήρος, ἱμορος, ἑμμαρτσός, cf. μέρος, ‘part’; πέπρωται, cf. Latin pars, ‘portion’; κήρ, cf. κεῖρο, ‘cut’; δαίμον, ‘apportioner’ (from δαίμω), like ‘kismet’ (from Arabic qasama, ‘divide’), reflects the same notion. The most universal aspect of one’s lot is death, and so these words often connote death; indeed, μόρος has come to mean ‘death’, and βροτός (< *mrtos) must come from the same root (this has eluded the etymologists).

The idea that everyone has an allotted portion in life is very old; a formular verse preserves an ancient metaphor for this, that someone suffers ‘what fate spun into the thread as he was born’ (20.127f. etc.). Such fatalism is an inevitable and necessary response to harsh circumstances, as is its opposite, the idea of free will (which Homer never formulated, but projects onto his gods). Without reflecting upon their inconsistency, we still tend to waver between these views, as life’s changing situations affect us; the epic tradition itself was little different. Homer exploits the poetic advantages of both perspectives without bringing them into direct confrontation; the tangled relation between fate, human freedom and the gods was left for later thinkers to unravel.

Nothing ever happens contrary to fate in the Iliad, save for the extraordinary hyperbole at 16.780, when the Greeks prevail ‘beyond destiny’ (ὑπὲρ ἀσόν); normally we hear that events would have happened ‘contrary to fate’, had not someone intervened (e.g. 16.698ff.). ‘Beyond fate’ is even replaced by ‘beyond god’ at 17.327, when the god is Zeus (cf. 331). At 16.431ff. Zeus ponders whether to save his son Sarpedon; Here agrees that he could do so, but objects that it would set a precedent for other deities. The question of Zeus’s power relative to fate lurks behind her words, but receives no answer. Instead, the scene reveals the depth of Zeus’s grief, and shifts the emphasis to a theme central to the Iliad, the unbridgeable chasm between mortal and immortal: even the ruler of gods and men knows the limits to his power and exercises self-control for the sake of universal order

10 See further ibid. 259–93; Bremer, art. cit. in n. 4.
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- an example of the leadership Agamemnon ought to have displayed. But in the Odyssey mortals can suffer beyond what is fated, because of their own wickedness. Similarly, Zeus's interest in justice among men is confined in the Iliad to a simile at 16.384ff., but the Odyssey often mentions his concern to defend justice and punish wrongdoers (e.g. 3.132ff.). Neither difference between the epics should be explained by positing a historical evolution towards a Hesiodic theodicy - as we shall see, the linguistic data are fully compatible with the view that both epics are the work of a single poet. Instead, these differences exactly reflect each poem's divergent viewpoint - the Iliad stresses the tragic aspect of life, where suffering predominates, whereas the Odyssey offers a simpler, moralizing view, whereby the gods are concerned to ensure that we will eventually suffer beyond our due if we misbehave. Both views of the world were traditional; the first is more apt for war, the second for peace. Homer's art is shown by the consistency with which he has adopted the one appropriate to each epic and excluded the other.

In the Iliad, it is hardly too simplistic to regard fate as simply 'what happens', almost the needs of the tale or of the tradition, over which not even the poet has full control: nobody ever dared to deny, for instance, that Troy fell. If it happened, it must have been fated to happen. But fate and divine interference are also different ways of explaining the same event, depending on which one the character speaking finds more consoling or the poet more dramatic. Thus at 9.410ff. Akhilleus says that he has a choice of fates - a short and glorious life, or a long and inglorious one; at 18.96 Thetis tells him that, if he chooses to kill Hektor, his own death must soon follow. The literary effect is clear: nothing arouses more pathos than a hero going clear-eyed to his doom. If stress is placed on the inevitability of an event, its importance in a character's life-story or the need to endure it, then fate is invoked; if the emphasis falls on an action's power or strangeness, then it tends to be the work of a god. What is never suggested is that an odd or significant event is mere chance; Homer has no word for this, and does not know the idea either.

These ways of looking at events were clearly part of common belief, but Homer exploits them for literary effect; both ineluctable fate and unpredictable divine intervention reinforce the sense of man as a plaything at the mercy of mightier powers. But the conclusion drawn from this is far from a negative or passive one; we must win honour within the limits set for us by our existence within a cosmos which is basically well-ordered, however hard that order may be to discern. When Odysseus is reduced to beggary, he does not lower his moral standards; when Akhilleus faces the inevitability of death, he is still determined to die gloriously. Homer adapts for his own poetic and moral ends ways of thinking which are potentially contradictory,
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refining the myths and world-view of his tradition. All his art is mobilized to stress the need for intelligence, courage and moral responsibility in the face of a dangerous universe, wherein mankind has an insignificant and yet paramount role. It is this attitude which makes the Homeric poems so sublimely and archetypally humane.¹¹

¹¹ See further Simone Weil, The Iliad, or The Poem of Force, trans. M. McCarthy, Wallingford, Pa. 1956; Griffin, HLD.