

## HEGEL, HOMER, HEROISM

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*Abstract:* The genre of epic poetry finds a place within Hegel's aesthetics and taking Homer's *Iliad* as paradigmatic he analyzes epic in the triadic terms typical of his dialectic. This article surveys Hegel's diverse ideas on epic and Homer's *Iliad* in particular – ideas about the thematic unity of epic, its combination of cosmic breadth with vivid detail, its significant actions and passions, its fully rounded characters both human and divine, its heroes and heroic wars that exemplify the essence of the world-historical cultures that produced epic poems. Such ideas contribute to a systematic and often compelling whole, and this article offers some other detailed examples to bolster a Hegelian interpretation of the *Iliad*. On the other hand, aspects of the *Iliad* stoutly resist a Hegelian treatment and when Hegel at times envisions his philosophy of history as a kind of philosophical epic, one imagines that the poet of the Trojan War would have been unconvinced, given his own more somber treatment of anger, conflict, the death of loved ones, and the gods' immortality.

When it comes to the Greeks, Hegel is most commonly associated with tragedy, and especially Sophocles' *Antigone*. This was his favourite play from an early age and in its characterization and plot it seems plausibly to illustrate the central Hegelian idea that the Spirit advances by opposition and passionate unreason from one-sided abstractions towards the inclusive and all-embracing. In a play like the *Antigone*, tragic poetry seems to adumbrate the insights of philosophy itself and so gains Hegel's highest admiration. Less commented upon are his remarks on epic poetry.<sup>1</sup> Yet, scattered as these remarks are across various works and lecture notes (notably the *Lectures on Aesthetics*), they nevertheless add up to a perspective that is at once far-reaching, consistent, and suggestive. One intention of this article is to present Hegel's ideas on epic in a briefer compass, and show how Hegel's many-sided understanding of epic poetry, its historical situation, typical characters, actions, and objective tone form the basis for his admiration of the *Iliad* as the premier epic, as well as a fundamental document for Greek history and even for world-history. Furthermore, Hegel acknowledges that his remarks on epic are rudimentary, and unfinished, and invites readers to supplement them with further details. I will here offer some such supplements, at least with regard to Homer's *Iliad*, to illustrate the suggestiveness of Hegel's approach. At the same time, one need not follow uncritically in Hegel's wake. Would Homer, for example, have accepted a Hegelian interpretation of his poems? In fact, unavoidable aspects of the *Iliad* jostle uneasily

<sup>1</sup> For example, Allen Speight's *Hegel, Literature and the Problem of Agency* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001) devotes separate chapters to tragedy, comedy and the *Phenomenology of Spirit* (as 'Hegel's novel') but none to epic. The concerns of Georg Lukács' *The Theory of the Novel: A Historico-Philosophical Essay on the Forms of Great Epic Literature*, trans. A. Bostock (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1971 [1916]) and Mikhail M. Bakhtin's 'The Epic and the Novel', in *The Dialogic Imagination*, ed. M. Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981 [1941]) lie more with the modern novel than epic *per se*.

within a Hegelian system. These aspects may indeed be closer to the spirit of our own times, which stresses difference, flux, uncertainty, subjective alienation, and the withdrawal of God from full sensuous presence.

This sense of postmodern uncertainty and dislocation has roots in a theme that goes back to the beginning of modern literature and philosophy. This is the notion that the age of heroes is past, that the modern world cannot look for inspiration to any of those exemplary figures whose strength, courage and intelligence overcame all obstacles. In place of Homer's *Odysseus*, for example, Joyce celebrates the character of Leopold Bloom, flighty, meandering, without much cunning, and not so formidable. Of course films regale us with stories of hard men and their feats of valour, from James Bond to Jason Bourne. But these Hollywood-generated heroes belong firmly in the theatre, and exist primarily to give a welcome escape from the work-a-day world. The basic notion of the hero – a person of over-natural strength and courage – may seem unrealistic and even misplaced in a scientific society with fixed laws, an egalitarian politics, developed bureaucracies, and machines that will do most of the heavy lifting. We have replaced the lone gunslinger with uniformed police, and what dragons are there left for a Heracles, Beowulf or Siegfried to slay? In the prosaic and sceptical light of reason, all is analyzed and brought down to size. Emblematic here is Don Quixote, who does not know that the age of the Crusades and feudal romance has ended: he tries to keep up the ideals of chivalry, becomes a knight-errant in search of a quest, and ends up tilting against windmills. This widespread idea, that the time of heroes is past, is reflected also in modern philosophical works. I think at least of Descartes and Bacon when they remark that though in the past there were universal geniuses with the ken of an Aristotle, yet they had no proper method: they were giants, but when turned in the wrong direction their giant legs swept them enormously off-course. And so, for Descartes, the future should belong to comparative pigmies who would take short, methodical steps in the right direction and so reach the goal slowly but surely, where so many of their heroic predecessors went gallivanting off on quests of magnificent folly.

Hegel for his part reflects and accepts this sense of modern disenchantment. In the *Philosophy of Right*, he understands 'heroes' as strong men who exert mere force against the blind force of mere nature, but in so doing actually serve the Idea: figures like Heracles exert the first, rough justice and so appear at the foundation of states and the beginnings of society (§93, 102A). Similarly Hegel argues in *Lectures on Fine Art*, heroic epic tends to arise in relatively unsettled times, when there are commonly shared values and a loose sense of community – but no single recognized authority, no system of law and education to harmonize the individual to the demands of the whole. This condition of semi-anarchy allows much latitude to people of extraordinary strength, courage, cunning, beauty, and their subjective freedom can lead to extraordinary actions that become the stuff of song and heroic story. Epics therefore arise in the formative period of a national culture, and Hegel adduces various epics in proof: the *Ramayana* for India; the *Iliad*, *Odyssey* and *Cyclic* poems for Greek civilization; the epic migrations and wars of the Old Testament for the Hebrew nation; the *Nibelungenlied*, Icelandic sagas and others for 'Germanic', that is, for northern European culture; the *Chansons de Geste*, *Song of Roland* and *El Cid* for Christendom in the high medieval period: these and other 'national bibles'

of world-historical peoples were fostered in a period before fixed laws and authorities.<sup>2</sup>

## I

### ART AS A MODE OF THE ABSOLUTE

Thus for Hegel, epic art arises naturally, perhaps even inevitably, in the course of national development. We will return to the relation of epic and history at the end, but for now let us turn to Hegel's ideas about art, epic art, and Homeric epic in particular. Hegel lectured on aesthetics for many years, in 1818, 1821, 1823, 1826, 1828, 1829 and it is his lecture notes and additions, edited by Heinrich Hotho, that have come down to us as the *Lectures on Fine Art*. They have been regarded as one of the most comprehensive single study of art in the western tradition, rich in both theoretical reflection and empirical detail. Each artistic genre he approaches from a variety of angles – treating it as a work of art (as opposed to religion or mere *techné*), comparing genres with each other, and discussing historical differences within genres. These different approaches are evident in his discussion of epic. Like other genres, epics can be classified as Oriental, Classical and Romantic, and as noted above, Indians, Persians, Greeks, Romans, French, Germans, English and others have had their epic poems. Epic's content and form is characteristically objective: it details objects, persons and actions as moments of the external world, and does so in a matter-of-fact tone, with 'objective tranquility' (*LFA* II.1045), unburdened by emotional outbursts or philosophical meditations. Hence it differs from lyric poetry, which focuses first on subjective moods; and from dramatic poetry, in which subjective dispositions and passions give rise to a conflict on stage. Its objectivity brings epic in close relation to sculpture, and so Hegel sees no mere coincidence in the ancient Greek genius for both artistic forms (*LFA* II.1094). Finally, like all other works of art, epic is a self-enclosed, self-justifying, yet all-embracing whole, unified and beautiful. It unifies within itself a vision of the totality of nature and the mental, and therefore, although epic is not intellectual or burdened by overt ideas, it nevertheless spontaneously reveals the highest experiences and realities. Like all true art, it is a compelling manifestation of the Idea, the Absolute.

Many lines of thinking lie behind this thesis that art (along with religion and philosophy) reveals the Absolute. First, like Hegel's self-thinking God, art does not serve any ends outside itself; on the contrary, many other human activities exist for art's sake, and the best art exists for its own sake. Hegel does not make such statements in the spirit of aestheticism, and he criticized those merely 'beautiful souls', those dandified aesthetes who have little sense of evil and suffering. Secondly, therefore, art is not a luxury or mere add-on, but a humanly indispensable

<sup>2</sup> Throughout Hegel consistently expresses a preference for 'primitive' epics like the *Iliad*, as more spontaneous, honest and forceful than the polished article of 'artistic' epics like the *Aeneid*: as a Roman imitation of Greek exemplars, the *Aeneid* does not quite express the Roman spirit. Nor all world-historical peoples have epics: Hegel dismisses attempts (by Niebuhr, for example) to find epic material in Livy's legends of early Rome (II.1099); similarly, the Hebrews are without an epic proper, as Hegel prefers to term the heroic and kingly narratives in the Old Testament 'sagas and histories told in religious poetry' (*LFA* II.1097). The Chinese too have no founding epic, but Hegel finds ones for the Arabs and Persians, among his 'Oriental' subjects. All subsequent references will be to the *Lectures on Fine Art* (abbreviated *LFA*), translated by T.M. Knox (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975) unless otherwise noted.

activity. Human beings (for Hegel) are free, thinking beings, and art is one way in which we express our freedom and articulate our deepest experiences, thoughts, truths, values – our gods. In art we store up our most profound feelings and experiences; in art we embody what we regard to be the greatest realities; and so art itself comes to shape our highest destinies. Hegel therefore was impressed by the fact that in many past civilizations, art has had a fundamentally religious aura. Faith in Christ gives rise to the Byzantine making of icons, as well as to numberless paintings of, say, the Madonna and Child or the Descent from the Cross. The classical Athenian democracy funded and built the temples on the Parthenon, primarily in order to honour their city's patron and guardian, the goddess Athena. Or to go back even further, Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey* tell of Achilles and Odysseus to be sure, but they also give a vision of the divine realm that supported and transcended the heroes. Here Hegel was ever impressed by the depth of that 'great remark of Herodotus: Homer and Hesiod gave the Greeks their gods' (LFA II.1047).

For Hegel, of course, the Greek gods are only adumbrations of the true God, yet his conception of divinity will also have reflections in his privileging epic as one mode of the Absolute. For Hegel, God or the Absolute is the self-thinking Idea that overreaches itself to subsume all seeming others into the totality of its ideal existence; God is necessary and universal Being that particularizes itself into all singular beings, and then develops the inner relations that reunite them to himself. Or, in a different way, the Absolute is the true infinite that is not limited by its seeming other, and that therefore incorporates the finite within its universal scope. Such a theology leads Hegel to privilege art as a mode of the manifestation of God, for several reasons. One reason that seems most prominent for Hegel is that an artwork is a material entity that has been transformed by higher spiritual content: the sculpture of Apollo Belvedere is not mere stone; the painting of Caravaggio's Christ betrayed is not just oil on canvas; Mozart's *Requiem* is not simply a string of notes, mere vibrations of the air; and so forth. On the contrary, art sanctifies the natural and vivifies it as an expression of ideas. That is, art subsumes the natural into the spiritual. In art, the mind or spirit overreaches itself to make the natural and seemingly mindless a moment in itself; nature, unbeautiful in itself, becomes radiantly beautiful. This overcoming of the seeming other is *the* activity of Hegel's Absolute and all things exist to the extent that they participate in this divine activity. Therefore artists of all periods have attested that in their moments of supreme inspiration, they have felt moved by some uncanny force that was their own and yet greater than their particular selves: for a moment, their long technical training and practice was rewarded by a visitation of the Muses, whom they had long known but could not command.

In another way, art is an expression of the Absolute because here mind speaks to mind about the mind. That is, one individual spirit speaks to others about the experiences and ideas which for them are most profound, and in this spirit-conversation, the material substrate is subsumed and transfigured into one moment of the spirit. So the artist does not paint or sculpt or sing for himself alone: rather, he does so for an audience or community, and it is only when a community provides the material and spiritual support for his work that he can create truly lasting art-works. In this regard, Hegel seems most impressed by the artistic cultures of classical Greek antiquity: there the temples, statuary, dramatic performances, and so forth were inextricably linked with the religious life of the individual city-states

and with Hellas as a whole; there artists articulated or engaged with the deepest ideas of their time, and these ideas were equally alive for their audiences and contemporaries; the artists of the Parthenon for example transformed a craggy mountain into a thing of sacred beauty, not only for Athenians but for all Greeks.

We of course may go to see the Acropolis, and may study the art of past peoples, and Hegel may suggest that the art of the past will or should remain an important part of a modern person's education. But his more notorious statement is that 'art, considered in its highest vocation, is and remains for us a thing of the past' (LFA I.11). It can no longer satisfy the demands of a scientific and philosophical culture in which mentalities are shaped by universalizing thought – by laws, formulas, abstractions, statistics, and so forth. Our thought patterns cannot nourish the type of sensuous thinking that is the matrix of great art. Hegel's proclamation of the end of art is notorious, and from one perspective, seems strange, given that he was a near contemporary of Goethe, Beethoven, Schubert, Turner. Brahms, Dostoyevsky, Monet, Picasso, Joyce and so many more followed in all fields of art that one might say: surely art and remains for us a compelling force in the present?

Yet with regard to epic, Hegel's thesis is, I think, less controversial. Who would disagree that epic is an art-form of the past, and that it is not the vehicle for the ideas and aspirations of modern communities and nations? Hegel himself took a moment to speculate that if there were to be a modern epic, it might appear in response to some war between North and South America<sup>3</sup>: perhaps his thought here is that those colonies, with their wide open spaces, agricultural economies and lower level of civilization generally,<sup>4</sup> would allow for the semi-anarchic conditions where heroes thrive. Perhaps the Mexican-American War of 1846-48, as well as such battles as the Alamo, and such heroes as Davy Crockett, might have provided material for such an epic, but in any case it never materialized. There have been modern epics like Tennyson's *Idylls of the King* or Derek Walcott's *Omeros*, but they have hardly served as 'bibles' for whole civilizations, while prose epics like Melville's *Moby Dick*, Tolstoy's *War and Peace* or Joyce's *Ulysses* are 'epic' more in length than in characteristic themes and style. And where in previous times, *aoidoi*, *skalds* and bards might have sought to unite disparate legends and sagas into a single, supreme story of heroism, our post-modern sages tend to voice their hostility to all-embracing 'grand narratives' and even to the possibility of superior, heroic types.<sup>5</sup>

## II

### THE INNER DIALECTIC OF EPIC: UNIVERSAL, PARTICULAR AND INDIVIDUAL

Hegel for his part tries to integrate his sense of the pastness of epic into his system as a whole. As one might expect, Hegel's thoughts about epic are dominated by the triad of universal-particular-individual that dominates his thinking generally: he

<sup>3</sup> LFA II.062 with Knox's note.

<sup>4</sup> *Philosophy of Right* 248A.

<sup>5</sup> Franco Moretti's *Modern Epic: The World System from Goethe to Garcia Márquez* (London: Verso, 1996) explores the genre of 'epic' post-Hegel. Note that he devotes his two main sections to 'Faust and the Nineteenth Century', and 'Ulysses and the Twentieth Century', with a 'transition' on Wagner's *Nibelungelied* and an 'epilogue' on Márquez' *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. Hegel for his part, over a generation before Wagner, was contemptuous of the yearning to create a national mythology out of the half-forgotten sagas of Siegfried, Brünhild, Wotan Alberich and the rest: all dusty anachronisms in the life of a Christian, scientific Europe (LFA II.1057).

admires epic because it is one form that can unite universal notion and particular instance into a concrete individual, a rich totality that captures a multitude in its sensuous singularity. First, an epic must be universal in its scope as it depicts a whole 'world-situation' – the geographical backdrop of lands, rivers, mountains, against which countless characters appear, speaking, acting, and interacting, in the hunt, shepherding, farming, working, feasting, fighting, sacrificing to their gods and spontaneously illustrating all the facets of their simple culture. Hegel can here adduce no better example of epic universality than the *Odyssey* as it depicts a whole world, from the homely hut of Eumaeus to the palaces of the distant, exotic Phaeacians. The *Iliad*, Hegel acknowledges, is more constrained in its focus on one dusty plain before one city, Troy, yet here too the view can broaden, as when on the Shield of Achilles Homer depicts,

with great art and marvelous insight [].the whole sphere of the earth and human life, weddings, legal actions, agriculture, herds, etc. private wars between cities, and described all this on the shield of Achilles, a description not to be regarded as an external parergon (*LFA* II.1055).

Regarding the *Iliad*, one might indeed supplement Hegel's remarks, noting its detailed and often precise geographical references, especially in the Catalogue of Ships and around the Troad, a list of places that effectively includes the whole world known to Homer; its more than 1000 named characters; its involvement of the Olympian gods in the human drama; and its evocation of a culture of competition, honour, love of living beauty, and even of strife with a wealthy, powerful eastern city. In such ways, the *Iliad* takes as its material a 'world situation' and as the fundamental poem of Greek civilization effectively gives Archaic and Classical Greeks their dominant conception of the world. Hegel encodes this aspect of epic under the category of universality: 'From no source but Homer [].do we learn in such a lively way or recognize in such a simple way the nature of the Greek spirit and Greek history, or at least the essence of what the Greeks were in their beginnings' (*LFA* II.1056). Like the *Iliad*, other epics too were seen by Hegel 'national bibles', in that they articulate the 'substantial kernel of a nation's life' (*LFA* II.1094). To study an epic is to study the culture itself, and a collection of epics would present a 'a gallery of the spirits of peoples', and indeed indeed a 'great natural history of the spirit' (*LFA* II.1045, cf. 1077).

At the same time, epic takes as its material 'what is' in the sense that it focuses on 'something which is necessary and self-grounded' (*LFA* II.1040). The epic depicts with objective distance the actions of various characters, their speeches, interactions, as well as their reactions to the outside powers of chance, fate and the gods. All actions and events simply happen, from the perspective of the epic artist, and so, he conveys a sense of their seeming necessity. Thus, the epic treats 'what is' not only by depicting a world-situation but by painting certain events as rising spontaneously from the irresistible power of fate or from that of self-willed, self-grounded epic characters. Thus, from various angles, it is because of the epic's universality of material, and its way of evoking the necessity of certain objective events, that the epic retains its hold over later generations, even into the modern period. True epics may no longer be made, yet a more mature modern person can appreciate the great epics as expressions of the Absolute, for here too the spirit seems to recognize and acknowledge the inevitability and implicit rightness of 'what is'.

Such a notion of the Absolute may seem to take one far from a poem like the *Iliad*. Yet in Hegel's view, the Absolute is not a merely abstract concept but a concrete universal that includes all singular particulars, whether they be external things and events or internal thoughts and emotions. In Hegel's analysis, epic too is 'absolute' in that it ranges from the broad sweep of things to their minutest detail. The epic poet's delight in external particulars is most apparent. Homer for instance lingers over the description of clothing, jewelry, ornaments, weapons, the games, individual combats, feasts, the sunrise, sacrifices, and so forth.<sup>6</sup> This delight almost in the sheer fact of externals is typical of the epic age: a simple material life of farming and artisanal crafts corresponds to a consciousness unburdened by complex reflection or inner meditation. The reflective attitude of modern readers may make such descriptions of particulars tedious to *us*, but Hegel pauses several times to stress the importance of all those epic descriptions of weapons, actions or formulaic rituals: a really reflective modern person will appreciate these as expressions of the naïve realism of early peoples, and therefore as one perennial human possibility.<sup>7</sup> In addition, Hegel notes that epic poets do not neglect particular internal states, as when they note that a hero was angry, afraid, hopeful or sorrowful.

Epics depict many emotions and events, yet if epic embraces both the internal and external, it does so in its own distinctive manner: the 'form of objectivity' is 'what is fundamentally typical of epic' (*LFA* II.1082). Namely, it treats both external and internal particulars as simply existing, in a matter-of-fact tone without much obvious reflection or elaboration upon the particular's inner relation with others. This epic objectivity is analogous to sensuous experience itself. For just as particular things and events in the objective world are differentiated in space and time, lying simply side by side, or occurring one after another, and their inner unity is not immediately apparent, so in epic what one seems to have are so many distinct entities: individual characters with their own free power and heroic independence; gods with their own distinct individualities, separate from each other and from humans; many episodes, descriptions of objects and actions which at first glance seem to be included only for their own sake. The epic's objective form has, Hegel implies, misled contemporary followers of Friedrich August Wolf. His *Prolegomena ad Homerum* (1795) revolutionized Homeric scholarship with the thesis that the Homeric poems were not composed by a single poet but began as so many short sagas that were later collated and 'stitched together' by literate editors. Due largely to the study of oral poetic traditions by Albert Lord and Milman Perry, contemporary Homeric scholarship has reverted from Wolfian 'Analysis' to 'Unitarianism' and it is interesting therefore to hear Hegel vehemently pressing a Unitarian viewpoint, from purely aesthetic and even *apriori* considerations. Hegel acknowledges that tradition and national spirit precede and condition the appearance of an epic. Nevertheless, 'it is only individuals who can write poetry, a national collectively cannot' (*LFA* II.1049). Hegel therefore alludes dismissively to those 'who have advanced the opinion that Homer [.] never existed and that single pieces were produced by single hands and then assembled together to form these two great works' (*LFA* II.1049). This basic assumption that an epic can be

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Hegel's remarks on 'ornament' in *Philosophy of History* (Section II: Phases of Individuality Aesthetically Conditioned, Chapter I. – The Subjective Work of Art).

<sup>7</sup> E.g. *LFA* II.1052, 1055, and 1077.

composed in parts is dismissed as 'a barbaric idea at variance with the nature of art' (*LEA* II.1050) and as 'excessively crude' (*LEA* II.1087).

For if an epic proceeds in a leisurely fashion that seems to border on the episodic, it is in fact governed by a single controlling intelligence that imparts a loose unity to his vast material. This is done by attending to one particular action that becomes the core around which all others revolve. Actions are the work of individuals, and so the properly epic action will be performed by an individual who is worthy of his world and even of all humanity. The epic hero is therefore, for Hegel, a vast, three-dimensional figure. He is a kind of 'absolute', filled with irresistible force, and embracing multitudes of characteristics and relations in his singular individuality. So of Achilles, Hegel writes:

In Homer, e.g., every hero is a whole range of qualities and characteristics, full of life. Achilles is the most youthful hero, but his youthful force does not lack the other genuinely human qualities, and Homer unveils this many-sidedness to us in the most varied situations. Achilles loves his mother, Thetis; he weeps for Briseis because she is snatched from him, and his mortified honour drives him to the quarrel with Agamemnon, which is the point of departure for all the further events in the *Iliad*. In addition he is the truest friend of Patroclus and Antilochus, at the same time the most glowing fiery youth, swift of foot, brave, but full of respect for the aged. The faithful Phoenix, his trusted attendant, is at his feet, and, at the funeral of Patroclus, he gives to old Nestor the highest respect and honour. But, even so, Achilles also shows himself irascible, irritable, revengeful, and full of the harshest cruelty to the enemy, as when he binds the slain Hector to his chariot, drives on, and so drags the corpse three times round the walls of Troy. And yet he is mollified when old Priam comes to him in his tent; he berinks himself of his own old father at home and gives to the weeping King the hand which had slain his son. Of Achilles we may say: here is a man; the many-sidedness of noble human nature develops its whole richness in this one individual. And the same is true of the other Homeric characters – Odysseus, Diomedes, Ajax, Agamemnon, Hector, Andromache; each of them is a whole, a world in itself; each is a complete living human being and not at all only the allegorical abstraction of some isolated trait of character (*LEA* II.236-37).<sup>8</sup>

Thus the epic character is the counterpart to the 'world-situation' depicted by the poem, and the fullness of a character like Achilles is made manifest 'in the greatest variety of scenes and situations' (*LEA* II.1067) which themselves combine to give a picture of a whole world. In this way, both the epic world-situation and epic hero are embodiments of 'what is': they are absolutes, in that they seem to contain or mirror all reality within their selves. Such seem the leading ideas inspiring Hegel to defend the wrath of Achilles, in words that will resonate more loudly in his defense of world-historical wars. For Hegel, Achilles may 'be full of the harshest cruelty to the enemy', but this is part of his greatness:

<sup>8</sup> Cf. *LEA* II.1068: 'Now precisely because these chief epic figures are whole and entire individuals who brilliantly concentrate in themselves those traits of national character which otherwise are separately dispersed, and who on this account remain great, free, and humanly beautiful characters, they acquire the right to be put at the head of affairs and to see the chief event conjoined with their individual selves. The nation is concentrated in them into a living individual person, and so they fight for the national enterprise to its end [...]. Odysseus or Achilles, this entire Greek spirit in its bloom of youth. The Achaeans cannot win when Achilles retires from the fight; by his defeat of Hector he alone conquers Troy. And in Odysseus' journey home there is mirrored the return of all the Greeks from Troy [...].'



the point is that Achilles is the man that he *is*, and with that, so far as epic goes, the matter is at an end. The same is to be said of ambition and desire for fame. For the chief right of these great characters consists in the energy of their self-accomplishment, because in their particular character they still carry the universal, while, conversely, commonplace moralizing persists in not respecting the particular personality and in putting all its energy into this disrespect. Was it not a tremendous sense of self that raised Alexander above his friends and the life of so many thousands? Revenge, and even a trace of cruelty, are part of the same energy in heroic times, and even in this respect Achilles, as an epic character, should not be given moral lectures as if he were a schoolboy (*LFA* II.1068).

Such vast personages as Achilles become topics for epic because they are capable of representing the universal material of epic. In particular, their emotions, motivations, and the actions which issue from these, are powerful enough to involve and affect entire peoples. In the *Iliad*, for example, the wrath of Achilles determines the fate of Greeks and Trojans alike, as it flares up and subsides. In more abstract Hegelian terminology, the particular epic hero and action becomes the manifestation the universal, and so in narrating the origin, course and consequences of a heroic action, the epic seamlessly unites the two sides of universal and particular. Such a formulation implicitly extends key insights of Aristotle's *Poetics* and traditional taste generally which also admired Homer as the supreme epic artist. Aristotle's *Poetics* singles out the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* for praise<sup>9</sup>: unlike the poems of the Trojan Cycle, the Homeric epics are not episodic but focus everything around a single theme – the wrath of Achilles, the man Odysseus – and from these first words, passionate rage and variegated character become the themes that unite the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* respectively. Hegel accepts and extends Aristotle's demand for unity of theme or action, rather than a unity provided by personality only (as in biography). But more than Aristotle, the monist Hegel stresses the unity of epic even more. Hegel emphasizes that true epic, like the *Iliad*, will focus its universal scope around a singular action, which in its origins and consequences, illustrates not only a hero's character, but also the essential disposition of a whole people. So it is with the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. Here the first thematic words are all-dominating. They overreach themselves, as it were, and differentiate themselves into the plurality of actions, speeches and descriptions which constitute the epic, and so for interpreting the *Iliad*, Hegel insists that it is the wrath of Achilles that should be 'kept firmly in view and adduced as the support that holds the whole narrative together' (II.1089). Against Wolfian Analysts, who find the beginning, ending and/or individual incidents inappropriate, a Hegelian study would find the wrath of Achilles threading through *all* passages, even when Achilles is ostensibly absent: for example, one might adduce the famous interview of Hector and Andromache, near the walls of Troy, far from the relentless force of Achilles, and yet here he appears, for as Andromache reminds Hector, it was Achilles who once sacked her city, killed her father and seven brothers, and enslaved her mother.<sup>10</sup>

To expand Hegel's remarks on the epic unity of the *Iliad* would be to detail how each particular incident and scene has its place within Homer's narration of Achilles' anger, retirement from battle, and return in glory. A Hegelian reader might thus compare and contrast every character with Achilles, in their background,

<sup>9</sup> *Poetics* 8.1451a16–35. Cf. *LFA* II.1088.

<sup>10</sup> *Iliad* 6.414–28. Cf. *LFA* II.1089–90 where Hegel offers some remarks on how Books 23 and 24 provide not merely an appropriate but a 'most beautiful and satisfying ending'.

personality and disposition, actions and speeches: Agamemnon, supreme in status and wealth yet insecure and rash; the valiant, uncomplicated Diomedes or the stubborn, loyal Ajax, both foils for Achilles' own valour and complex obstinacy; the sympathetic but rather conventional Hector; Odysseus, the pragmatic survivor who chooses life over honour – these and others illuminate and highlight Achilles' strength and principled intransigence in different ways, just as they and non-combatants like Chryseis, Briseis, Andromache, Hecuba, Priam and many others suffer from it. The gods too look down on Achilles' *pathos*, and Homer juxtaposes Achilles with Zeus, Thetis, Athena, Hera, Ares, Hephaestus, Apollo and other gods who aid, oppose, resemble or revile him. Such comparisons of characters, along with similar explorations of duels, feats, implements like Agamemnon's scepter or heroic weapons would contribute to making of Achilles' anger an 'aesthetic idea' in the Kantian sense: a notion that seduces the imagination and understanding into endless contemplation, without any final conceptual determination. Hegel writes that Homer's characters provide material for 'inexhaustible reflections' (LFA II.1083), perhaps hinting that he himself knew the seductive spell of Homer's poetry.

In any case, it is the ability to seamlessly unite universal and particular, world-situation and heroic action that gives epic art its absolute status for Hegel. Moreover, Hegel argues that this tacit blending of sensuous particular and cultural universal is the essence of beauty. Now it is curious, I think, to describe the *Iliad* as a whole as beautiful and Hegel might agree that an epic is typically so vast that few can recognize or appreciate its 'beautiful' thematic unity. Nevertheless, Hegel's general postulate that art *qua* art is beautiful would extend also to epic art, as in the curt dismissal of Wolf (LFA II.1087). Epic is beautiful at various levels. The hexameter meter is, like other forms of verbal music, a spiritual transformation of sound, and its 'tranquilly rolling stream' is perfectly adapted to the all-inclusive subject matter and objective tone (LFA II.1020,1136). Individual passages of the *Iliad* are praised as beautiful: the beginning evokes a whole world through the clash of Achilles and Agamemnon, and so has the 'most beautiful clarity' (LFA II.1081); the farewell of Hector and Andromache is quoted as 'one of the most beautiful things that epic poetry can ever provide' (LFA II.1083), while the ending too is 'most beautiful and satisfying' (LFA II.1090). Furthermore, epic characters are 'humanly beautiful' because they are the quintessence of their people (LFA II.1068). More generally, epics emerge in the most 'beautiful' periods of world-history when peoples live between savage anarchy and fully developed society. For Hegel, only the Greeks completely inhabited 'this beautiful middle position' (LFA II.1043) when the Idea was experienced in immediate sensuous form:

We find in the Homeric poems for the first time a world hovering beautifully between the universal foundations of life in the ethical order of family, state, and religious belief, and the individual personal character; between spirit and nature in their beautiful equipoise (LFA II.1098-99; cf. 1053, 1056, 1073).<sup>11</sup>

Such statements are variations upon the consensus of the 'time of Goethe', which made the Greeks the people of art and beauty, happily content with nature and their

<sup>11</sup> On this general point, cf. Walter T. Stace, *The Philosophy of Hegel: A Systematic Exposition* (Dover, 1955), p. 448.

well-toned bodies, and worshipping a pantheon of lovely anthropomorphic divinities. But, again, the idea is startling when applied to the *Iliad*: can one rightly describe a story focused upon rage, battle, mortality, despair and heroic competition as *beautiful*? Some two thirds of the poem are devoted to scenes of fighting and carnage: ‘so he fell with a thud and darkness veiled his eyes’ is the somber refrain so often repeated. Yet Hegel’s formulation cannot be dismissed as that of a naïve or sentimental aesthete, or untrue to the spirit of the *Iliad*. For example, its warriors do not die gruesome, lingering deaths, but fall ‘like poppies’ or ‘poplar trees’ – recurrent metaphors that initiate the Greek notion of the ‘beautiful death’. More broadly, the poet finds in the midst of suffering feats of valour, courage, nobility, self-sacrifice that partially redeem the negativity of war. Certainly Homer seems peculiarly attentive to beauty in its many disparate manifestations: the beauty of song (*Iliad* 1.473, 18.570); the beauty of Agamemnon’s cloak (2.43) and his kingly stature (3.169); the beauty of freshly-made chariots (5.194), of a chariot yoke (5.730), or of prize-swords (23.808); the beautiful skin of a deity or warrior (5.354, 5.858, 14.175; 11.352, 14.175, 21.398, 22.321, 23.805); the beauty of orchards and wheat-fields (6.195, 12.314, 20.185); beautiful serving-baskets (9.217, 24.626), of chairs (14.238, 17.390), of cauldrons (23.268), cups (24.101, 24.429), cloaks (24.588), and of of stone wash-basins where Trojan women did their washing (22.154); the beauty of an olive sapling uprooted by storm (17.55), or of the broad walls of Troy, built by gods (21.447). Helen is beautiful, as are Paris (3.44-55) and the Trojan women (22.155), while Hellas is the land ‘of beautiful women’ (*kalligunaika*, e.g. 2.683). The general Greek love for beauty Hegel found epitomized in the attention to ornament,<sup>12</sup> and if it is indeed true that Homer’s *Iliad* sounds a keynote that would distinguish Greek culture from, say, Roman or Gothic, then it is significant that Homer praises the beauty of Achilles – that invincible champion yet doomed so soon to die (21.108).

One passage where this language of beauty is especially prevalent is the passage about the shield of Achilles, and the whole episode can be given a plausible Hegelian reading, I suggest. The passage itself occurs in *Iliad* 18, at the point when Achilles is poised to return to battle to avenge the death of Patroclus. At this juncture, he receives new armour forged in the smithy of the gods and Homer devotes some 200 lines to describing the scenes of nature and human life which Hephaestus engraved on Achilles’ new shield. Homer does not interpret the scenes, of course, yet they offer a suggestive portrait of man’s place within the cosmic totality. At the centre of the shield are depicted the earth, heavens, sea and constellations of stars – those vast natural things that endure through all human doings. Around these Hephaestus places two cities. One city is at peace, and here people dance in a wedding, and a dispute is settled by words and calm judges. The other city is at war and here are scenes of fighting and death, as in much of the *Iliad* itself. Around the two cities is placed their agricultural hinterland: the arable, with scenes of ploughing and harvesting, then the vineyards, then the grazing land. Finally on the rim around everything is placed Ocean, which in the Archaic Greek scheme was both Oceanus (one of the primal, Titanic gods) as well the ‘ocean stream’ which was thought to surround the whole earth. It is a shield with such representations that Achilles carries into battle: this is the shield with which he will

<sup>12</sup> *Lectures on Philosophy of History*, Second Part (“The Greek World”), II.1 (“The Subjective Work of Art”).

rout the Trojan army, kill suppliants, fight the rivers, and duel with Hector. It is also the shield he will carry when he dies. Both in its making and later (19.379-80, 22.314) Homer pauses several times to praise the work as beautiful, worthy of its divine maker and human bearer.

Here from the Hegelian perspective is a perfect example of epic art. The Shield gives a vision of the cosmos and man's place within it, moving tacitly from the oldest divinities of Earth and Heaven down into the endless particularity of human experience: a representation of Spirit, perhaps. Moreover, the Shield becomes part of a larger narrative that explores man's place and self-understanding within the whole. Achilles here literally bears the universal, and its reality and meaning are somehow bound up with his story, and vice versa. The exact interpretation of this relation between the Shield and Achilles' fate remains debated, but this the very lack of consensus may well bolster the Kantian notion that the meaning of an art-work cannot be fully conceptualized, even while it inspires much conceptual interplay between understanding and imagination. A Hegelian approach would go further to suggest that a work so fruitful of aesthetic ideas is a sensuous manifestation of the infinity of the Idea itself.

The Hegelian Absolute is, of course, the intimate union of seeming opposites like universal and particular, object and subject, God and man. Some aspects of the later books of the *Iliad* may point in a Hegelian direction. Particularly relevant here is Scully's reading of the Shield. Scully (2003) emphasizes that when Achilles first contemplates the Shield, he does so with a fierce delight. By contrast, his Myrmidons and Hector cannot look on it without fear (*Il.* 19.12-19, 22.136). Thus, the Shield would seem to mark Achilles' transcendence of the merely mortal. Achilles is transfigured in other ways too in the final scenes: his divine mother appears to him; after the death of Patroclus, he abstains from sex, sleep and food, and is sustained by ambrosia; when he goes out to battle, his immortal horses suddenly speak to him; in battle he becomes like a god of war, fired with an energy akin to the divine, as when with the help of Hephaestus he fights the divine river Scamander, or when he threatens Apollo. In the scenes of fighting, he is calmly and cruelly indifferent to death, both the deaths of others and of himself, and in this too he resembles the gods, for it is the deathlessness of the 'immortals' (*athanatoi*) that makes them indifferent to death. Through all this, the 'will of Zeus' is done, and Achilles is restored to the deathless glory (*kleos aphthiton*) that he so desired. The fashioning of the Shield prefigures his final, glorious victory over Hector and so honours Achilles as the 'best of the Achaeans', a hero and therefore quasi-divine. One suggestive passage has it that Achilles did not merely *carry* his shield and other god-forged weapons. Rather, Homer says that the armour fitted him perfectly, and he flew in them, as if they lifted him 'like wings' (*Il.* 19.385-86). So for the proficient warrior, the external weapons are not an impediment but an extension of his will. Or, in more Hegelian terms, object and subject are united in the quasi-absolute that is the victorious Achilles: that substantial man, filled temporarily with the irresistible force of divinity, something that simply *is*, to be contemplated and admired as beautiful, even when it is a terrifying beauty, beyond conventional notions of good and evil.

A Hegelian reading might thus stress divine aspects of the Absolute in the figure of Achilles and his god-forged Shield. Hegel also remarks that the conclusion of the *Iliad* is 'most beautiful and satisfying' (*LFA* II.1090), yet for most readers the scenes of the reconciliation of Priam and Achilles, of Achilles' acceptance of his

own finitude as a social being and a mortal, of the Trojans' lamentations and Hector's funeral – all these sound a note of existential melancholy, far in spirit from Hegelian constructions of the Absolute's self-disclosure through exceptional heroes. Indeed, it is a curious fact that Homer makes his Achilles the most thoughtful of heroes: he alone resists Agamemnon on principles of honour and justice; he alone seems to begin to challenge the heroic code, both resisting and exaggerating the conventions of his heroic society, as he seeks honour 'from Zeus alone' and not in the gift-tokens of his would-be peers. Most poignantly, Achilles in his meeting with Priam will generalize about the human condition, teaching the older man how all are creatures of circumstances, destined always to receive some misfortune from the 'jars of Zeus'. Here and throughout the poem, Achilles' language is unique to him, appropriate perhaps to the depth and originality of his perspective. Homer's Achilles is certainly a thinking person, beside whom a Diomedes or Hector are merely conventional.<sup>13</sup> It might be too much to describe him as a philosopher, yet one can contrast the final wisdom that he offers Priam with Hegelian ideas. Achilles' speech to Priam epitomizes the dualistic 'wisdom' typical of the Archaic Greek age, stressing the sheer difference between man and divinity: man is not an immortal, but subject to death, suffering, limitations, and 'negativity' generally as Zeus distributes from his 'jar of evil'. Forgotten now is the earlier blaze of energy that seemed to project Achilles above mere mortality and made him the revelation of Zeus' power and will. This stress on difference and limitation is perhaps more akin to contemporary intuitions than Hegel's insistence that to know a limit is to transcend it, and that in the purity of reasoning human beings can recognize and therefore transcend all limitations and attain a real infinity of understanding. Such a perspective would interpret the *Iliad's* final scenes as an early moment in the Spirit's self-discovery as inherently infinite: after all his heroic feats are over, Achilles may die bodily, yet his final words reach higher than any deeds, for here he reaches for the vision of Zeus himself, and so Achilles' didactic, almost prosaic speech to Priam reveals him as essentially a contemplative being that can and should think the whole.

### III

#### AN EPIC OF THE ABSOLUTE?

Whether one prefers Greek Archaic dualism or Hegelian monism, it is interesting to gather together Hegel's scattered remarks and recognize how he hints at the material identity of epic poetry and philosophical history. For Hegel, both share the same content, though their form differs: epics prefigured his own philosophy of

<sup>13</sup> On Achilles' language, see especially Adam Parry, 'The Language of Achilles', *Transactions and Proceedings of the American Philological Association* 87 (1956), 1-7; David B. Claus, 'Aidos in the Language of Achilles', *Transactions of the American Philological Association* 105 (1975), 13-28; and Paul Friedrich and James Redfield, 'Speech as a Personality Symbol: The case of Achilles', *Language* 54: 263-88. Reproduced in *Homer: Critical Assessments*, ed. Irene J.F. de Jong (London: Routledge, 1999). Friedrich and Redfield conclude that Achilles' language does not reflect alienation from societal values of honour and victory, but do mirror his forceful character: 'He is so used to dominating others that he has developed no manipulative skills to help him when that dominance becomes difficult' (1978: 255). Arieti, by contrast, goes much further in detecting a subjectively complex Achilles when he concludes: 'Achilles is an explorer and discoverer of moral values as significant for the western world as Abraham' ('Achilles' Alienation in *Iliad* 9', *The Classical Journal* 82.1 (1986), 1-27 (p. 11)).

history, while on the other hand, his philosophical history is a kind of epic of the Absolute. Again, Hegel regards good epics as rehearsing the dialectic of universal-particular-individual as they depict a whole culture through the representative deeds of its greatest heroes. These deeds typically involve significant wars, for it is such extreme tests that the values and spirit of a civilization are most keenly displayed. Therefore epics are 'national bibles' and Hegel opines that 'it would be interesting to form a collection of such epic bibles. For the series of epics, excluding those which are later *tours de force*, would present us with a gallery of the spirits of peoples' (LFA II.1045). Hegel's own partial list of the Indian *Ramayana* and *Mahabarata*, Greek *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, Roman *Aeneid*, Christian *Cid*, *Jerusalem Liberated*, *Lusiad*, *Inferno* and many others from various periods illustrates the catholicity of modern thought as a whole, which seeks to embrace all history in its ken, from its broad outlines to most intimate detail. Furthermore, for Hegel, the task of Reason is to divine the hidden unity through apparent multiplicity, and so he suggests that the most important 'national bibles' feature wars between nations that involve some higher principle. This

arises above all in the *Iliad* where the Greeks take the field against the Asiatics and thereby fight the first epic battles in the tremendous opposition that led to the wars which constitute in Greek history a turning-point in world history. In a similar way the *Cid* fights against the Moors; in Tasso and Ariosto the Christians fight against the Saracens, in Camoens the Portuguese against the Indians. And so in almost all the great epics we see peoples different in morals, religion, speech, in short in mind and surroundings, arrayed against one another; and we are made completely at peace by the world-historically justified victory of the higher principle over the lower which succumbs to a bravery that leaves nothing over for the defeated. In this sense, the epics of the past describe the triumph of the West over the East, of European moderation, and the individual beauty of a reason that sets limits to itself, over Asiatic brilliance and over the magnificence of a patriarchal unity still devoid of perfect articulation or bound together so abstractly that it collapses parts separate from one another (LFA II.1062).

With regard to the *Iliad*, the somewhat complacent notion that the Greek victories under Achilles represent the triumph of beautiful Greek rationality over Oriental despotism is replayed in the *Lectures on Philosophy of History*. Here Achilles becomes the representative of the Greek spirit, whose ardent, youthful idealism would find its final champion in Alexander. Alexander modeled himself on Achilles and so Homer's narrative of his victories over Hector and the Trojans becomes the paradigm for the historical extension of Greek rationality over the Levant, Egypt, Mesopotamia, Persian and even India – those cradles of the Hegelian Orient. In turn, Alexander becomes for Hegel the first of those world-historical individuals whose vast passions and megalomaniacal ambitions paradoxically furthered the rational progress of the species. Similarly with Achilles: he becomes the ultimate ancestor of Caesar, Charlemagne and Napoleon, and in the *pathos* of his wrath, he becomes the unwitting champion of man's quest for self-knowledge and absolute freedom from limitation. Achilles becomes representative of the self-justified power of the human spirit itself, the most human and universal of Homer's characters, though it is only a comprehensive modern philosophy that can appreciate his significance in the larger story. Here, one might detect in Hegel yet another sign of his fascination with power. His Achilles and Alexander are as *self*-justified as being itself, and the philosophical contemplator of the whole of history can only admire them for their all-consuming energy. So too Hegel's heroes have the right,

stemming from the Idea itself, to war down the wayward (PR §93, 350), and his theodicy envisions history as the *Schlachtbank* on which individuals and nations are sacrificed for the self-realization of the Spirit. The *Iliad* too glorifies the violence of heroes, yet about Achilles' final madness, killing of innocents like Lycaon, mutilation of Hector, sacrifice of twelve Trojan youths, and so forth – about these Homer may well be more profoundly ambiguous than Hegel.

In any case, Hegel's overall understanding of Achilles and the *Iliad* is curiously consistent with his conception of history as a whole. History, like Being, is ultimately singular and comprises a single movement of the Spirit, as it develops itself through the successive spirits of different civilizations: China, India, Persia, Egypt, Greece, Rome, Christian Europe, with all their innumerable wars, characters, events – each of these spirits both individual and communal ultimately bear the impress of the infinite totality of Spirit itself. If this is the case, could the individual events of history form so much material for a universal epic? One passage in the *Lectures on Fine Art* does indeed show Hegel sketching out such an 'absolute epic': here, the geographical and world-situation would be the 'entire earth'; the hero would be Spirit itself, that is 'the spirit of man, or humanity'; the event or action would be 'world history itself' played out on the 'battlefield of the universal spirit' (LFA II.1064-65).<sup>14</sup>

The passage envisions the philosophical history of the world as a kind of prose epic. But even while pondering the possibility, Hegel dismisses it – perhaps somewhat ruefully? Certainly, his ambiguity towards epic art as both absolute and historically past returns here in his ambivalence towards a possible philosophical epic. It cannot be done artistically, he concludes: the world-situation would not be limited to Greece and the Troad, for instance, but would incorporate the entire earth (and perhaps the whole physical cosmos?) which in Hegel's revised Kantian schema is an Idea known to Reason but not to sense, and therefore unrepresentable in sensuous form. Similarly the Spirit that would be the 'hero' of epic world-history can be grasped only in non-sensuous thought, and would therefore need to be represented symbolically through a 'succession of the really world-historical figures'. The *Philosophy of History* does in fact offer a series of such figures in Alexander, Caesar, Charlemagne, and Napoleon, but they become less individual personalities than exemplifications of the abstract notion of the 'cunning of Reason'. Furthermore, while both epics and histories often concentrate on wars, it is not phalanxes and heroic champions that clash on the 'battleground of the universal spirit' but rather the soundless struggle of propositions and categories. Hegel may thus sketch an analogy between epics and the philosophical 'epic' of history, and in his project of universal monism, he may have hoped to demonstrate the inner identity of epic art and philosophy, with epic poetry pointing to its spiritual completion in the prose of a philosophical narrative. Here one can only point more forcefully than does Hegel to the possible disjunction between his project and Homer's story of Achilles.

<sup>14</sup> One might note also the debate as to whether the *Phenomenology of the Spirit* with its 'succession of Spirits' and 'gallery of images' (§808) can or should be interpreted as a *Bildungsroman*: see, for example, Speight op. cit. pp. 16-17.

## CONCLUSION

A painting of Rubens depicts 'Aristotle contemplating the bust of Homer' (1653). Here '*the philosopher*' contemplates *the poet*', and it is as if Rubens wonders what they would have said to each other if they were contemporaries. Hegel's remarks on epic in the *Lectures on Fine Art* and elsewhere reveal the systematic philosopher of modernity contemplating Homer as one of his predecessors and even as one his peers in the timeless realm of the spirit. Hegel admired Homer's *Iliad* not only as the model of epic art but as an adumbration of his own dialectical vision. This admiration helped to inspire his thesis that epic art generally is one mode of the Absolute, incorporating both objective and subjective realities into a unified whole. But for all the greatness of epic, its sensuous presentation of the Absolute could not (for Hegel) be repeated in modern, reflective societies, and all modern epics would be doomed to lack the primitive freshness of genuine epic. Yet, at the same time, Hegel remains consistent with himself when he hints at the unity of epic art and philosophy, at least in their shared content. A complete collection of epics would provide a kind of history of mankind, while the philosophical history of the world would be an epic of epics – if only it could be sung.