

Blumenberg, Homer and the function of irony in mythical narratives

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I would like to start my argument with a personal anecdote. One night, when I was still very young, my father took me for a walk in a nature reserve nearby our house. In the distance, we could see some flickering lights, probably street lightning or something. But my father, who loved folk tales, told me that these little stars were will-o'-the-wisps, unbaptized souls that were doomed to roam the heath. He then warned me never to beckon at these lights, for they would take it as a sign that you were prepared to baptize them, and then come rushing at you with such a force that the blow would break your chest. Fascinated by the story I tarried till I dropped behind, and then, terrified, half-heartedly, beckoned to the lights. The only thing that followed me, as I spurred back to my father, were some whirling snowflakes. In spite of this experience, surprisingly, for years I kept thinking of the little sparkles on the heath as restless souls, will-o'-the-wisps, and nothing else. But maybe it is even more surprising that I beckoned altogether. For if I did give credence to my father's story, even if only a little bit, I was taking a deadly risk, and if not, the gesture would have been meaningless.

It is justified, I think, to state that at that time, my father's story was a myth to me. Just like myths, it fascinated, it defined a part of the world, but at the same time, it wasn't totally clear whether I took it to be fact or fiction, serious or not. By beckoning, was I acknowledging or mocking the legend of the will-o'-the-wisps?

This inherent ambiguity of myth, the fact that it often seems to hover between mockery and veneration, is one of it's most puzzling qualities. Another fine instance of this mythical paradox is Homer's ambiguous portrayal of the Olympian gods, and it is this subject that I want to discuss here. The Homeric gods are anthropomorphic - not only human, but all too human, even. At the same time these belligerent, pretentious and childish creatures represent exalted cosmic forces that are deemed worthy of veneration and awe. Calhoun phrases the paradox very accurately:

The scandalous tale of Ares and Aphrodite, for example, ends on a note of serene beauty and dignity; in three lines we pass from a scene that might have shocked the goodwife of Bath to the august serenity of the most sacred shrine of earth's most potent goddess (θ 360-362). That majestic Zeus whose nod shakes great Olympus, the Zeus of Phidias and of all poets, is also the furtive, henpecked husband, made querulous by the thought of Hera's nagging, who presently finds relief in a ridiculous squabble with his consort (A 528-567). In the Theomachy is this same curious intermingling of the sublime with the ridiculous and vulgar, lines that are stigmatized as unspeakably bad by Leaf and Wilamowitz and lines that can be acclaimed for their sublimity by so critical a spirit as Edward Gibbon. Calhoun 1937a: 11-12

This seeming discrepancy in Homer's conception of Olympus, which Calhoun calls "one of the unsolved puzzles of Homeric study." (1937a: 11) has troubled scholars even in antiquity, as early as the sixth century. This led to the criticism of Xenophanes and the apologetic but distorting readings of Theagenes and Pherecydes.<sup>1</sup> Until well in the twentieth century, the often ludicrous depiction of the gods gave cause for unease in Homeric studies: the contested passages were often disposed of as late interpolations that were consciously critical. The original epics were assumed to be composed in an "early" period of simple faith and sincere religious feeling in which poets sang of the gods with reverence and exalted them "as the benevolent rulers of the cosmos", while the scandalous scenes originated in "subsequent periods of iconoclastic scepticism – usually a concomitant of the Ionian philosophy – in which "later" poets scoff and jeer at the deities of earlier generations"<sup>2</sup>. It was only with the work of George Calhoun that this kind of reasoning lost its credit. He pointed out that "[i]n those instances in which the cultural background of mythology or religion is definitely known we find uniformly that naive, grotesque elements appear at a very primitive level and are in no way incompatible with devout religious feeling." (1937b: 266-267)<sup>3</sup> Calhoun assumed that the 'grotesque elements' in Homer came from ancient folk tale and *Märchen*<sup>4</sup>, and were blended in with the more solemn material for aesthetic reasons. For him, chopping up Homer in different religious strata is "as intelligent as would be the assumption that in a mosaic the tesserae of different colours must have been set by different hands." (1937b: 272).

For us, now, it is clear that Calhoun's opponents projected the expectations and characteristics of a relatively modern, monotheistic system of belief, the one of their own time and culture, on that of Homer. In the past decades, our views have of course become much more relativistic and less unilateral. We have become aware that contradiction is all but uncommon in human imagination and thinking, on an individual as well as on a collective scale. Paul Veyne's study *Les Grecs ont-ils cru à leurs mythes?* (1983) has been crucial in that respect: Veyne has shown how anachronistic it is to even use the verb 'to believe' when it

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<sup>1</sup> See also Sikes 1940: 123.

<sup>2</sup> I quote from George M. Calhoun's *Higher criticism on Olympus* (1937: 258), in which he attacks such hypotheses, principally those of Wilamowitz and Finsler. I also refer to this article for a general survey of their positions.

<sup>3</sup> See also Keller: "One of the prime characteristics of primitive social forms is the ease with which they ignore consistency. This general proposition could be illustrated at length from Homer, entirely apart from the subject of rationalisation. For example, the gods are represented as eating with men, as enjoying the savor of sacrifices; yet it is elsewhere stated that they eat ambrosia (that is immortality), that a fluid called "ichor" supplies for them the place of blood, and so on. Souls are incorporeal and like smoke; yet Odysseus can keep them away from his blood-filled trench at the point of the sword." Keller 1910 : 652-653

<sup>4</sup> See Calhoun's *Homer's Gods – Myth and Märchen* (1939), where he substantiates this theory with a list of fairy tale elements from Homer.

comes to the Greek and their myths. He laid bare the historicity of the concept of truth and stated that originally, myth was not evaluated by that standard. It was a *tertium quid*, neither true nor false (Veyne 1983 : 11, 43).<sup>5</sup> Calhoun has certainly won his case. However, some questions are left unanswered. Although we can agree with him that the Homeric epics should be seen as literary works and not as those of a theologian, we cannot ignore their powerful religious dimension. And while Calhoun is certainly right in remarking that the element of parody, even mockery, was not incompatible with sincere veneration, this leaves us with the question how both sides interrelated. How should we conceive of this religious attitude? And what was the function of the parodical element?

In what follows, I want to propose an answer to this question on the basis of the theories of Hans Blumenberg's *Work on Myth* (1979). Blumenberg looks at parody as an important element of the mythical, vital to its function. I will, however, prefer the term irony to 'parody', because parody implies a serious original that is ridiculed, while it is essential to my argument (and that of Blumenberg) that there is no such original, and that the sincere and the playful are inextricably entangled in myth. 'Irony' is a concept that leaves more room for this ambiguity, as I will show in a theoretical examination of the concept. Of course, the term is used anachronistically here, in lack of an accurate term, and will need some conceptual adaptation. Finally, I will try to apply this new concept to some actual Homeric passages.

#### Blumenberg and the absolutism of reality.

Being both a philosopher and a philologist, Hans Blumenberg approached myth from a double perspective. In his work, mythology refers not only to the stories we call myths, but also to a more abstract conception, a modality of imagining and thinking that gives structure to the world by narration. The point of departure for Blumenberg was the work of the philosopher Ernst Cassirer, who in his *Philosophie der symbolischen Formen* (1923-1929) tried to bridge the gap between the Enlightenment's distrust of myth and Romanticism's idealisation of it. What Blumenberg takes over from Cassirer is the attitude of not seeing *mythos* as the opposite of *logos*, but as a preliminary phase, a steppingstone towards it. The only problem with this theory, for Blumenberg, is that it implies that once the stadium of *logos* is reached, myth should become redundant and dissolve. This, according to Blumenberg, has never happened. Myth is still, implicitly or explicitly, omnipresent. His conclusion is that myth cannot be a primitive and imperfect form of *logos*: since it isn't made futile by *logos*, it

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<sup>5</sup> Marcel Detienne's *Les maîtres de la vérité dans la Grèce archaïque* (1967) should also be mentioned here, as it substantiates the thesis that the concept of truth is historically and culturally defined.

must serve some other purpose, a purpose of its own. This is why Blumenberg proposes to stop studying myth from the point of a *terminus ad quem*, from the point of *logos* towards which it should evolve in an almost teleological way, but from its *terminus a quo*, from the situation out of which myth originated, from the problem that triggered it. To conceptualise this situation, Blumenberg is forced to create a sort of anthropological myth himself, and to use what he calls a liminal concept: the *Absolutismus der Wirklichkeit*, absolutism of reality. Absolutism of reality refers to a state of total fear and paralysation that overtook primitive man - or could have overtaken him – when he left his biological niche as an animal and exchanged the habitat of the woods for the vast plains of the savannah. In this environment with its open horizon, to which he was no longer adapted, danger could come from anywhere. Reacting to possibilities and threats of the environment was no longer a matter of reflexes and instincts; for the first time, a future had to be anticipated:

What is here called the absolutism of reality is the totality of what goes with this situational leap, which is inconceivable without super-accomplishment in consequence of a sudden lack of adaptation. Part of this is the capacity of foresight, anticipation of what has not yet taken place, preparation for what is absent, beyond the horizon. It all converges on what is accomplished by concepts. Before that, though, the pure state of indefinite anticipation is 'anxiety'. To formulate it paradoxically, it is intentionality of consciousness without an object. As a result of it, the whole horizon becomes equivalent as the totality of the directions from which 'it can come at once'. Blumenberg 1985: 4

Absolutism of reality is not the fear of some particular threat, but exactly the more radical form of anxiety that occurs when the threat *isn't* specified, is everywhere and nowhere, reality itself. Against this *Angst* – the German word is more appropriate – no defence is possible because it is absolute, unrestricted by forms or names. However, absolutism of reality is a liminal concept: man has never been overwhelmed by it in this measure; for as far as we can go back, it has always been kept at bay by something that could turn this total, undefined *Angst* into 'mere' concrete fear, directed at a well-defined danger. This was accomplished by means of myth.

Many factors have contributed to the exact shaping of mythical narratives: psychological, biological, socio-political realities... But for Blumenberg, the reasons why these stories have taken on these particular forms is less important than the fact *that they have* taken on specific forms – no matter what these forms are. By these means, man succeeds in structuralizing his world, in making it appear comprehensible, even controllable. This is achieved not in the first place through *logos*, reason, but through imagination, for reason itself only becomes possible on irrational premises:

[A]nxiety must again and again be rationalised into fear, both in the history of mankind and in that of the individual. This occurs primarily, not through experience and knowledge, but rather through devices like that of the substitution of the familiar for the unfamiliar, of explanations for the inexplicable, of names for the unnameable. Blumenberg 1985: 5

Myth's primal function is to give the uncontrollable and indefinable a face and a name: it takes the form of monsters and gods. By this, the horror is channelled and mitigated into milder emotions: awe, astonishment and rapture (Blumenberg 1985: 62). The mystery becomes more *fascinans* than *tremendum*, to use Rudolf Otto's terms.

### Division of powers and parody

The process of restricting the threat by naming and delimiting it leads to ever further ramification: more and more names appear to classify the sacred, with more and more stories and particularities attached to them. A mythology comes into being. The main aim of this mythology is division of power and therefore, Blumenberg argues, religion is always originally polytheistic. For every threatening Poseidon there must be a helpful Athena, for every vindictive Hera there must be a benevolent Zeus. This is also the reason why mythology loves to portray the gods as a bunch of quarrelsome children: "Not only to be able to shield oneself from one power with the aid of another, but simply to see one as always occupied and entangled with the other, was an encouragement to man deriving from there mere multiplicity." (Blumenberg 1985: 14) In a later stage, some religions will indeed turn to monotheism. I cannot go into this issue here, and will restrict myself to saying that even monotheistic mythologies try to confine the god's powers, by a covenant, a treaty he enters with man, but also by introducing saints, angels and even a Mother of God to mollify his wrath.

With this theory about the division of powers, Blumenberg provides an explanation for a multitude of properties of mythology, like the polytheistic origin of religion, the superabundance of names in mythological genealogies and the quarrelsome nature of the gods.<sup>6</sup> But there's more that seems to be consistent with his theory, like the fact that the Olympians aren't the primordial gods, but were preceded by older generations. In contrast with the rude gods of the past, Blumenberg suggests, man could depict the present gods as charitable and well-disposed towards man. On the other hand, the fact that Zeus had not ruled the world since the beginnings of time suggested that his reign was not absolute and did not

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<sup>6</sup> Discussing the Homeric epics, Calhoun even goes as far as to call the quarrelling of the gods "the dominant motif of the Olympian scenes throughout both poems". (1939a: 22)

have to last eternally. The story of Prometheus, not accidentally the creator and champion of man, reminds us that even Zeus is not invincible, in the end.

Of course, the function of myth is not to totally deny the threat posed by the sacral. On the contrary, myth can only work properly when it represents the horror. But it allows us the choice how to represent it: the Titans, the vengeful Zeus that causes the Deluge, creatures like Python and Typhon are set in a distant past, and the monsters that roamed the earth are unchangingly accompanied by heroes that get the better of them. And as the work of mythology advances, even monsters lose their grim disposition and become alluring. This is what happened to Medusa, who through the ages iconographically evolved from a hideous beast to an image of agonized beauty. (Blumenberg 1985: 15, 65-66) Blumenberg considers the Gorgon to be exemplary for the workings of myth. Her capacity to turn those who look her in the face into stone seems to suggest the paralysing panic of the absolutism of reality. Like all monsters, she's a ragbag of animal bodyparts. Her hybrid, polymorphous body reflects the amorphous, undefined fear she symbolizes, but at the same time the minute description defines and restricts it. Apollodorus describes her with snakes instead of hair, a tongue that hung out between an enormous set of teeth, iron claws and dragon scales, but, as Blumenberg remarks, "each of [these] details [...] makes Medusa more harmless (1985: 116-117). Myth is Perseus' mirror-shield that reflects our fears, turns them into images we can face and by doing so enables us to conquer them. Once Medusa is defeated, we can incorporate her powers. The head becomes beneficial, it merges with the protective aegis of sublime Athena.

But next to description and division of power, there's another important stratagem of myth that Blumenberg discusses, the one that concerns us here: its comical character. His theory on this matter may be a valuable addition to Calhoun's insights, since he shows how the ambiguous image of the Homeric gods may be motivated by more than simply aesthetic reasons. The problem always has been closely connected to the question to what extent ancient people literally 'believed' their myths. For isn't mockery of the gods only a step away from denying their existence altogether? Blumenberg has a paradoxical answer to this question. On the one hand, he affirms that the mockery is a form of rebellion against the gods, a declaration of independence. On the other hand, this ridicule is not contradictory to myth. Far from that, it's one of the "techniques of work on myth." (Blumenberg 1985: 33). Parody may seem to undermine the authority of the gods, but at the same time, it confirms it, makes it possible, bearable. We can only endure a god if we know we can defy him to some extent, and

parody has to assure us of this. This is what Homer does when he pokes fun at the gods, and this is what I did when I beckoned the will-o'-the-wisps:

To make the god endure curses, mockery, and blasphemous ceremonies is to feel out and possibly to displace the limits on which one can rely. To provoke the savior to the point where he comes [...]. One can do this, or say that, without being struck by lightning. It is the first stage of 'Enlightenment' satire, of rhetorical secularization as a stylistic technique employed by a spirit that is not yet confident of its enlightened status. Blumenberg 1985: 16-17

So when I assured myself that the unbaptized souls on the heath weren't really that dangerous, I was on a small scale preparing my own Enlightenment. But, at the same time, the gesture made it possible for me for the first time to confidently believe in these spirits: it reassured me that by admitting their existence, I wasn't admitting some terrible power in the world that could not be controlled. On the contrary, the will-o'-the-wisps provided me with an image in which I could store some of the absolutism of reality. With them, some of my fears were banned to the heath, to a no man's land between reality and fiction.

#### Irony and human helplessness

Up until now, I have kept using Blumenberg's term parody. But as I already mentioned, this word isn't entirely adequate. A classical definition considers parody to be "any cultural practice which provides a relatively polemical allusive imitation of another cultural production or practice." (Dentith 2000: 9) Definitions may vary, of course, but the serious original seems to be an indispensable element. In my reading of Blumenberg, however, it is essential that there never was such an original. Blumenberg stresses that for him, there is only "work on myth", *Arbeit am Mythos*:

Even though I distinguish, in discussing connections that are evident in literature, between myth and its reception, I do not want to leave room for the assumption that 'myth' is the primary, archaic formation, in relation to which everything subsequent can be called reception. [...] [T]he process of reception has itself become a presentation of its manner of functioning. Blumenberg 1985: 118

There is no original myth to be found, since myth is not a certain fixed genre, but a movement away from something. The parodic tone of these stories should not be interpreted as an allusion to a serious original, but rather as an essential and inextricable feature of what myth is and does. Myth is a *simulacrum*, a copy without an original. It would be more correct to state that the comical engendered the serious than the other way round.

The difficulty in approaching this problem is that, on this account, our perception is incommensurable to the Greek one<sup>7</sup>. But if we would venture to use a modern term to describe this aspect of Greek mythology, I think 'irony' would be a good choice. For the ambiguity of the *simulacrum* isn't at all strange to this category and in addition, it will appear to have some other connection to the issue we deal with here.

We use the word 'irony' for many and different kinds of acts and speech acts. But to keep it simple, we can begin to define irony with the classical notions of simulation and dissimulation: "pretending to be what one is not and pretending not to be what one is." (Muecke 1970: 25). In the schoolbook example of Marc Antony's speech in Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*, when he claims that "Brutus is an honourable man", Marc Antony implies that Brutus, on the contrary, is an unscrupulous murderer. But to speak of irony, there must at least be a possibility that someone might take Marc Anthony's words literally. So the classical definition of irony implies on the one hand the self-conscious ironist, together with, in most cases, an accomplice audience that understands his real intentions, and on the other hand, the victim, a naive listener who is fooled by the ironist's dissimulation. (Hutcheon 2005: 43) But, as is clear even in this simplified situation, the literal interpretation must always be possible – if not, we would not speak of irony but of mockery. The essence of irony is doubt: there must always be a certain ambiguity.

So in reality, more often than not, the ironist's intention isn't completely clear, not even to himself – something that distinguishes him from the parodist, who can clearly draw the line between the serious original and the mocking parody. Therefore, most theorists of irony also allow for broader definitions – irony, then, is based not on dissimulation but on ambiguity and paradox, e.g. a burglar being robbed is ironic. Some go even further and speak of something like 'general' or 'cosmic' irony, not longer a simple trope, but a general attitude towards life. Schlegel, for example, considered irony to be the "recognition of the fact that the world in its essence is paradoxical and that an ambivalent attitude alone can grasp its contradictory totality". (Muecke 1970: 19)

One of these theorists, Douglas Muecke, sees this general irony as a reaction to the human condition itself. Irony is man's makeshift measure to cope with his inadequateness to

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<sup>7</sup> "What remains extraordinarily difficult to establish is the effect of this parody on the sacred stories themselves. Part of the difficulty concerns the very status of religious myth in classical Greece. [...] [T]he categories of the modern (i.e. post-medieval) world simply do not translate to this early social world. [...] At all events, the Greeks seemed able to sustain an attitude or frame of mind in which the serious forms and their parodic counterparts could exist side by side, even when these serious forms - and thus their parodies - carried some of the most sacred stories of their culture." (Dentith 2000: 40-41)

understand and control the world. "So that what is called World Irony or Philosophical Irony or Cosmic Irony is sometimes little more than a presentation of the helplessness of men in the face of an indifferent universe, a presentation coloured with feelings of resignation and melancholy or even despair, bitterness, and indignation." (Muecke 1970: 69). One step further, and Muecke's description of General Irony leads us right back to Blumenberg's theories about the absolutism of reality: "This lightness may be but is not necessarily an inability to feel the terrible seriousness of life; it may be *a refusal to be overwhelmed by it*, an assertion of the spiritual power of man over existence." (Muecke 1970: 36, my italics).

Since for Muecke the concept of irony touches upon the (lack of) meaning of human existence itself, it is not all too surprising that his general irony also has an important religious dimension. He starts from the idea that the ironic smile has its origins in the experience of looking down upon the misery or helplessness of others while being in a position of control:

In Lucretius, Lucan, Cicero, Dante, Chaucer, Shakespeare, Bacon, Heine, Nietzsche, Flaubert, Amiel, Tennyson, Meredith, not to mention the Bible, we find the idea that looking down from on high upon the doings of men induces laughter or at least a smile. The ironic's awareness of himself as observer tends to enhance his feeling of freedom and induce a mood perhaps of serenity, or joyfulness, or even exultation. His awareness of the victim's unawareness invites him to see the victim as bound or trapped where he feels free; committed where he feels disengaged; swayed by emotions, harassed, or miserable, where he is dispassionate, serene, or even moved to laughter; trustful, credulous or naïve, where he is critical, sceptical, or content to suspend judgement. Muecke 1970: 37

This, for Muecke, is the original ironic experience. And he proceeds:

From this point of view the archetypal ironist is God - 'he that sitteth in the heavens shall laugh: the Lord shall have them in derision.' He is the ironist *par excellence* because he is omniscient, omnipotent, transcendent, absolute, infinite, and free. [...] In earthly art Irony has this meaning - conduct similar to god's. The archetypal victim of irony is man, seen, *per contra*, as trapped and submerged in time and matter, blind, contingent, limited, and unfree - and confidently unaware that this is his predicament. Muecke 1970: 37-38

### Irony and the Homeric gods

At this point, I come back to the Olympian gods, who hold this same position of supreme irony. Take, for example, the final verses of Sophocles' tragedy *Women of Trachis*: Let all men here forgive me, / and mark the malevolence / of the unforgiving gods / in this event. We call them / fathers of sons, and they / look down unmoved / upon our tragedies. / [...] Women of Trachis, you have leave to go. / You have seen strange things, / the awful hand of death, new shapes of woe, / uncounted sufferings; / and all that you have seen/ is God.<sup>8</sup> In Homer's

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<sup>8</sup> trans. E. F. Watling, Penguin, 1953

Iliad, the Gods are only slightly less callous in regards to human suffering. They have much in common with the superior beings Jenyn describes in a passage quoted by Muecke:

As we drown whelps and kittens, they amuse themselves, now and then, with sinking a ship, and stand round the fields of Blenheim, or the walls of Prague, as we encircle a cockpit. As we shoot a bird flying, they take a man in the midst of his business or pleasure, and knock him down with an apoplexy. Some of them, perhaps, are virtuosi, and delight in the operations of an asthma, as a human philosopher in the effects of the air-pump. To swell a man with a tympany is as good sport as to blow a frog. Many a merry bout have these frolick beings at the vicissitudes of an ague, and good sport it is to see a man tumble with an epilepsy, and revive and tumble again, and all this he knows not why. Muecke 1970: 30-31

In the same dispassionate way Apollo crushes Patrocles with a simple gesture, or spreads the plague in the Greek camp. In the same way Athena light-heartedly tricks Hector into walking towards his death. But most of the time, they only look on from above. Griffin even states that 'looking on' is the essence of the concept 'god' (Griffin 1978: 1).

But the interesting thing, of course, is that in Homeric epic these same powerful gods are made a laughingstock in their turn. And this, I want to argue, is exactly what Homeric parody of the gods is all about: if man can conceive of being looked at ironically, it's only a small step to reverse the gaze. If we follow the line of thought of Blumenberg, then this is exactly what man would be inclined to do. Let's take a look at the three most famous instances of Olympian ridiculousness, the ones already summed up by Calhoun: the entrapment of Ares and Aphrodite, the Theomachy, and finally, the *Dios Apatè*, the beguilement of Zeus by Hera. The point I will try to make is that even at a very concrete textual level, we can clearly find that the helplessness of the gods is a reversed reflection of human suffering.

Let's first take a look at the famous scene in the Odyssey where the Phaeacian singer Demodocus tells the story of Aphrodite and Ares. It's one of those scenes that were considered to be interpolations until quite recently, simply because they depicted the gods so irreverently. The adulterous couple is trapped in bed by Hephaestus, Aphrodite's husband, with an invisible but unbreakable netting, and exposed like that for all the gods to see. The sight, of course, rouses the proverbial Homeric laughter, especially when Hermes declares that he would gladly endure the weight of trice as much chains and gazes if only he could be the one lying there with golden Aphrodite. The first thing that draws attention is that the scene exactly matches Muecke's description of the archetypical ironic situation: a group of onlookers entertain themselves from their safe, superior position by watching the helplessness and shame of others. Besides, Homer focalizes not through the eyes of the unhappy victims, but through the divine audience: the ironic smile of the reader or listener is theirs. But if we

study this scene even further, we notice that Demodocus' subject matter isn't chosen arbitrarily. For in his audience we find Odysseus, the hero of the epic, who is in many ways very similar to Hephaestus. First of all, he is famous for his cunning, just like the god of craftsmanship. Second, he also has reason to fear for the conjugal fidelity of his wife, since he has been away from home for twenty years now, and suitors are planning to take his place on his throne and in his bed. The parallel that Homer subtly suggests here is extensively demonstrated by Burkert and Braswell, amongst others.<sup>9</sup> We can imagine what goes through Odysseus' head while he listens to the singer's story. But we, who listen to Homer, know that his wife Penelope has been as faithful as Aphrodite was fickle, so for once, the comparison between god and man works out in favour of the mortal:

[T]he marriage of the Ithacan couple is of such a nature as to make the gods themselves envious. "The gods imposed these woes on us," explains Penelope in 23.210-12, "because they were jealous of our living together to enjoy our youth and reach the threshold of old age." For the relationship of Odysseus and Penelope, uniquely stable amongst mortals, is equally rare among the gods as well. Aphrodite, the fairest of the Olympian goddesses, and Hephaestus, shrewd patron of intelligence and craft, do not live in such secure happiness with one another. Their marriage is flimsy as the invisible net which catches the wife in an adulterous embrace. Newton 1987: 19

So we, mortals, who listen to the story of Ares and Aphrodite, have the rare pleasure not only to experience the feeling of literally looking down upon such powerful divinities, but also the hope that we can do better than them.

The second scene, the Theomachy in the Iliad, may be the most striking case of "intermingling of the sublime with the ridiculous and vulgar", as Calhoun put it. (1937. 11-12) At the point where the battle over Troy reaches its peak, Zeus allows the other gods to freely participate and to fight each other. The lines that paint their descent from Olympus are truly majestic: their battle cries fill the air, and the earth shakes so hard that Hades fears it will crack and reveal the shady realms of the dead (XX, 47-70). The battle itself, however, is not that exalted. The gods boast and rail against each other like little children. The goddesses especially don't act too worthy: the catfight between Hera and Artemis ends up with Hera smacking the goddess of hunt over the ears with her own bow, after which she runs off crying to Zeus like a little girl - something her father seems to find rather amusing. In Zeus, who stays at the Olympus to enjoy the show, we again encounter the detached ironic audience, looking on from up high. Human tragedy is about to culminate – Achilles is setting out to kill Hector, by which he is sealing the faith of Troy and is consciously signing his own death sentence. Precisely at this point in the story, where the misery of war becomes almost

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<sup>9</sup> For a survey, see Newton 1987 and Brown 1989.

unbearable, the gods take over the battlefield and replace tragedy with comedy. There is absolutely no narrative need for this fight between the gods, it changes nothing in the outcome of the story. But it does serve as counterweight to the battle of the humans, and some scenes – like the combat between Athena and Ares – are modelled on battles between mortal warriors (Calhoun 1937a: 25). So again, this comic relief scene has a reassuring effect: for once, the gods themselves struggle on the battlefield while we mortals watch on. Even if none of them loses his life, they do all lose their detachedness and dignity. The divinity that wins the most sympathy is Hermes, who is put in against Leto, but makes his escape with the witticism that he deems it far too dangerous to fight a lover of Zeus. He unheroically tells Leto she's free to boast her victory over him amongst the gods.

Finally there's the last scene Calhoun mentions as both sublime and ridiculous: the beguilement of Zeus by Hera, the famous *Dios Apatè*. This scene has been interpreted both as the depiction of the sacred *hieros gamos* of heaven and earth and as, once again, a late interpolation, a sceptical mockery of the Olympians. To have free hand in helping the Achaeans, which Zeus has forbidden her, Hera plots to seduce her husband and put him to sleep. With the help of Hypnos and the magical girdle of Aphrodite she actually manages to do so: Zeus becomes so enchanted by his wife's beauty that he does not see through her plans and wants to make love to her there and then. Hera, of course, only for a moment feigns to object. To hide themselves from the view of other gods, Zeus makes the earth produce a bed of flowers and surrounds them with a golden nebula, out of which glistening drops of dew fall down. Even Helios cannot look through this nebula, Zeus tells Hera. (XIV, 342-345) That may well be so, but there is a gaze even more pervasive than that of Helios: for Homer himself watches on, and we with him: "Thus in quiet slept the father on topmost Gargarus, by sleep and love subdued, and clasped his wife in his arms." (XIV, 352-354) So we are literally placed above the highest of the gods, and look down upon him, as he finds himself in a position of ignorance and helplessness. In the meantime the war for Helen is going on below. But at least now we know that even Zeus is not above losing his head over a beautiful woman.

The gods are a thinking concept. Just as man can borrow their distant view, they can take over man's helplessness. There's an extreme satisfaction in this, of course. For without openly revolting (this would only be terrifying and would destroy the god's effectiveness as representative of the absolutism of reality), man can have a taste of what it is like to switch roles. This, of course, can only be done with extreme caution and subtlety. This irony is never in contradiction with the divine power; ultimately, the ironic tone of myth is a recognition of the gods' superiority. On the other hand, their supreme position is only useful and bearable to

the imagination of man when it is balanced by an ironic tone. But never is the irony implying that the gods should or could be more dignified. Homer's irony is General Irony, the irony that simply acknowledges that a 'serious' look on life just isn't an option: reality is far too complex, ambiguous and paradoxical to approach it in a straightforward manner. Life is too complex to fit the dichotomy of play and sincerity, of reality and fiction, since we can only come to a concept of reality through fiction, through myth.

### Conclusion

By superficially discussing these three scenes, I have of course only made a tentative suggestion of how this ironic functioning in myth could be identified. It would of course be necessary to investigate the question more thoroughly, to look into other sources than Homer, and to find out to what extent this type of irony is typical for Greek society. I am convinced, however, that both the study of irony and the study of mythology could benefit from the idea that their functions interrelate.

For centuries, the monotheistic background of our western culture has been an impediment to our comprehension of the Greek religious universe. Of course the cultural gap between us and the Greeks can never fully be bridged, but still, some new opportunities may be forming. After thousands of years of monotheism, a new attitude is developing. God has been dead since Nietzsche, and in recent days this has ceased to be the contrary opinion of the solitary intellectual – it has become the common attitude. Notions like truth, reason or humanity are no longer self-evident. Our century is post-humanistic, post-structuralistic, post-monotheistic, but on the other hand, we haven't found an adequate way to live without structure, humanity or spirituality. We are forced to allow contradiction and paradox into our way of thinking and of looking at the world. In this perspective, it can very well be that we are closer now to the Greek attitude of general irony than ever before. For the struggle against absolutism of reality is never over: as this unconscious, all-embracing irony helped the Greeks to mitigate the absolute existence of the sacred, we use it to mitigate its absolute non-existence.<sup>10</sup> For both mean the same thing to us humans: in both cases, the world we live in is a cluster of powers that are beyond our control and comprehension. In both cases, we need myth to cut it down to human proportions, to narratives to which we can relate. So, as regards to the dichotomy *logos* and *mythos*: we can no longer believe in the Enlightenment project that aimed to reduce myth as much as possible in favour of logos. If Blumenberg is right in

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<sup>10</sup> See also Muecke 1970: 80

stating that myth is still a precondition of logos, we need to recognize its inescapable and vitally important function, and try to learn as much as possible about the manifold and fascinating mechanisms of mythical imagination.

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