

Trajectories of *Things*: Spears, Arrows, and Agency in Ancient Greek Epic Poetry

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Introduction

How to make a classicist cringe: assert that, in the Homeric epics, humans are mere playthings of the gods, unfortunate rag-dolls subject to the diverse peevish manipulations of jealous and trifling deities. How to get an article published: assert that, “man-made objects [in Homer]...never acquire a life of their own but are always firmly connected with the particular people who made them and use them.”¹ We have sufficiently liberated *man* in our literary analysis of the epics, but in many cases, we have yet to unfetter the *thing* (in all its greatness or ugliness). The sentiment I quoted from the article is not an ignorant outlier in the world of Homeric studies — it is only the most recent example of anthropocentric object-theory in Homeric studies, continuing in the tradition of George Lukács² and G.E. Lessing.³ Neither of these men is a Homeric expert

¹ Crehan, Stewart. “The Rape of the Lock and the Economy of >Trivial Things.” *Eighteenth-Century Studies*. 31.1 (1997) 45-68.

² It might be helpful to read Lukács in the context of his well-known Marxism: i.e. any separation of the human from the product results in distortion and fetishism.

³ The fact that my work incorporates work from non-specialist literary scholars is not a mistake. I will be drawing on theory that is relevant in both spheres, and if the comments of Lukács or Lessing do not always prove helpful to Homeric studies, I believe that the challenging of said comments will. For G.E. Lessing’s view on Homeric things, see his *Laokoon*.

per se, but they offer a decent framework with which to start; the classical camp has itself been somewhat silent concerning the phenomenon of living things.⁴

In his essay, “To Narrate or Describe?” published in a collection of essays entitled *Homer* (ed. Steiner and Fagles), Lukács contends:

Boxes and orchestra, stage, sets, and wardrobes are in themselves dead, uninteresting, completely unpoetic objects...only in so far as the theater or stock-exchange becomes the immediate, concrete matrix of concrete human interrelation and interaction- does it take on a literary significance and become poetic (86).

We can dispense here with an analysis of what is “poetic” and “unpoetic,” an invariably vague and idiosyncratic practice. I am more interested in investigating the notion that things are *dead* and that only human relevance can award them meaning and ultimately, life.

Certainly, Lukács hasn’t got it all wrong in his assessment. The man-related aspects of things in the epic, as I will argue, are crucial to their definition. Yet I will argue just as vehemently that we cannot completely get at the *thing* by studying the way in which man is putting it to work for him. If we define the life of things as narrowly as do Lukács, Lessing, and Crehan, we miss out on an uncanny *otherness* in certain objects, an otherness which makes itself quite manifest in the Greek, if only sporadically. My intention is not to speculate about an alternate fantasy world in the Mediterranean, but instead to look at how the oft overlooked *agency* of certain things themselves challenge,

⁴ Much work has been done on the phenomenon of *ekphrasis* in the epics, wherein a thing (a shield, scepter, etc.) seems to come alive through its history, but this is a different type of life, which is bound up in human ownership and relevance. There is also a convention of object-life through its *representations*, such as the scenes on Achilles’ shield in Book 18 of the *Iliad*.

clarify, and often *supplement* the methods which we are already using to approach certain problems in the epics.

I am not so ambitious (or naïve) to think that I can survey the lives of all the *things* in the epic. That is why I've decided to confine my scope to a couple of things which seem to misbehave most often: arrows and spears.⁵ These projectiles readily rebel against the assertions of Crehan, Lukacs, and Lessing; in fact they do more than rebel — they *rage*, they *desire*, they *overcome*.

Arrows and Spears as Gathering-Points of Meaning

In his essay, “The Thing,” Martin Heidegger explores the German roots of the word *thing* back to a “gathering,” and proffers a difficult definition: “The thing things. In thinging, it stays earth and sky, divinities and mortals. Staying, the thing brings the four, in their remoteness, near to one another” (175). While I may not endorse Heidegger’s personal brand of metaphysics involving these fourfold forces, I am struck by the felicity of this description as a starting point for the characterization of projectiles in Homer. Arrows and spears are extremely versatile in the epics; they have a unique relationship, with *earth* (being the location of material taken from it and to which it must return), *sky* (being the field of flight and the zone of possibility), *divinities* (receiving some guidance from them, sometimes being crafted by them), and *mortals* (receiving a different type of

⁵ I further confine my analysis to throwing spears as opposed to hand-spears. The reason for this is to conduct a tighter study of projectiles as things in the epic. Also, as things, the arrow and the throwing spear (or dart) share a certain heritage. See Farmer, Malcolm, “The Origins of Weapons Systems” *Current Anthropology* 35.5 (December 1994) 679-81.

guidance from them, sometimes being crafted by them). It is the intersection of (at least) these four entities, and not only the intersection of human affairs (as I quoted Lukács as arguing above), that brings arrows and spears “to life” in the ever-vacillating balance of actions and events in epic. Furthermore, Heidegger’s formulation “The thing things,” grants the thing a grammatical autonomy which reflects its irreducible *otherness*, something which cannot be fully explained in terms of other entities. But before looking at how arrows and spears have a life of their own, it is important to get a wider conception of their “life” in the epics more generally.

I am not intending an exhaustive monograph of arrows and spears (though this has yet to be done, and might be useful in itself) nor will this essay be reviewing the usual purple passages involving arrows and spears in epic. I am looking primarily at places where these things don’t act like we expect them to, and this behavior may appear in scenes of varying import as far as the actual storylines are concerned. More specifically, I am looking at the vibrant multitude of ways in which arrows and spears manifest themselves, and the unique and often surprising implications of these manifestations. My analysis of projectiles might suggest a strategy for approaching other things in the epic, appreciating how the metonymical and conceptual resizing of objects allows scenes to be told in many possible ways. When every thing has a full spectrum of expression which can be exploited, the interplay of objects will allow for almost infinite variation, guaranteeing a consistently renewed vitality in the oral tradition, a performed vitality.

Weapon-Warriors: Metonymy and Mortality

In *Iliad* 16, we encounter a particularly vivid description of battle, and arrows, spears, and stones are used to indicate chaos and great potential of harm and risk of loss:

ὥς Τρῶες καὶ Ἀχαιοὶ ἐπ' ἀλλήλοισι θορόντες
 δῆουν, οὐδ' ἕτεροι μνώνοντ' ὀλοοῖο φόβοιο.
 πολλὰ δὲ Κεβριόνην ἄμφ' ὄξεα δοῦρα πεπήγει
 ἰοί τε περόεντες ἀπὸ νευρῆφι θορόντες,
 πολλὰ δὲ χερμάδια μεγάλ' ἀσπίδας ἐστυφέλιξαν
 μαρναμένων ἄμφ' αὐτόν· ὃ δ' ἐν στροφάλιγγι κονίης
 κεῖτο μέγας μεγαλωσί, λελασμένος ἵπποσυνάων. (770-776)

*The Trojans and Greeks collided in battle,
 And neither side thought of yielding ground.
 Around Cebriones many spears were stuck,
 Many arrows flew singing from the string,
 And many big stones thudded onto the shields
 Of men fighting around him. But there he lay
 In the whirling dust, one of the great,
 Forgetful of his horsemanship. (Iliad 16.807-814. Transl. Stanley Lombardo)*

What is interesting about a construction like this is that the arrows' destinations are irrelevant for the time being. One reason for this is that it is an effective way to show the ongoing life of the instruments of war juxtaposed against the death of Cebriones. The little particle “δ'” in line 772 quietly delivers this contrast. It no longer matters to Cebriones where the arrows land, as they have outlived him. Viewed in a wider context, we should remember that when men die on the field in the epic, very often the motivation of the opponents is to strip the enemy body of its armor. There is a symbolic purpose to this as well as a pragmatic one: it is both an act of ultimate disrespect and a simple process of amassing and reusing materials. Over the course of time, then, these reused objects have strange and unpredictable circulations — they have extended lives, so to

speak, being the warriors which fight the longest, and for both sides.⁶ The weapons and armor will go where their original owners no longer can, and play out scenes from which the original owners are absent. The histories of the object cling to the thing and engrave themselves in a way that changes the way soldiers look at them. What Achilles focuses on right before he slays Hector (and what he references immediately after slaying him) is the *armor* Hector is wearing, taken from the dead Patroclus (*Iliad* 321-358). The height of his frenzy comes at the viewing of the re-appropriated war object. Similarly, spears and arrows are cast, re-gathered, and reused. But it is not only the histories which give the recycled objects a life of their own — their very durability through the death of many men allows them their own robust identity, a frightening permanency.

This permanency also allows for metonymical applications in epic poetry. On one level, weapons like arrows or spears (and for that matter, stones) can be used to represent battle itself. In other words, they don't just *do* battle, they *are* battle, in some sense. It should be noted that arrows represent a certain *type* of battle in Greek epic and usually cannot stand as perfect substitutes for all battle itself. Nevertheless, their appearance can be a narrative shortcut: if arrows are flying, war must be happening. In this sense, arrows can be seen as metonymical representations of grueling combat. Let us look again, then, at the phrase “many arrows flew singing from the string.”⁷ or more properly, “many flying arrows flew leaping from the string.” There is another reason we don't need to be informed of their destination. The metonymical use of the arrow grounds

⁶ The phenomenon of the behavior of spears being described in the language of warriors is discussed below.

⁷ For the agency implications of this passage, see below.

it in human experience and, indirectly, in human narrative control: it asks the listener or reader to compose the rest of the story. The fact that the arrows are leaping into the air in the first place is bad news, and the listener or reader can fill in the rest. The very lack of information provided suggests a correspondingly rich set of associations that listeners can imagine and fill in for themselves, either because they've seen what the arrows can do in other places in the epic *or* because a certain passage could expand into a more extended tale or metaphor upon a different retelling. In this passage, we don't follow the individual arrows to their destinations — if we are familiar with the conventions (which a listener would have been), we know that every one of those leaping arrows has the possibility of becoming lodged in a loved one and closing his eyes forever. The most common adjective⁸ used for arrows (though not used in the above quoted passage) in the epic is “πίκρον” or *bitter* — the arrow's main adjective does not describe the arrow *qua* arrow but its consequence, its relevance to the human economy of pain and loss. In the above quoted passage, instead of giving us a snapshot of *one* life or *one* suffering, the strategy is one of multitude, a dark blanket of bitterness, which serves to evoke a different (but related) sort of dread.

On the other hand, sometimes in Homer, the point of reference can change, both visually and conceptually, in one on one combat.

⁸ See, for example, *Iliad* 5.99, 5.110, 5.278, 8.323, 13.587, 13.592, 23.867. Also see the enigmatic description of arrows in *Iliad* 4.118, where the arrow is described as μελαινέων ἔρμ' ὀδυνάων (“freighted with pain” or “a prop of dark pain” or “ballast of dark pains” or “a come out of nowhere reef of dark pain”?). This passage needs more investigation. As of now, there is little consensus amongst scholars even in translating it, much less interpreting it. At least one classical scholia source has marked it as a transcription error.

Consider the spectacular and uncanny in *Iliad* 13 where the arrow of Helenus and the spear of Menelaus, both launched into the air at the same time, pass by one another in the air, crossing like friends, and then continue on, one failing the other succeeding:

τὼ δ' ἄρ' ὀμαρτήδην ὃ μὲν ἔγχεϊ ὀξυόεντι
 ἴετ' ἀκοντίσσαι, ὃ δ' ἀπὸ νευρήφιν οἴστῳ.
 Πριαμίδης μὲν ἔπειτα κατὰ στήθος βάλεν ἰῶ
 θώρηκος γύαλον, ἀπὸ δ' ἔπτατο πικρὸς οἴστός.
 ὡς δ' ὅτ' ἀπὸ πλατέος πτυόφιν μεγάλην κατ' ἄλωήν
 θρώσκωσιν κύαμοι μελανόχροες ἢ ἐρέβινθοι
 πνοιῇ ὑπο λιγυρῇ καὶ λικμητήρος ἐρωῇ,
 ὡς ἀπὸ θώρηκος Μενελάου κυδαλίμοιο
 πολλὸν ἀποπλαγχθεὶς ἐκάς ἔπτατο πικρὸς οἴστός.
 Ἄτρεΐδης δ' ἄρα χεῖρα βοῆν ἀγαθὸς Μενέλαος
 τὴν βάλεν ἢ ῥ' ἔχε τόξον εὐξοον· ἐν δ' ἄρα τόξῳ
 ἀντικρὺ διὰ χειρὸς ἐλίλατο χάλκεον ἔγχος.
 ἄψ δ' ἐτάρων εἰς ἔθνος ἐχάζετο κῆρ' ἀλεείνων
 χεῖρα παρακρεμάσας· τὸ δ' ἐφέλκετο μείλινον ἔγχος.
 (584-597)

*...They each shot at once,
 The spear and arrow crossing in mid-air,
 Helenus' needling arrow going on to hit
 Menelaus' breastplate and clang off the bronze.
 Think of dark beans, or lentils, bounding up
 From the great broad shovel a winnower wields
 In a great threshing floor swept by shrill winds.
 Thus the arrow that ricocheted off
 Menelaus' corselet and went flying away.
 But Menealus' own shot wasn't wasted,
 The sharp spearpoint hitting Helenus' bow hand
 And going through it into the polished wood.
 He fell back among his comrades, avoiding death,
 The ash-wood spear trailing from his hand... (Iliad 13.610-623. Transl. Stanley Lombardo)*

In this passage, we witness a brief fellowship in the sky as the missiles pass one another.

The meeting of the missiles suggests a bond independent of the throwers — they are at

cross purposes and yet they were both made to perform the same task. At the apex of the arc, however, we realize that we can only follow one at a time. We are thus in the territory of Zielinski's law⁹ which states that in the face of simultaneous action, Homeric epic will completely describe one action and then immediately follow with the next.

I would also like to add that a corollary might be, in the face of simultaneity, the grander action follows the less grand. This is simply a feature of good storytelling — a move from something great to something less is seen as bathetic and somehow unfulfilling. It therefore makes sense that we trace Helenus' ricocheting dart before we look at Menelaus' spear which passes Helenus' missile in the air and then drives itself not only through the hand of his foe but into the wood of the very bow from which sprang the friend/enemy arrow. There is a certain intimacy of the materials of weaponry in the passage which gives the sense of close combat a whole new aspect. Furthermore, the arrows, in some sense, write their own story. The humans are no longer the foregrounded subjects: we are used to reading about (or hearing about) *people* as they get hit by or escape *projectiles*, we are not used to reading about (or hearing about) *projectiles* as they hit or miss *people*. Such a focus constitutes a rare privileging of the weapon, meanwhile adding a new dimension to the ensuing action.

The materials of the weapon can also push the significance of the arrow or spear past mere metonymy. In the *Odyssey*, we see a curious passage involving arrows that at first looks like another example of metonymy, but actually is something quite different. Odysseus describes his love for things martial rather than agricultural:

⁹ Zielinski, Thaddeus. *Die Behandlung gleichzeitiger Ereignisse im Antiken Epos*, *Philologus Supplementband* 8: 405-449.

... ἔργον δέ μοι οὐ φίλον ἔσκεν
 οὐδ' οἰκωφελίη, ἣ τε τρέφει ἀγλαὰ τέκνα,
 ἀλλά μοι αἰεὶ νῆες ἐπήρητμοι φίλαι ἦσαν
 καὶ πόλεμοι καὶ ἄκοντες ἐϋξέστοι καὶ οἴστοί,
 λυγρά, τὰ τ' ἄλλοισὶν γε καταρριγηλὰ πέλονται.
 αὐτὰρ ἐμοὶ τὰ φίλ' ἔσκε, τὰ που θεὸς ἐν φρεσὶ θῆκεν·
 ἄλλος γάρ τ' ἄλλοισιν ἀνήρ ἐπιτέρπεται ἔργοις. (14.222-228)

...But fieldwork

Was not to my taste, nor caring for a household

Where children are reared. Oared ships are what I liked,

And war, polished spears, and arrows,

All the grim things that make most people shudder.

I suppose I liked what a god put in my heart-

One man's meat is another man's poison. (Odyssey 14.244-250. Transl. Stanley Lombardo)

At first we might see this catalogue of weapons as another sort of metonymical list — in other words, Odysseus enjoys not the *things* themselves, but their uses, their conceptual applications. But the mention of “πόλεμοι” in the list is both disturbing and interesting — saying he loved arrows and oared ships would have been enough to evoke suggestions of war, as the metonymical powers of the respective objects would have worked their powers. But the inclusion of “πόλεμοι” as well makes us recalculate why the other things are dear to him in themselves, the mention of war at once ties all the things together but also liberates them from the grasp of its singular association. What comes to mind is possibly a sort of fetishism, a love for the actual thing and not just its utility. But it is more likely a kinship felt with the object and its composition. For Odysseus, this pairing of himself with the brutal material nature of the arrow or spear (rather than the pliant field) defines an important part of his identity; he is a *spears* guy rather than a *fields* guy, an *arrow* of a man, not a *cornstalk* of a man.

When Odysseus says that “a god put in [his] heart” the love for grievous things like arrows, we enter into the territory of complicated and ambiguous agency. What exactly is doing the loving of the materials and why? This same confusion arises in the actual shooting of arrows in the epics. Sometimes the arrow seems to be shooting itself, sometimes a god will directly intervene in the course of an arrow, sometimes the success or failure of an arrow is attributed to a more ambiguous fate or randomness (or nothing at all), and sometimes the success is attributed to the skill or talents of the archer. As a result, arrows do serve a metonymical purpose — they are a sort of emblematic way of looking at human versus divine will matters in the epics, and in themselves they can be compact metaphors of agency, will, or fate. But what I will try to show in this essay is that while these things are often employed in such ways, there is sometimes something *extra* — aspects of arrows and spears that can’t be completely harnessed by warriors for use in battle and can’t be completely tamed by literary scholars for customary tropological analysis.

Living Things

From the first passage I quoted in *Iliad* 16, it should already be apparent that there is something strange going on with the way arrows move. The word *θορόντες* suggests that the arrows are leaping or springing from the bowstring. It is an active participle, and it seems as if neither the bow nor the shooter is telling the projectiles what to do. Constructions like these possibly contribute to the metonymical dexterity of the arrows,

because they don't need the hand of a human to convey their message. But compactness in expression doesn't always seem to be the top priority — what about a much more overt expression of arrow agency? In Book 4 of the *Iliad*, we find the following phrasing:

αὐτὰρ ἐπεὶ δὴ κυκλοτερὲς μέγα τόξον ἔτεινε,
λίγξε βίος, νευρὴ δὲ μέγ' ἴαχεν, ἄλτο δ' οἷστος
ὄξυβελῆς καθ' ὄμιλον ἐπιπτέσθαι μενεαίνων. (123-125)

But when he had drawn the great bow into a round, the bow twanged and the string sang aloud, and the keen arrow leapt, eager to wing its way [to fly to/towards] amid the throng. (Translated by Samuel Butler)

How is the arrow eager? Has an eagerness in the archer been transferred into the arrow by a mysterious physics of aim and determination? Is a god eager to get the arrow into the throng, thereby giving it a boost? We can't say for sure what is meant here, and that very ambiguity seems to work in tandem with another important ambiguity — no one knows where exactly the arrow is going to end up landing. Is it possible that allotting some inexplicable agency to the arrow creates a situation roughly analogous to the mystery of its eventual success or failure? Additionally, there is something ominous and intriguing about arrows having lives of their own, as if arrows have been ready to fly and kill throughout the ages, only requiring some currently living soul with some pretense to put them in the air again.

At other points in the epic, the movement of and responsibility for arrows is clearly associated with humans, especially in the moments where one is trying to stop the stream of arrows. It becomes clear at these times that one does not attempt to fight or disarm an arrow itself, but rather the human arm:

ἦτοι δ' μὲν φαρέτρης ἐξείλετο πικρὸν οἶστόν,
 θῆκε δ' ἐπὶ νευρῆ· τὸν δ' αὖ κορυθαίολος Ἴεκτωρ
 αὐερόντα παρ' ὤμον, ὅθι κληῖς ἀποέργει
 ἀχένα τε στήθος τε, μάλιστα δὲ καίριόν ἐστι,
 τῆ ῥ' ἐπὶ οἷ μεμαῶτα βάλεν λίθῳ ὀκრიόνετι,
 ῥῆξε δέ οἱ νευρήν· νάρκησε δὲ χεὶρ ἐπὶ καρπῷ,
 στή δὲ γνύξ ἐριπῶν, τόξον δέ οἱ ἔκπεσε χειρός. (8.323-329)

*[Teucer] had drawn an arrow from his quiver,
 Notched it on the string, and was pulling it back.
 He was taking dead aim at Hector in his shining helmet,
 When the stone caught him just where the collarbone
 Divides the neck from the chest, a vulnerable spot.
 The jagged rock broke the string, his hand went numb;
 He staggered, fell to his knees, and dropped the bow. (Iliad 8.328-34. Transl. Stanley Lombardo)*

In this passage, it is apparent that arrows, though possibly taking a life of their own once in the air, are fundamentally connected to human agency: if every arrow involves a mystery, perhaps the human can be considered to be *forcing* the individual mysteries.

Are arrows, then, presented as natural or man-made? They are often man-made things which end up effecting natural or properly proportional outcomes. A beautiful bow is not going to take out an important soldier if the archer doesn't deserve it. We see this in Book 4 of the *Iliad* in the story of Pandarus, where the *ekphrasis* informs the object — the thing (the bow) is born out of cowardice and can therefore only produce craven results. Odysseus receives special poison arrows from Athena Mentēs' father, but this is only because he has sufficiently impressed him, as the man is “strangely/excessively fond of him.”¹⁰ The special arrows therefore serve not as

¹⁰ *Odyssey*, 1.255-267.

graciously bestowed boons but as indices of a very real power that has developed in the matrix of human affairs. In this manner, divine intervention can heighten conflict that is already latent — the introduction of new weapons serves as another way to designate and demarcate exceptional glory, by bringing us into another mode of warfare where advantages in arms must correspond with a given man's strength or public virtues.¹¹

Arrows, therefore, may demonstrate a mysterious eagerness of their own, but they never seem to possess a desire which is antithetical to the progress at hand — in other words, a bowman who wants to kill can trust that his arrows will want to kill; furthermore, he can trust that if he misses with his missile, the missile will also be furious, if not *more* furious. This phenomenon of murderous desires in projectiles is made especially clear in the language used to describe throwing spears which miss their target.

Consider the following two passages:

Αἰνείας δ' ἐπὶ Μηριόνη δόρυ χάλκεον ἤκεν·
 ἔλπετο γὰρ τεύξεσθαι ὑπασπίδια προβιβῶντος,
 ἀλλ' ὃ μὲν ἄντα ἰδὼν ἠλεύατο χάλκεον ἔγχος·
 πρόσσω γὰρ κατέκυψε, τὸ δ' ἐξόπιθεν δόρυ μακρὸν
 οὔδει ἐνισκίμφθη, ἐπὶ δ' οὐρίαχος πελεμίχθη
 ἔγχεος· ἔνθα δ' ἔπειτ' ἀφίει μένος ὄβριμος Ἄρης. (16.608-613)

*Aeneas launched his spear at Meriones,
 Hoping to hit him as he advanced
 Under cover of his shield, but Meriones
 Saw the spear coming and ducked forward,
 Leaving it to punch into the ground and stand there
 Quivering, as if Ares had twanged it
 So it could spend its fury... (Iliad 16.640-6. Transl. Stanley Lombardo)*

¹¹ Consider Achilles' armor which only materializes and lends weight to the fears already existing about the warrior.

Ἔκτωρ δ' Αὐτομέδοντος ἀκόντισε δουρὶ φαεινῶ·
 ἀλλ' ὃ μὲν ἄντα ἰδὼν ἠλεύατο χάλκεον ἔγχος·
 πρόσσω γὰρ κατέκυψε, τὸ δ' ἐξόπιθεν δόρυ μακρὸν
 οὔδει ἐνισκίμφθη, ἐπὶ δ' οὐρίαχος πελεμίχθη
 ἔγχεος· ἔνθα δ' ἔπειτ' ἀφίει μένος ὄβριμος Ἄρης. (17.528-532)

*...Hector rifled
 His polished spear at Automedon,
 But Automedon saw it all the way and ducked,
 Leaving it to punch into the ground and stand there
 Trembling, until Ares finally stilled its fury. (Iliad 17.539-43. Transl. Stanley Lombardo)*

The verb πελεμίξω (to quiver, tremble) is normally associated with mortals reeling in battle.¹² Here the spear appears to have an anger of its own and rattles accordingly. As one can see, Lombardo's translations are somewhat misleading — the last four lines of each passage should actually be translated exactly the same. This precise repetition and the way in which the extended vision starts a line (not unlike the conventionality of similes) shows that it can be easily added or taken away whenever one is talking about a spear that missed.¹³ In other words, if we have the time or care, we can trace out what happened to that arrow which didn't hit its target. This notion of convention raises another important point: these curious moments where things come alive should not be seen as brilliant and idiosyncratic twists by the poet "Homer" but instead as moments where the way in which a culture sees the agency of weapons in an epic context peeks

¹² See *Iliad* 4.535, 5.626, and 13.148. Also, Zeus makes Olympus tremble (8.443) and winds make trees quiver (16.766).

¹³ For a comprehensive bibliography of literature relating to simile/metaphor conventionality in Greek epic, see Leonard Muellner, "The Simile of the Cranes and Pygmies," in *Greek Literature. Volume 1: The Oral Traditional Background of Ancient Greek Literature* (ed. Nagy, G.) page 60n1.

through.¹⁴ Acknowledging the likely variety of ways to tell the *Iliad*, we could expect the lines about the quivering spear to show up more or less as needed, in accord with the requirements of a given performance. In a wider context then, we see that accumulating example upon example of living things is not exactly the point. We don't have the epic "ur text" from which all variations sprang — instead we have moments — moments which are rich in themselves but also grant us license to speculate a bit more broadly on conceptual trends.

So why is the spear trembling and what agency accounts for it? The spear is "quaking" or "trembling" partially because this would be the natural physical phenomenon based on the transference of velocity from a moving thing sticking in a much larger fixed body (the earth). But it is clear that this goes beyond physics and enters into the realm of anger. It is trembling with "fury" because it has not achieved its goal. This conventional construction connects the movement to Ares, but it is clear that Ares does not have complete control over the raging dart. We are allowed to see it quake for a little while to understand not only the velocity but the gravity of *hatred* in the air — partially human (from the throw), partially "natural" (based on the physics of contact with sky and ground), partially divine (from the intervention of Ares), *and* partially embedded in the thing itself. Perhaps the most remarkable passage featuring a "trembling

¹⁴ I do not intend to push my interpretations past the cultural-poetic to the purely cultural context. In other words, I am not attempting a reconsideration of the way in which the contemporary Greek culture viewed and valued the agency of *actual* things. For one, the realm of the epic is clearly differentiated from everyday speech, and is a specialized, stylized performance. Secondly, it is not altogether clear who is in the best position to investigate such cultural implications (the anthropologist? the archeologist? the philologist?).

spear” comes in *Iliad* 13 where the spear successfully lands in its target. Idomeneus’

weapon enters Alcahous:

δὴ τότε γ' αὔον ἄυσεν ἐρεικόμενος περὶ δουρί.
 δούπησεν δὲ πεσών, δόρυ δ' ἐν κραδίῃ ἐπεπήγει,
 ἢ ῥά οἱ ἀσπαίρουσα καὶ οὐρίαχον πελέμιζεν
 ἔγχεος· ἔνθα δ' ἔπειτ' ἀφίει μένος ὄβριμος Ἄρης·

*He fell backward, the spear's point
 Fixed deep in the still beating heart
 So that the upright shaft quivered a while
 Until at last Ares put its fury at ease. (Iliad 13.458-461. Transl. Stanley Lombardo)*

In this passage, it is virtually impossible to separate the quaking rage of the spear from the last pulsing heartbeats of Alcahous. The heart and spear are put to ease at the same moment and the resulting pile is a curious patchwork of materiality.

When I noted that the spear is furious because it missed its “goal,” I should have been more specific. It is arguable that the human has set its target and so the goal of the thrower is translated to the projectile. The miss of the spear therefore reflects badly on it, as it has failed its purpose. But I’m not sure this is a persuasive reading of the passages. It seems more likely that the missile is furious because of its own bloodlust, so to speak.

Similar to the “eager” arrows, the thrown spear can show a yearning which goes far beyond mere appeasement of its thrower:

ᾠς φάτ' ἀπειλήσας, ὃ δ' ἀνέσχετο δῖος Ἀχιλλεὺς
 Πηλιάδα μελίην· ὃ δ' ἀμαρτῆ δούρασιν ἀμφὶς
 ἦρως Ἀστεροπαῖος, ἐπεὶ περιδέξιος ἦεν.
 καὶ ῥ' ἐτέρω μὲν δουρὶ σάκος βάλεν, οὐδὲ διὰ πρὸ
 ῥῆξε σάκος· χρυσὸς γὰρ ἐρύκακε δῶρα θεοῖο·
 τῷ δ' ἐτέρω μιν πῆχυν ἐπιγράβδην βάλε χειρὸς
 δεξιτερῆς, σύτο δ' αἶμα κελαινεφές· ἢ δ' ὑπὲρ αὐτοῦ

γαίῃ ἐνεστήρικτο λιλαιομένη χροὸς ἄσαι. (21.161-168)

*It was a threat, and as Achilles raised high
His spear of Pelian ash, Asteropaeus,
Who was ambidextrous, hurled both his spears.
One hit Achilles' shield but did not penetrate,
Stopped by the layer of god-given gold.
The other spear grazed his raised right forearm,
Drawing a welt of black blood and sailing on
Until it punched into earth unsatisfied. (Iliad 21.168-176. Transl. Stanley Lombardo)*

Lombardo's translation of the last line does not do justice to the spear's cravings. It should be closer to: "until it punched itself into the earth, longing to gorge itself on flesh."¹⁵ It almost seems here as if the spear has its own stake in injuring Achilles.

Earlier I argued that spears and arrows function as sort of permanent warriors that keep fighting when soldiers die. Consider this in light of the recently quoted identical passages where spears are fueled by their own μένος, not unlike other warriors (most specifically Achilles). Perhaps the clearest link, however, between the language used to describe spears and the language used to describe warriors is that of the verb to *rage* or μαῖνομαι. In *Iliad* 5, the Trojans are trying to figure out what man is engaging in battle in such a frenzy. They suspect it is Diomedes, but it is added "οὐχ ὄ γ' ἄνευθε θεοῦ τάδε μαίνεται," (*not without (the presence) of a god does he rage like this*) (5.185). We then find the same exact verb in *Iliad* 8 to describe Diomedes' spear waiting for its shot at combat. Diomedes yells to Odysseus:

Τρωσὶν ἐφ' ἵπποδάμοις ἰθύνομεν, ὄφρα καὶ Ἐκτωρ
εἴσεται εἰ καὶ ἐμὸν δόρυ μαίνεται ἐν παλάμησιν.

Let's drive these horses straight at the Trojans

¹⁵ My translation.

*So that Hector might know whether my spear also rages in my hands.*¹⁶

The beauty of these constructions is that we cannot quite say that the frenzy of Diomedes has been transferred to his spear, nor can we say that the frenzy of the spear is informing his rage. The spear is awarded a seemingly independent “καὶ” and we cannot trace the causality. Diomedes wields this mystery almost as another weapon, and this adds to his imposing status. It should be noted that the verb μάχνομαι, as well as the spear itself, is conventionally associated with Ares. In *Iliad* 5.717 we find Ares “raging” and in *Iliad* 15.605, Hector is said to “rage...like Ares, Wielder of the Spear.”¹⁷ We will also recall from the earlier examples quoted that Ares always has something to do with the spears when they seem alive. Though I believe the linguistic evidence for a certain level of autonomy in spears should stand on its own, some students of Homer may feel that the consistent association of spear activity with Ares makes the movement fully explainable through Ares. Let me remind such a student of two things: we should read the appearance of Ares in these moments as no more or less “conventional” than the moments themselves. One who shakes one’s head at the shaking spear and contends that “Ares is the entity commonly associated with spears” must answer to the equally authoritative comment: “The language of semi-independent movement and intent is also commonly associated with spears.”

Building on this point, I will return to the argument I proffered at the opening of this essay: we should not be too quick to write off the surfeit energy of the spear as the

¹⁶ My translation.

¹⁷ My translation.

direct intervention of Ares, just as we would not want to write off Diomedes’ “rage” as something wholly given by a god — such an approach drains the human or thing of its potency and doesn’t do justice to the actual balance of energy and intent at hand. Perhaps we should reconsider the notion of “intervention” more finely: it is not that Ares is going around trying to find people and things to become warlike, it is rather that people and things increasingly enter his domain of governance by having certain furies and intentions in the first place. If we fail to admit this point, then the epics become grand marionette shows filled with people and props which answer to the gods’ beck and call. This is not to say that there is not a pressuring sense of *determinism* in the Greek epics. Instead, I will argue that, entity-wise, this determinism is more diffusive, more detailed, than many have formerly imagined. The determinism is not completely locked up in the overlooking deities (this would be more of a Judeo-Christian imposition on the text) but instead the sense of what is bound to happen is also partially in the breast of the human¹⁸

¹⁸ This is most evident in the mid-battle internal dialogues which sprinkle the epic. Consider Hector’s comment to himself in the face of the approaching Achilles:

ἀλλὰ τί ἤ μοι ταῦτα φίλος διελέξατο θυμός;

...

βέλτερον αὐτ' ἔριδι ξυνελαυνέμεν ὅττι τάχιστα·
εἶδομεν ὀπποτέρῳ κεν Ὀλύμπιος εὖχος ὀρέξῃ.

(22.122, 129-130)

But why am I talking to myself like this?

...

Better to lock up in mortal combat

As soon as possible and see to whom

God on Olympus grants the victory. (Iliad 22.138, 146-148. Transl. Stanley Lombardo)

and partially inscribed in the *things* that make up his or her world.¹⁹ In short, I am claiming that sometimes, the determinism rests just as much in the arrowcase as in a god's preference. Consider one of the most crucial moments in the *Odyssey*, when Odysseus (still incognito as the beggar) successfully strings the bow and is about to take his aim through the twelve axeheads, as all the fearful suitors look on. He moves to the table to take an arrow: (21.416-418)

εἶλετο δ' ὠκὺν οἰστόν, ὃ οἱ παρέκειτο τραπέζῃ
 γυμνός· τοῖ δ' ἄλλοι κοίλης ἔντοσθε φαρέτρης
 κείατο, τῶν τάχ' ἔμελλον Ἀχαιοὶ πειρήσεσθαι.

[Odysseus picked up]

One arrow [which] lay bare on the table. The rest,

Which the suitors were about to taste,

Were still in the quiver. (Odyssey, 21.442-444. Transl. Stanley Lombardo. Brackets are my additions.)

The arrows are yet still but they are ready to move. Indeed, the rest of the story, the tale itself, in some sense, is still waiting in the quiver with those arrows. In terms of the appositional description then, events of the future are already atomized in the arrow.

Though the individual arrows have not yet been loaded by the bow, the story is waiting anxiously in the covered tips. As readers or listeners, we are at once granted access to see the waiting objects through the quiver and at the same time granted access to see forward into the story. Considering this, we must reconsider traditional notions of some objects in epic — that they are simply particles moving around and being used by the mortals in

Though his soul wants to rebel, Hector's fate is essentially etched in his body and bones, which serve to quell the contrary spirit.

¹⁹ Recall that I am only focusing on spears and arrows, but a broader notion of “living things” might significantly supplement these arguments.

real-time. In effect, their presence in the epic might be temporally wider than we have formerly admitted. I have already pointed out how instruments of war are able to suck the past into their *thingness* (both materially and conceptually) — the passage just quoted shows how they can also suck in the *future*.

Conclusion

We have considered (though not exhaustively) some of the wild ways in which arrows and spears operate. Let me return to Lukács. One of his most persuasive assertions is that Homer’s approach to things is as follows:

He seeks of the task objects have in the nexus of human destinies, and he does so only when the objects have a share in those destinies, when they partake in the deeds and sufferings of men. (87)

On one level, Lukács is correct, but the argument is more tautological than profound. If the *Iliad* opens with an invocation to sing a song about the rage of a certain man and the *Odyssey* opens with an invocation to sing a song of a cunning heroic man, it is not surprising that everything — every mention of every person, deity, thing, event, etc. has *something* to do with the “nexus of human destinies” — otherwise it wouldn’t be showing up in the song about human destinies. Also, the oral tradition is a human tradition and what gets incorporated into the tradition had better be relevant to human experience in some way.

We should not expect *things* to be the heroes or objects to steal the show; and for that matter, we should not expect such things to have “lives” in any sense that is comparable to human life. Instead, I have attempted to look at how certain things function *within* these songs of man, as matrices of multiple entities and agencies. I have

tried to recover the wonder of certain passages which are conceptually disjunctive — where agency is not quite attributable, where more energy pulses than necessary, where a spear wanders outside the bounds of human relevance and still possesses a purpose or fury. In the epics, arrows and spears have a frustratingly vast scope, temporally and conceptually, and they are, in some sense, larger than the metonymical categories we've been forcing them into. The purpose of this essay, then, was to take a peek at those arrows waiting to be liberated from their hollow quiver.

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