

The Limits of Textuality: Mobility and Fire Production in Homer and *Beowulf*

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Brian Stock has explained in *The Implications of Literacy* how “ways of thinking associated with orality often survive in a textual environment” (1983:12), and Paul Zumthor has underlined the importance of vocality in the performance of texts that were read at times such as the Middle Ages when illiteracy was the norm. However, Stock has also stressed the change in mentalities due to the advent of literacy: “The new use of texts is not merely ‘the graphic counterpart of speech.’ It has a structure and logical properties of its own. In societies functioning orally the advent of the written word can disrupt previous patterns of thought and action, often permanently” (18). For, in orality “the form and content of knowledge, whose logical properties are not differentiated as in textual tradition, are passed on in a series of face-to-face encounters. Such meetings are rich in gesture, ritual, and ceremony: men communicate not only by what they say but by how they behave” (14-15).

For Katherine O’Brien O’Keeffe, writing is language made spatial (1990:4):

Speaking is in essence a temporal act, and spoken communication depends on the presence of the audience before a speaker. . . . Literacy thus becomes a process of spatializing the once-exclusively temporal, and the thought-shaping technology of writing is an index of the development of this process. . . . In the hypothetical case of an originally oral poem, for example, committing the work to writing involves loss and gain—loss of interpretative performance but gain in the conservation of the poem. That loss is gradually, though never completely, compensated for by the addition of graphic cues that add information which guides interpretation.

Ursula Schaefer (1991:124) further explained that

even if we consider some of the preserved poetry to be “transcripts” of sorts from oral poetry, the simple act of writing down had already

transformed the singer's existence onto parchment which had to be brought to life again by somebody who usually was not this singer. This transformation of the living individual into a merely "potential voice" meant that until the "performance" it was waiting, as it were, to be revived by somebody else (or even by the same individual). This was the consequence of the moment of performance being separated from the moment of composition. While with the "singer of tales" the sung composition and the reception by listening were one, as soon as the writing medium interceded, composition and performance were separate events.

Thus the advent of literacy separated the moment of composition from that of performance. The poet had to rely on means of communication independent from gestures, muscular tone, vocal intonations, and the overall expressive dynamic of the body. The disappearance of corporeal mobility through the exteriorized and objectified existence of the written lines must have been a compelling difficulty in a period when an oral mentality—for which mobility was a component of communication—was gradually learning to convey meanings through motionless signs. Those changes were to modify patterns of thought both in the communication of ideas and in the reception of them, but first and foremost in the act of conceptualization.

To echo O'Brien O'Keeffe's words, "committing the work to writing involves loss and gain." The loss I wish to discuss is not associated with some prelapsarian state in which presence and communication were meaningful without the mediation of language (verbal and non-verbal) as a system of constructs. It is rather a shift from one way of creating meanings and shaping concepts to another. As Jack Goody puts it (1987:256): "Writing makes a difference not only to the expression of thought but to how that thinking is done in the first place." Correspondingly, Walter Ong has famously distinguished the psychodynamics of orality from that of literacy in this way (1982:55): "An oral culture simply does not deal in such items as geometrical figures, abstract categorization, formally logical reasoning processes, definitions, or even comprehensive descriptions, or articulated self-analysis, all of which derive not simply from thought itself but from text-formed thought."

The psychodynamics of orality and literacy must not be confused with orality and literacy as historical facts. John Miles Foley has rightly argued against an artificial separation of literacy and orality according to what has been called the Great Divide model: "The key concept in further development of this field must then be *complication*. We can no longer afford to settle for either side of the Great Divide model, for to do so is to turn away from the complex reality of our ancient and medieval texts"

(1991:36). On the basis of Stock's statement that "ways of thinking associated with orality often survive in a textual environment" (1983:12), the "complication" I propose in this essay involves reading signs of mobility, that is, signs of a way of thinking in which mobility is of prime significance. This way of thinking is akin to the psychodynamics of orality as defined by Ong.

This inquiry will lead me to question traditional interpretations of lines that have become difficult to read from within a literate mind-set. For example, scholars have often seen in Hephaestus a lame puffing god, whereas study of phraseology associated with him in the *Iliad* suggests a more complex case: while orality seems to have expressed extraordinary mobility, literacy involves handicap. As for the epic poem *Beowulf*, critics have strived vainly to give Grendel and his mother a shape—preferably monstrous—when all we know of their external appearance is that in fact they look human.¹ Once again mobility is more significant than form.

Consider John Carrington's experience. Quoting from Carrington, Ong comments: "Asked what he thought of a new village school principal, a Central African responded to Carrington, 'Let's watch a little how he dances.' Oral folk assess intelligence not as extrapolated from contrived textbook quizzes but as situated in operational contexts" (1982:55). The logic of this answer also underlies the *Iliad*, *Beowulf*, and the *Homeric Hymn to Hermes*. Hephaestus, Hermes, and the dragon in *Beowulf* all make fire. In each case, the praxis of fire production is staged not as a technical operation but as a bodily event associated with an abnormal or extraordinary type of mobility. Moreover, the conceptual link between the body and the creation of fire is not to be found within a formal logic and a subject-object relationship. Instead of a form consisting of organs and capable of handling tools, the body is defined by its movements, and it is these movements that are the origin of fire. Mobility is at the core of this other logic.²

Words as objects and not as events—that is, as written rather than oral—give different accounts of the world.³ When a literate thinker such as

¹ Hrothgar explains that, according to his hall-counselors who have seen them, Grendel's mother is in the likeness of a woman (*idese onlicnes*) and Grendel has the form of a man (*on weres wæstmum*) (1351-52). The word *wæstm* ("form," dative plural *wæstmum*) appears in this line only in the poem. Quotations from *Beowulf* are made from Jack 1994.

² See further Bolens 2000:espec. chs. 2, 4.

³ "Formal logic is the invention of Greek culture after it had interiorized the technology of alphabetic writing" (Ong 1982:52).

Aristotle investigates the nature of movements, his question sounds like the opposite of the orally based problematic: “That which first causes movement in the animal is necessarily in some beginning,” that is, must be situated in some beginning (702). Aristotle’s endeavor is to locate the ἀρχή, “the beginning,” within the body. Instead of the idea that movement *is* the beginning, Aristotle states that movement is bound to be *in* a beginning. The philosopher then proceeds through a series of analogies leading him to assert that the origin of movements is desire (703) *within* the soul, which is analogous to the innate spirit *within* the heart. The order of priority has changed (organs come first, movements second) and along with it the modes of signification of the body.

The Homeric Hymn to Hermes

Hermes’ corporeality is linked to remarkable events. Hermes is born from Zeus’ love for the nymph Maia who gives birth to a παιῖδα πολύτροπον “a child of many turns, of many wiles” (13). Πολύτροπος is formed on πολύς “many” and τρόπος “turn,” derived from τρέπω “to turn.” The adjective can be understood literally (of many physical turns) as well as metaphorically (of many wiles, ruses, tricks, or skills). Both readings are pertinent, for the god is skilled—he invents the lyre out of a tortoise, also fire-sticks and the ritual sacrifice of oxen—and beguiles his brother Apollo while stealing his cattle; moreover, he does so by revolving in many directions and by inverting the usual directions of bodies and footprints. The newly born god invents the lyre and with it sings his own begetting, “naming the genesis made famous of himself” (59). This self-reflexivity and the use of language as a creative power will soon be paralleled by concrete “re-flections” that create fire as they reverse the directions of bodies.

The divine child Hermes steals the cattle of Apollo, the solar god, leading fifty oxen away from the herd, driving them through a sandy place and inverting their traces (ἵχνη’ ἀποστρέψας, 76). The aorist participle ἀποστρέψας of ἀπο-στρέφω “to turn in the opposite direction, to turn back” suggests grammatically that the hoofprints are reversed when pressed on the ground. The mobility of signs—here tracks—is further emphasized by the nature of the surface they are imprinted upon: footprints on sand are likely to alter. The god then inverts the hoofs themselves (literally, “making the hoofs opposite,” 77), placing the front of them in the back and the back in the front (77-78), and Hermes himself walks along backwards (ἔμπαλιν,

78). An old man witnesses the scene and is later questioned by Apollo. He answers that the child, as he walked, was turning in all directions (ἐπιστροφάδην, 210, an adverb likewise formed on στρέφω “to turn”).

The old man adds that Hermes was driving the cattle backwards, holding the head opposite to himself (κάρη δ' ἔχεν ἀντίον αὐτῷ, 211). Hugh Evelyn-White translates “he was driving them a backwards way, with their heads towards him.” He thus interprets κάρη “head/s” as a plural although it can also be a singular; he reads ἀντίον αὐτῷ as “towards him,” and translates ἀντία ποιήσας ὀπλάς (77) as “[Hermes] reversed the marks of their hoofs.” It is indeed possible for the adjective ἀντίος to mean “facing” as well as “opposite,” but if we choose to see a singular in κάρη and assign the same meaning to both instances of ἀντίος, we find the image of a bidirectional body, an image that fits in the series of inversions narrated in the text. After inverting the prints, the hooves, and the entire bodies of the oxen, Hermes walks backwards, turning in all directions and holding his head opposite to himself, that is, opposite to the front part of himself.

One more word manifests the importance of turning in Hermes' mobility. The aorist participle αὐτοτροπήσας (86) is used just as the child has woven sandals for his feet and is ready to steal the cattle away. Laurence Kahn explains that this participle is commonly translated by “with personal means,” but because the term is formed on αὐτο and τροπέω (=τρέπω) “to turn,” it can also be understood as “un mouvement, . . . un geste d'Hermès, ‘se retournant sur lui-même’” (1978:45, n. 12). This tends to confirm the idea that Hermes reverses not only the cattle's hoofs, but also himself and possibly his own head. In other words, inversions take place in the bodies he acts upon as well as within his own body.

The sandals Hermes weaves for himself with twigs of tamarisk and myrtle leave prints that are unreadable for Apollo, who is in search of his stolen cattle. He can recognize the tracks of the oxen despite their being turned backwards, he says, but he cannot identify the marks visible on the other side of the path: they cannot be footprints of man or woman or wolves or bears or lions, “nor do I think they are the tracks of a rough-maned Centaur—whoever it be that with swift feet makes such monstrous footprints” (224-25 Evelyn-White). The adjective πέλωρος “monstruous, enormous, exceptional” is derived from πέλωρ, which designates Hephaestus and Hades in the *Iliad*. Despite his extreme youth, Hermes' mobility creates signs bewildering even to the all-seeing solar god.

Before Zeus—whose judgment is called upon—Apollo explains his surprise and says that Hermes drove the cattle across a sandy place, using neither his feet nor his hands (346-47); “but, furnished with some other

means, he trudged his way—wonder of wonders!—as though one walked on slender oak-trees” (348-49 Evelyn-White). The verb (δια-)τριβω means “to rub, grind, consume,” and Evelyn-White translates it by “to trudge” to denote Hermes’ gait. It seems, however, paradoxical that a hypermobile god should have a heavy gait, and it is therefore probably more accurate to maintain the idea of rubbing since the child’s tracks suggest that he walked by means of slender oak-trees. For he is about to rub twigs together and invent fire-sticks.

To this point, neither feet nor hands have been used, but prodigious traces of rubbing are perceptible, and a few lines later an interesting verb is chosen by Apollo to describe Hermes’ capacity to create artifices and wiles: διαπυρπαλάμησεν (357). This verb derives from διά “throughout,” τὸ πῦρ “fire,” and ἡ παλάμη “palm of the hand, hand.” Evelyn-White translates it as “[he had gone home] by crafty turns and twists.” Although turns and twists are indeed relevant here, the signifiers literally refer to hands and fire. The implied meaning of the verb is “he was making tricks,” while its concrete, more immediate, meaning echoes the god’s second invention, the technique of fire: πυρὸς . . . τέχνην (108), that is, the production of fire by palms rubbing pieces of wood together.

Here is the passage in question: “[Hermes] gathered a pile of wood and began to seek the art of fire. He chose a stout laurel branch and trimmed it with the knife . . . held firmly in his hand: and the hot smoke rose up. For it was Hermes who first invented fire-sticks and fire” (108-11). Evelyn-White, following Kuhn, thinks that “there is a lacuna here. In l. 109 the borer is described, but the friction of this upon the fire-block (to which the phrase ‘held firmly’ clearly belongs) must also have been mentioned” (331, n. 1). Allen, Halliday and Sikes agree with this interpretation (1980:302): “Accordingly, if ὄζον and ἄρμενον denote different things, and if, as all anthropologists have seen, the process of friction is omitted, the lacuna demanded by Kuhn must be allowed.”

The text at lines 109-10 reads, literally, “taking a twig of the magnificent laurel, he trimmed it with iron / held [the twig] in his palm; the hot breath exhaled.”⁴ Both singular and neuter, ὄζον “twig” and ἄρμενον “held” can perfectly fit together, meaning that Hermes holds the twig in his palm with the consequence that a hot breath rises. The omission of the movement of friction is a lacuna only if an instrumental logic is expected. But the *Homeric Hymn to Hermes* narrates a corporeal event, not a practical

⁴ δάφνης ἀγλαὸν ὄζον ἔλων ἐπέλεψε σιδήρῳ / ἄρμενον ἐν παλάμῃ· ἄμπνυτο δὲ θερμὸς αὐτμῆ.

instruction on innovative tools used by a subject acting upon an object. The friction of fire-sticks implies a fast, back-and-forth movement of the hands by which the twig revolves on the fire-block, and rapid, back-and-forth movements define Hermes' own mobility.

Thus the omission of the revolving motion of the fire-stick is not a lacuna after all: it indicates that the text is concerned not with pragmatics but with mobility. Instead of a technical instruction on fire-sticks, the hymn describes a polytropic god who moves in ever-changing and opposite directions, creating signs that elude Apollo himself by means of his gait and the twigs he rubs on the ground, producing heat with a twig he holds in his "fire-palm." In short, movement is understood as the origin of fire, and it was only the later literary audience of this text decided that something was missing.

Not illogically, Apollo feels threatened by his newborn brother Hermes, so young and already so powerful. He strives to overcome him precisely by limiting his mobility, surrounding his hands with firm bonds, with strong ligatures (409). "But the bands would not hold him, and the withes of osier fell far from him and began to grow at once from the ground," instead binding Apollo's cows. Kahn comments that "[Hermès] engendre le mouvement de ses liens" (1978:5). Hermes sets matter in motion or, more accurately, his creation is motion.

Hermes is then described as looking down on the ground, flashing fire. The verb ἀμαρύσσω means "to sparkle, shine, shoot forth, dart, cast lightnings," and the god is understood as emitting fire. The strangeness of this idea has led translators to situate fire in the eyes of the god, deflating the image down to a metaphor. Thus Evelyn-White renders "with eyes flashing fire"; similarly Humbert translates as "il jeta de côté des regards flamboyants." The text does not, however, mention the eyes. Admittedly, Hesiod used the same phrase in his *Theogony*, referring to fire flashing from Typhoeus' eyes (826-27). But in that instance the eyes are actually mentioned; moreover, Typhoeus is a dragon born from Earth and Tartarus; fire springs from his one hundred heads. His eyes are not merely shining, flashing fire metaphorically only; actual flames are produced by this extraordinary body. The dragon's power is such that "he would have come to reign over mortals and immortals" (837) if Zeus had not perceived it and fought against him, opposing lightning to fire: "through the two of them heat took hold on the dark-blue sea, through the thunder and lightning, and through the fire from the monster, and the scorching winds and blazing thunderbolt" (844-46). In Hermes' case, the phrase πῦρ ἀμαρύσσων allows equally for a literal reading: the god spins, revolves, inverts

directions, creates fire-sticks, cannot be tied down, and emits fire from his body.

Hephaestus in the *Iliad*

Hephaestus is characterized by his peculiar gait and has been seen throughout Western tradition as a limping and therefore diminished figure of the pantheon: “Hephaestus the god has crippled feet, making him an outsider among the perfect Olympians” (Burkert 1985:168). The reason for this interpretive consensus is to be found in Book 18 of the *Iliad*, where the smith is said to limp and is denoted by such terms as *κυλλοποδίων* (371) and *ἀμφιγυήεις* (393), two compound adjectives supposedly referring to a motor handicap. In fact, both adjectives may be understood as denoting a revolving motion. Indeed, *κυλλοποδίων* is a compound of the noun “foot” and a derivation from the verb “to roll, revolve.” It has been interpreted as the idea of a twisted and consequently maimed foot (see Chantraine 1968:s.v.). As for *ἀμφιγυήεις*, it has been translated into “limping with both legs.” But the stem *γυ-* refers to the notion of bending without negative connotation, appearing for example in *γυῖα* “joints”; any articular area of the body is defined as such because of its capacity to bend and modify the angles of the limbs.

The traditional interpretation of *ἀμφιγυήεις* has been rightfully called into question by Louis Deroy (1956), who analyzed the epithet into “*doué (-εις) d’une direction (-γυη-) double et divergente (ἀμφι-)*” [endowed with a double and diverging direction]. He concludes that, “according to linguistic evidence, Homer applied to Hephaestus a learned epithet, issued from some theological repertoire, which informs us that this god had the reputation of being able to move not only ahead, like everybody else, but also, quite surprisingly, in the opposite direction, backwards.”⁵ The iconography confirms Deroy’s reading, as one of the most ancient representations of Hephaestus paints him riding a donkey with one foot entirely turned backward by an inversion of the ankle and two fingers of his left hand pointing towards the rear, emphasizing the simultaneous

⁵ “Au témoignage de la linguistique, Homère aurait appliqué à Héphaïstos une épithète savante, tirée d’on ne sait quel répertoire théologique, et qui nous apprend que ce dieu avait la réputation de pouvoir se déplacer non seulement en avant comme tout le monde, mais aussi, fort étonnamment, en sens inverse, vers l’arrière” (1956:134).

bidirectionality of his body (François Vase, beg. sixth century B.C.E., Museum of Florence).

Détienne and Vernant, agreeing with Deroy's reading of Hephaestus' epithet, compare his mobility to that of Hermes (1974:257). Both gods have a gait defined by revolving movements and contradictory directions. The *Iliad* depicts Hephaestus revolving around his bellows, sweating and speeding up (18.372-73); his thin legs moved quickly beneath him (18.411), and, at this point, he is said to be limping (χωλεύων), while he is also called πέλωρ αἴητον (18.410-11). These lines have proven difficult to understand and translate.⁶ Mugler (1989) interpreted them as “the monstrous and wheezy cripple left the foot of his anvil, shaking his scrawny legs”, and Daremberg (1865:35) read in the second part of the sentence: “his weak legs were shaking under him (trembling)”;⁷ Murray and Wyatt (1999) translated: “He . . . rose from the anvil, a huge, panting bulk, limping along, but beneath him his slender legs moved nimbly,” while Lattimore (1951) renders: “He . . . took the huge blower off from the block of the anvil limping; and yet his shrunken legs moved lightly beneath him.” Finally, Fagles (1990) translates: “With that he heaved up from the anvil block—his immense hulk hobbling along but his shrunken legs moved nimbly.” The English translators thus tried to resolve the contradiction in Hephaestus' mobility by adding adversatives—absent in the text—such as “*but* his legs moved nimbly” or “*and yet* his legs moved lightly.”

Lattimore sees in πέλωρ αἴητον a reference to a bellows, while Mugler and Murray and Wyatt interpret the phrase as referring to the difficult breathing of the god. Bailly (1950) links the unsure meaning of αἴητος to its cognate ἄητος “terrible, impetuous (as is the blast of winds).” The verb ἄημι is used to describe the action of winds blowing, and the noun ἡ ἀήτης refers to the blowing of winds. As for the noun τὸ πέλωρ, it refers to Hades in the *Iliad*, to Hermes' footprints in his *Homeric Hymn*, and to Typhoeus in Hesiod's *Theogony*; although it can possibly be translated by “monster,” it is more correct and less misleading to read “prodigious being.” For the idea expressed concerning Hephaestus may perhaps be that of a creating god (a smith who can reproduce the world on a metallic shield), one who is phenomenal (πέλωρος) both in his breathing (possibly

⁶ ἀπ' ἀκμοθέτοιο πέλωρ αἴητον ἀνέστη / χωλεύων· ὑπὸ δὲ κνήμαι ῥώνοντο ἀραιαί.

⁷ Mugler (1989): “le Bancal monstrueux et poussif quitta le pied de son enclume en agitant ses jambes grêles”; Daremberg (1865): “ses jambes faibles s'agitaient sous lui (flageolaient).”

similar to the blowing of storming winds) and in his mobility (*ἀμφιγυήεις*, indicating that he can move in simultaneous contradictory directions).

Hephaestus' mobility is highly ambiguous and cannot be simply reduced to a handicap: the smith revolves like the wheels he forges for automatically rolling tripods (18.375), and his legs move swiftly like those of the robot maidens he once created out of gold, and who support him as he walks towards Thetis (18.417). The same verb (*ῥώομαι*) is used for swift warriors who race to the battlefield (11.50, 16.166). In the *Homeric Hymn to Hermes*, the trees, supposedly used by Hermes to make enormous steps or footprints, are said to be "slender," an adjective chosen to qualify Hephaestus' legs in Book 18 of the *Iliad*. The smith is thus a *πέλωρ* and his legs are thin in the way that trees can be said to be thin. This indicates that the adjective should not be translated by "shrunk," as Lattimore and Fagles thought appropriate, or by any word imposing a negative connotation.⁸ Thin legs in Hephaestus—even abnormally thin—need not be read as deficient legs, for slender branches produce fire in the *Homeric Hymn to Hermes*.

At the end of Book 1 of the *Iliad*, Hephaestus, on Mount Olympus among the gods, dashes towards Hera. The verb used, (*ἀν*)-*αἴσσω* (participle *ἀναίξας* 1.584), later describes the soaring of Poseidon compared to a swift-winged hawk (13.62). Poseidon takes on the build and voice of Calchas as he intervenes to increase the strength and ardor of the two Ajaxes. One of them, however, perceives the divine nature of their interlocutor when Poseidon soars skywards, and he asserts that he recognized the traces of his feet and legs (13.71). Gods can be recognized with precision, he says, by means of their traces. In Book 1, Hephaestus is springing up to give his mother a cup. The same verb of movement is used in both cases to denote Poseidon's aerial mobility and that of Hephaestus. In other passages it is Athena and Hera or Iris and Apollo who dart down from the peaks of the Olympus (2.167; 4.73; 14.150, 225); it is also Ulysses who, darting out with his spear, wards off the Trojans threatening him on all sides (11.484); it is Achilles who rushes straight on against a flood (21.303), and Zeus who springs up and stands (15.6, also 17.460). Clearly the verb *αἴσσω* denotes intense mobility.

As we noted, Hephaestus jumps up to give his mother a cup, and he proceeds to serve wine to the Olympians whose unquenchable laughter begins as they see the smith breathing (*ποιπνύοντα*) through the palace (1.600). The odd verb *ποιπνύω* is formed on *πνέω* "to blow, to breathe,"

⁸ Compare "grêles" by Mugler and "faibles" by Daremberg.

with an initial duplication suggesting an intensified respiration. Because Hephaestus is said to limp and because the gods laugh, the participle employed here has been understood as implying a difficulty in breathing, giving way to such translations as “puffing” (Murray and Wyatt 1999).⁹ Yet, an intensified breathing is not necessarily synonymous with being out of breath. It may be due to an increase of mobility in a god whose movements are signified by such verbs as ἀν-αίσσω “to soar, dash forth,” ῥώομαι “to move with energy,” and ἐλίσσω “to revolve, turn around.”

Moreover, another verb, ἀσθμαίνω, meaning clearly this time “to breathe with difficulty,” is used in the *Iliad* to depict Diomedes and Ulysses running after Dolon and, finally out of breath (10.376), catching him. The same verb is used to indicate that Hector is critically wounded and can hardly breathe (15.10, 241; also 10.496). By opposition, the verb πνέω “to blow, to breathe” appears, for instance, when Athena breathes onto a warrior to increase his *menos*, that is, his heat and energy (10.482; 17.456; 11.508; 15.235). With the prefixes *ana-* and *am-*, πνέω means that the person is catching his or her breath.¹⁰ Therefore, the verb ποιπνύω, denoting Hephaestus’ breathing on Mount Olympus, should not be read as implying a lack of breath.

In his smithy, Hephaestus revolves around his bellows. The action of blowing and its correlate, breathing, are essential to the work of the smith, who thereby controls the heat of his element, fire. As he begins to forge new weapons for Achilles, Hephaestus is shown ordering his twenty bellows to adapt their speed to the varying needs of his art. The breath of the speeding bellows echoes the winds called forth by Iris for the sake of Achilles after Patroclus’ death: the pyre of Patroclus does not kindle and Achilles implores Zephyrus and Borea to blow on the funeral flames. The winds soared “with a wondrous din, driving the clouds tumultuously before them. And swiftly they came to the sea to blow on it, and the wave swelled beneath the shrill blast; and they came to the deep-soiled land of Troy, and fell on the pyre, and greatly roared the wondrous blazing fire. So the whole night long as with one blast they beat on the flame of the pyre, blowing shrill (φυσῶντες λιγέως)” (Murray and Wyatt 1999:23.212-18).

⁹ Lattimore (1951) avoids the problem with “bustling.” For Burkert (1985:168), “the *Iliad* makes Hephaestus the occasion and object of Homeric laughter when he assumes the role of the beautiful youth Ganymede and hobbles and wheezes around, pouring out wine to the gods.”

¹⁰ *am-* 22.222; 22.475; *ana-* 15.235; 16.42, 302; 19.227.

Hephaestus is a πέλωρ αἴητον (18.410-11). It may be that he is not puffing: he was perhaps originally a prodigious being with a respiration similar to the blowing of winds on the sea (ἀήμεναι, verb ἄημι “to blow”), winds that generate storms and blazing flames. Like them, he moves with force and rapidity, and, on Mount Olympus, he breathes with an intensity accompanied with divine laughter, while in his smithy around his bellows he melts bronze and gold, mastering the flames, as do winds when blowing on Patroclus’ pyre.

The laughter of the Olympians has been made to imply that the gods are ridiculing Hephaestus. But laughter does not perforce imply mockery. In the *Homeric Hymn* devoted to him, Hermes plays his lyre in front of Apollo, who begins to laugh for joy, “for the sweet throb of the marvelous music went to his heart, and a soft longing took hold on his soul as he listened” (420-23). Both Hermes and Hephaestus create not only movements, but also emotions and their related physical manifestations—in this instance, laughter. Hephaestus’ intervention was aimed at calming the strife between Hera and an increasingly angry and menacing Zeus, and in fact Hephaestus succeeded and modified the mood of the entire assembly. Thus laughter may be seen as having the same status as fire: both originate from a capacity to move and to be moved. Laughter among the Olympians may be understood as an outburst of energy due to the fire god’s increased breathing. Hephaestus’ intervention in this regard is similar to that of Athena’s breathing onto a warrior to increase his heat and energy.

Hephaestus’ mobility is akin to his force, that of fire. In the *Hymn to Hermes*, fire is called the strength of glorious Hephaestus. Hermes produces the first means to make fire as well as fire itself (111); he piles dry wood, and the flame begins to glow: “the strength of glorious Hephaestus was beginning to kindle the fire” (115). A hot breath is exhaled when the twig is in the palms of the god who is responsible for the invention of nothing less than fire. In the *Iliad*, Hephaestus contends with the river Xanthus, burning all in his path, including Achilles’ countless victims, the vegetation of the plain, and the fish in the streams of Xanthus who are said to be tormented by the breath of skillful Hephaestus (21.355). The breath of ingenious Hephaestus (21.366-67) distresses the drying river who cries: “Hephaestus, there is no one of the gods who has the power to contend with you, nor will I fight you, ablaze with fire as you are” (21.357-358). Revolving, burning, and blowing, the divine smith seems neither handicapped nor out of breath. When Zeus sends the gods to fight among the Trojans and the Achaeans, Hephaestus goes with them, “exulting in his might, limping, his thin legs moving rapidly beneath him” (20.36-37).

Yet it is clearly said that Hephaestus limps. The god's lameness is thematized in the narration of his ancient fall. Both Zeus and Hera are said to have hurled him down from Mount Olympus. Zeus seized Hera's son by the foot when he was trying to protect his mother, and cast him away in a descent that lasted for a whole day and ended up in Lemnos among the Sintian people (1.591-94); and Hera, in order to hide his lameness, threw her offspring down onto the earth where he was saved by Thetis and Eurynome, who hid him for nine years and taught him the art of metallurgy (18.394-99). Marie Delcourt saw in the god's double fall the sign of an initiatory ordeal by which a divinity acquires the power that will thereafter characterize him/her (1982:136). In both instances Hephaestus' lower limbs are mentioned, and in the second case the god becomes a smith. These details may account for the idea that a smith moves abnormally, for only an extraordinary mobility can be the origin of flames.

Flames do not exist except in motion; an immobile fire is an impossibility. Movements of flames are not straightforward and predictable, and neither are Hephaestus' contradictory movements. The etymology of *χολός* ("lameness") is obscure (Bailly 1950:s.v.) and it may be that motor deficiency should not be inferred. By opposition, the verb *σκάζω* "to limp" (linked to Sanskrit *khāñjati* "to limp") clearly indicates a difficulty in walking, as Ulysses and Diomedes are said to be limping (*σκάζοντε*, 19.47) owing to wounds they received, and similarly Eurypylus has to limp out from the battle (*σκάζων*, 11.811) because of being struck with an arrow in the thigh. Significant semantic nuances may originally have distinguished the two words, *χολεύω* and *σκάζω*, which later became synonymous.

Abnormal foot direction and gait appear in Strabo and Pliny as curiosities. Strabo writes that, according to Megasthenes, some exotic monsters have their heels turned in front and their toes and soles turned backward (*Geography* 15.1.57), while in Pliny some human beings, inhabitants of a region called Abarimon, have their feet turned backward behind their legs and are endowed with extreme velocity (*Natural History* 7.2.11). Although these descriptions have little meaning since they have been dissociated from any mythical logic, it is noteworthy that the inversion of the ankle, instead of inducing a limitation of movements, is in fact linked with greater speed. This connection tends to confirm that Hephaestus' bidirectionality should be understood as a sign of an exceptional mobility that has been expressed by apparently contradictory information in the *Iliad*. Analogous to the unreadable traces of Hermes, the textual signs of Hephaestus' mobility have proven unreadable to the literate mind for which meanings are conveyed by forms and organs, not by movements.

The dragon in *Beowulf*

The concept of body *signifies* differently depending on the logic in use in a given text. The figures of Hephaestus in the *Iliad* and of Hermes in his *Homeric Hymn* manifest the idea that the signifying mode of a body may reside in its movements rather than in its substance and shape. *Beowulf* also stages bodies in a way that partakes more of the psychodynamics of orality than of literacy. Indeed, bodies in the poem are defined primarily in terms of mobility and physical power. Beowulf's essential quality is that his grasp (*mundgripe*) has the might of thirty men (379-80). This aspect of the Geat seems so relevant that it is announced by the Danish king Hrothgar before Beowulf presents himself, and the fight with Grendel is narrated so as to confer an exponential power on the grasp; later, Beowulf's clenching fist tears off the entire arm (the organ of grasping) of Grendel.

The dismemberment takes place because both warriors pull with equal strength. If Grendel's might were inferior to that of Beowulf, the rest of his body would follow his arm. But instead, the force he opposes gives way to a lethal articular wound: the tendons spring apart and the locks of the bones burst asunder (817-18).¹¹ Later, Beowulf explains his failure to slay Grendel—who, although maimed, manages to escape—by saying that the enemy was “too mighty in his movements,” “to foremihtig . . . on feþe” (969-70). Klaeber translates *feþe* by “going, pace.” The phrase *on feþe* can be translated by “on foot,” but Klaeber insists that *feþe* is not related to *foþ* “foot.” It would therefore be misleading to refer to the organ when in fact motion is signified, and it is more accurate to translate *on feþe* by “in his movements.”

An abnormal relation to metal and metallurgy characterizes Grendel. Grendel's nails are similar to steel (*style gelicost*, 987), and all gazing at his torn arm agree that no metal in the world—even if it were the oldest and strongest iron—could touch the terrible limb (987-90), a claim proven when Beowulf's companions try to come to the rescue in Heorot during the fight and realize that Grendel's body is immune against metal (798-805). Similarly, Grendel's mother is protected against weapons, and her mobility is so powerful that she manages to make the hero fall on the ground by means of her fierce grasps (*grimman grapum*, 1537-44), a feat not to be underestimated in the heroically codified context of the poem. But Beowulf finally overcomes her and beheads her with a gigantic sword found in the cave, the only sword capable of injuring her body.

¹¹ For more on joints and dismemberment in *Beowulf*, see Bolens 2000:ch. 4.

Immediately after the decapitation, a light shines in the cave (1570-72).

Lixte se leoma, leoht inne stod,
efne swa of hefene hadre scineð
rodores candel.

(1570-72)

Light shone, brightness gleamed within, just as the candle of the sky shines clearly from heaven. (Swanton 1978)

The light within the lair is compared to nothing less than that of the sun, the sky-candle. This image is difficult to account for, and Andersson decided to ignore it altogether (1991:230): “The final extermination of monsters should be an occasion for some crowning revelry, but the poet shrinks back again. Instead of a hymn of release, we are now given a view of Beowulf’s companions on the shore despairing of the outcome and fully expecting that Beowulf has succumbed.” But it is not the poet who shrinks back again; it is the critic who unduly jumps ahead, for the scene with the companions comes later. In the meantime, seven signifiers are used to state that light has been produced. The text does not explain how, by whom, from where, or why, but the fact is that the cave, sunk deep under water, is filled with a light so bright that it approximates solar radiance.

Martin Puhvel considers the source of luminosity to be the gigantic sword and justifies the chronology of the description with an anachronistic aesthetic judgment (1979:37): “The fact that the light phenomenon is described only after the account of the decapitation is hardly significant, as the description of the violent act is brief and breathless—to interrupt it with a simile of some length would be very awkward.” To make a point of the poet’s alleged sense of awkwardness is itself awkward. Besides, the “violent act” is hardly brief; it takes the poet 71 lines to narrate it (1500-70). The textual order is relevant and ought to be respected: the light phenomenon takes place immediately after the beheading in the diegesis as well as in the text. It is consequently more accurate to say that a violent physical event is followed by a massive production of light. This idea departs from that of an object endowed with magical qualities such as a luminescent sword. Admittedly, the word *brond* “burning, fire” is used at line 1454 to denote a sword, and the sword brought by Beowulf and first swung at Grendel’s mother is called *beado-leoma* “light of battle” (1523). But this weapon is ineffectual and the hero soon discards it and fights bare-handed until he finds the giants’ sword. If the light in the cave is due to the appearance of the sword itself, it seems (this time indeed) awkward that the

weapon should not be denoted by the compound that associates light and swords. It is therefore certainly significant that the giants' sword is never said to be the cause—as magical object—of the phenomenal light. Light is created by a corporeal event.

In the final part of the poem, heat, light, and fire issue from the body of an extraordinary being called *lig-draca*, “dragon of fire” (2333). From him, lights of battle sprang widely (2582-83); burning (2272, 2569) and surrounded by fire (2274), he produces a burning light (*bryne-leoma*, 2313) and belches flames (2312). To impose on the text the conventional image of dragons as it has been progressively frozen and passed down by tradition is a methodological mistake. In *Beowulf*, the only information we have about the physical appearance of the dragon is that he is fifty feet long when lying dead (3042-43), that he is bare (2273), and that his position shapes him into a ring (2561). He is never said to have wings, but he is said to fly high and wide (2315, 2346) and to move swiftly (2832, 2288). It is thus his mobility that is relevant, not his organs.

The flames belched by the dragon come neither from his mouth nor from his head, but from his *gewitte*, his intellect or senses (2882). *Gewitte* has been variously translated by “head” (Swanton 1978, Jack 1994, Donaldson 1975, Heaney 1999), “breast” (Gordon 1967), “jaws” (Crossley-Holland 1968), and “cerveau” [brain] (Crépin 1991), all of these renderings amounting to efforts to inscribe the unreadable phenomenon within organicity. However, when the same word is used to refer to Beowulf (the only other instance of this noun in the text), its primary meaning is this time respected: “*Pa gen sylf cyning / geweold his gewitte*” (2702-03), “Then the king himself again / controlled his senses” (Swanton 1978), “Then once more the king himself was master of his thoughts” (Gordon 1967), “*Alors le roi se ressaisit en recouvrant ses sens*” (Crépin 1991). Heaney is consistent with his departure from accurate meaning and translates “Once more the king gathered his strength” (1999). Later, the adjective *gewittig* is associated with *cwico* and *wis*: “[Beowulf] was still *cwico* (“alive, quick”), *wis* (“alert, wise, sound in mind”), and *gewittig* (“conscious, capable of thinking”)” (3093). The noun *gewitte* denotes an intellectual capacity. Beowulf's dragon is akin to Hermes *polutropos* and to Hephaestus *polumetis* (*metis* meaning intelligence).¹² Dichotomies such as physical-mental, concrete-abstract, and subject-object do not apply here and cannot account for the phenomenon as it appears to have been understood by an oral mindset. The dragon's intellect is the source of flames because fire is produced not by organs but by a psychophysical event.

¹² See Détiéne and Vernant 1974.

Forseeing the fight to come, Beowulf speaks of the deadly fires, the breaths, and poisons of his adversary (2522-23). Provoked by Beowulf, the dragon appears, preceded by his breath and his hot battle-blood, *hat hildeswat* (2557-58) springing forth from the cave. We saw that the association of fire and breath are present in the characterization of Hephaestus. As for the word *swat*, it denotes “sweat” or “blood.” Crépin (1991) opted for “sweat” with “brûlante sueur de mort” (“burning sweat of death”) and Swanton (1978) translated *swat* by “vapour,” although they both maintained the meaning of blood (“gore”) when the *swat* of Grendel’s mother makes the giants’ sword melt to the hilt (1666b-68a):

Ða þæt hildebil
forbarn, brogdenmæl, swa þæt blod gesprang,
hatost heaþoswata.

Then that war-sword, the patterned blade, burned away as the blood gushed out,
the hottest of battle-gore. (Swanton 1978)

Yet the earlier use of the word *blod* surely leaves no doubt which bodily fluid the text refers to (1616). The female monster’s blood is so hot that even the best of iron melts on contact with it (1617). The same verb *gemeltan* (“to melt”) is used in the Sigemund episode when the warrior transfixes the dragon with his sword (897). Blood and fire spring from Beowulf’s dragon, Sigemund’s dragon melts as metal does, the blood of Grendel’s mother is so hot that it causes metal to melt, and Grendel and his mother are protected against weapons. In short, the text conveys the idea that extraordinary bodies have an atypical relation to heat and are thereby capable of transforming metal. The capacity to increase heat to a melting degree is expressed via fire production and projection of blood.

The association of fire production and projection of blood also appears in the Celtic epic *Táin Bó Cúalnge* (*The Cattle-Raid of Cooley*), in the description of Cuchulainn’s contortions. The hero undergoes a series of inversions until light, fire, and poison are emitted and a jet of blood springs from the top of his head. The inversions are extremely puzzling and have produced various interpretations.¹³ I propose that the physical phenomenon is coherent in that each stage of the contortions is an inversion of normal bodily order. Indeed, every part and joint shakes; the direction of the body is inverted within the skin and the front part of the legs turns backward. Tendons and muscles, no longer spread all over the body structure, gather up and bulge out; dual organs such as the eyes are no longer double, as one

¹³ See Bolens 2000:ch. 3 and Sayers 1985.

of them disappears within the head while the other protrudes; inner organs such as the lungs, the throat, and the liver can be perceived externally. These inversions enact five conceptual pairs: jointed-shaking (that is, disjointed), front-back, spread-gathered, dual-unique, and internal-external. Without the idea of inversion, this manifold physical event seems chaotic, whereas an analysis of it in terms of movements shows that it is cognate with the Homeric epithet for Hephaestus (*amphiguêeis*), with Hermes' polytropic revolutions, and with the production of fire, light, heat, and blood in *Beowulf* via the figures of the dragon and Grendel's mother.

Finally, a Greek weapon dance called the pyrrhic, attested in Greek art as early as the eighth century, was a rite of passage for the adolescent or ephobic warrior at Athens "with social and spiritual meanings" (Lonsdale 1993:139, 140). A great number of iconographic representations of the pyrrhic dance exist, and in the majority of them the head of the dancer is "turned sharply backward" (*ibid.*:147). Running speed is indicated by portraying the legs far apart and bent at the knees.¹⁴ The adjective "pyrrhic" is derived from πῦρ (*pyr*) "fire" (via πυρρός "red like fire," Delavaud-Roux 1993:53), and a fragment attributed to Aristotle (frg. 519) explains its appellation on the basis that "Achilles allegedly first performed the pyrrhic around the pyre (*pyr*) of Patroclus" (Lonsdale 1993:148). Aristotle interestingly associated the Iliadic context, fire, and a turning movement—an explanation that, however, fails to account for the inversion of the head. Bidirectionality, contradictory directions, and revolving motion characterize the mobility of Hephaestus, Hermes, and Cuchulainn; each of them is related to fire production, and the pyrrhic is "the dance of fire." The name of the dance may therefore be explained by the logic of its choreography, which has to do essentially with performing bidirectionality in the body.

We may conclude that Hephaestus was originally seen as the god of fire precisely because he was characterized by his revolving in contradictory directions. In order to be a good smith—and what is more, a divine smith—one must be able to spin! The passage from orality to literacy gradually precluded the readability of a logic soon to become alien to the very culture that had produced it. A form-oriented thinking inferred maimed organs from abnormal movements and converted Hephaestus into a cripple. The mobility of fire and of prodigious beings associated with its power (Hephaestus, Hermes, *Beowulf*'s dragon, Cuchulainn) could not be successfully communicated through literacy, for textuality has one fundamental and non-negotiable limit: it is irremediably still.

¹⁴ A great number of reproductions can be found in Delavaud-Roux 1993.

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