Literary translation as an activity calls for knowledge and skill, the more the better, and will continue to do so, but in different ways. Every project presents its own challenges and difficulties, and must be approached on its own terms. Given the radical changes in writing, readers, and reading that are now evident, along a trajectory whose end we cannot foresee with any clarity, translation as a field will need to be deeply rethought.

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Gods, Heroes and Epic Translations

In the famous opening paragraph of *The Theory of the Novel*, Georg Lukacs describes the age of the epic as an age when the life of mortals corresponds perfectly to the world around them. "Everything in such ages," he writes, "is new and yet familiar, full of adventure and yet their own. The world is wide and yet it is like a home, for the fire that burns in the soul is of the same essential nature as the stars" (29). The correspondence between aspiration and deed, life and essence, belongs, according to Lukacs, to a consciousness fundamentally different from our own – a consciousness of the organic and concrete totality of life where the hero's destiny "connects him by indissoluble threads to the community whose fate is crystallized in his own" (67). The epic is thus ineluctably linked to the Greek world – that is to say, to a profound and endlessly powerful fantasy of origin. Lukacs says that an unbridgeable gulf separates that world from the world of later literature, and specifically, from the world of the novel. While his account of the epic is particularly memorable for its skill and eloquence, it is also in many ways representative of the path by which western modernity has articulated its relation to, or its distance from, the Homeric epics. From this perspective, the epic is not simply one literary genre among others: it is the name for a lost world of perfection.

Even a cursory glance at contemporary scholarship from South Asia reveals, however, that the Indian epics, the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*, occupy a somewhat different position in modern India – or, indeed, in South and Southeast Asia. While the "original" Sanskrit texts may be read by relatively few people, most Indians are familiar with some version of these poems, and references to epic situations and characters are a commonplace in popular culture. In an essay called "Three Hundred Ramayanas," A. K. Ramanujan notes that no one in India or Southeast Asia ever reads the *Ramayana* or the *Mahabharata* for the first time (46), and that in Sanskrit alone, one may find over 25 versions or "tellings" of the story in various genres (24). Instead of relinquishing their authority to entirely new literary creations, the Indian epics seem to reappear in every age in new guises, perhaps dramatizing in their tenacity the tale of one of their minor characters, Yayati. Insatiably attached to life and lust, Yayati convinces his youngest son Puru to trade his youth for his father's age, so that the father might continue to

Canadian Review of Comparative Literature/Revue Canadienne de Littérature Comparée
CRCL/RCLC March / Mars 1999
0319-051X/99/26.1/$10.00/©Canadian Comparative Literature Association

revel in the charms of spring at the expense of the son.

The ease with which these works are assimilated in modern culture is partly related to their status as religious texts. Many Hindus read the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana* in terms of the moral values encoded in the texts, and moreover, consider some of the protagonists to be unambiguously divine. Rama, the hero of the *Mahabharata*, and Krishna, one of the central characters in the *Mahabharata*, are important Hindu deities, both *avatāras* (incarnations, or, more literally, "descents") of the god Vishnu. The rise of Hindu fundamentalism has added yet another dimension to the status of these texts. In the recent past, the epics have been propelled into the mainstream of cultural and political life in India in a manner that might well be unprecedented. The vast appeal of the nationally televised versions of the two epics must be seen in light of the steady militarization of Hinduism and the corresponding impoverishment of popular art and political idiom in the subcontinent.

The Homeric epics may also have had religious significance for ancient Greece, but the advent of Christianity decisively robbed the texts of their sacred dimension, and instead assigned to them the somewhat diminished role of heroic narrative. Thus, though modern scholars often discuss the representation of divinity in the Homeric texts, these works no longer bear for their readers the halo of transcendent truth. And while they certainly play a "political" role in the contemporary world, that role is not as easily discernable, as boldly articulated, as it is in the case of the Indian texts.

I begin with this comparison partly in order to reflect upon the larger institutional context that frames the teaching of "non-western" texts in literature departments in America. In a late and often confused attempt to represent in their curriculum minority populations as well as the countries they come from, literature departments have begun to offer an increasing number of courses in what is called "multicultural," "non-western," or, in the most extravagant designation possible, "world" literature. Anyone who has ever taught such a class is familiar with the peculiar assumptions that guide the syllabus as well as the exigencies which limit it. However, apart from pragmatic considerations, the encounter between texts from heterogeneous traditions raises interesting questions about the methodologies that inform the study of literature; in particular, it brings to focus the troubling status of genre as a defining category of literary analysis. At the very moment when literary study begins questioning the validity of the nationalist project, when it no longer takes for granted its own place in that project; that is to say, at the very moment when a formal category, such as genre, becomes especially attractive to literary study, it also becomes, by the same token, especially suspect. While the use or adequacy of genre distinctions, as well as the ideological burdens of such categories have already been scrutinized in

several contexts, it seems that a specific challenge is posed to genre distinctions by texts from entirely heterogeneous traditions. What happens when we use the "epic," as a defining term, for both the Indian and the Greek texts, given that in the Sanskrit literary tradition, there doesn't really exist a category corresponding to the "epic?" What is lost, and what is gained, by such assimilation?

In addressing the loss, I would suggest that it is not only a question of exposing something in this other tradition which otherwise becomes effaced, negated, or forgotten in the process of renaming. There might be more to this act of recovery, for remembering the context within which these works have been produced and read for several centuries, quite apart from its own proper significance, might also awaken *other* memories. It might, for instance, lead us to reflect anew, not only upon historical models of genealogy and genre, or cultural differences between approaches to literature, but also upon what we can only call the political surplus which circulates within, and traverses, the discourse of genre.

In literary studies, the category of the epic belongs, as we know, to a certain system of classification, and it makes sense within that system. Modern scholarship has explored the ideological shape of (western) epic narrative from various perspectives, and has critiqued, for example, its monologic authority, or its imperialist impulse, but it might be instructive to remember that in the Aristotelian classification, the category becomes meaningful in a rather different sense: it gains its distinction from being situated at a peculiar intersection between the content and the manner of representation. Thus the Homeric epics are distinguished, on the one hand, by their portrayal of serious action (a trait they share with tragedy), and on the other, by their mode of narration (which is distinct from tragedy, since in Epic we hear the voice of the narrator as well as the voices of the characters). In other words, it is in response to a particular set of questions (Who speaks, and about what?) that the system emerges with its impressive taxonomy. It seems both intriguing and significant that from the very outset, there appears to be no *necessary* connection between these two orders: the order of modes and that of content. Perhaps predictably, it is this gap – the potential disarticulation between the two orders – which becomes operative in some of the most remarkable works of modern taxonomy. Thus in his classic essay on genre, Northrop Frye writes, "In this essay I use the word "epos" to describe works in which the radical of presentation is oral address, keeping the word epic for its customary use as the name of the form of the *Iliad*, *Odyssey*, *Aeneid*, and *Paradise Lost*" (248). Once it is divorced from its position among the "radicals" of presentation or narration, epic can only be designated by example: it is the name given to certain texts; a name reserved, as it were, for Homer and his heirs.

The question emerges even more provocatively in Gérard Genette's

masterly essay on "architexts." Genette's argument concerning the necessary historicity of genres is predicated precisely on the transhistoricity of what he calls "modes" – the enunciating situation, or form of narration. The category of mode, Genette maintains, "is the most undeniably universal category inasmuch as it is based on the transhistorical and translinguistic fact of pragmatic situations" (74). Thus, while he convincingly argues that no archigenre (lyric, epic, drama) "could totally escape historicity while at the same time retaining a generic definition" (71), and, in a related gesture, asks how the epic could possibly be defined "without any reference to the Homeric model and tradition" (70), he nevertheless claims a "legitimate" privilege of naturalness for the three modes pure narration, mixed narration, and dramatic imitation (70).

Maintaining the "natural" status of the modes would also mean that a universal or transhistorical poetics would begin with reference to the enunciating subject and its oscillation between various degrees of ventriloquism. Whatever one may make of the designation of modes as "natural," and of the symmetrical divisions that structure Genette's essay (nature/history; natural language/literary language; pragmatics/aesthetics; mode/genre), it is clear that even within this account, modes themselves remain, in a sense, foreign to literary analysis, since they belong, Genette says, to "linguistics, or (more exactly) to what we call pragmatics" (64). In other words, they become operative precisely when one is *not* talking about literature: "*Except when using language for literary purposes*, the language user is constantly required – even (or especially) if unconsciously – to choose between forms of utterance such as discourse and story (in Benveniste's sense), direct quotation and indirect style, etc." (64; my emphasis). So we see that even if we accede to the transhistorical applicability of modes, that would not help us in arriving at a *literary* system of classification that would work across cultural and historical boundaries.[1]

In the Sanskrit tradition, the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*, though often aligned, are not necessarily considered part of the same family. In its

1 Once we embark on this course, the edge of a precipice seems to become discernable under the weight of an unruly horde of questions. Does genre belong, one might ask, to literature? Or rather, what is literature if not that which plays with, but continually resists, the law of genre? Derrida's essay on Blanchot's recit is of course guiding some of these concerns. Moving in a slightly different direction, we could also ask: does "literature" exist across cultures? Does that not come into being, again, as the result of a certain (historical) taxonomy? And if so, do we not surreptitiously bring in a kind of hidden baggage as soon as we speak of "comparative" literature? I cannot presume to answer these questions, but neither can I prevent them from prowling around the limits of this essay. For the moment, I can only address them in a circuitous way: by proceeding with the particular example that initially stimulated this inquiry.

introductory chapters, the *Mahabharata* refers to itself by several names – alternately calling itself *Itihasa* (history), *Purana* (ancient tale), and *Kavya* (poetry). The inclusion of long passages on polity, law, religious observances and ethics within the body of the text have given it an encyclopedic character, and led traditional scholars to regard it sometimes as a *Dharma Sastra* (Law treatise), or even as the Fifth Veda, following the four "revealed" texts of Hindu literature. The work as it exists now is simply colossal, with 100, 000 couplets and at least three broad levels of narration, i.e. three generations of reciters mentioned in the poem itself (Ugrasravas, Vaisampayana, and Krsna Dvaipayana or Vyasa). In the introduction to his English translation, van Buitenen refers to the work as an "expanding library" which collected several books over the centuries (*Mahabharata* xxiii). Elsewhere he says, "If an analogy were to be made to western culture, one would have to imagine something like the following: an *Iliad*, rather less tightly structured than it is now, incorporating an abbreviated version of the *Odyssey*, quite a bit of Hesiod, some adapted sequences from Herodotus, assimilated and distorted pre-Socratic fragments, Socrates by way of Plato by way of Plotinus, a fair proportion of the Gospels by way of moralizing stories, with the whole complex of 200,000 lines worked over, edited, polished, and versified in hexameter by successive waves of anonymous church fathers" (*Introduction to Indian Literatures* 53). The text itself legitimizes, and indeed, invites monumental description, imperiously claiming that "whatever is found here may be found elsewhere, but what is not found here is found nowhere" (I.56.34).

The *Ramayana*, with 24,000 verses divided into seven books, is a somewhat less daunting volume. Tradition ascribes the composition of the work to Valmiki, the *adikavi*, or archpoet, and the *Ramayana* too is widely considered the *adikavya*, or first poem of Sanskrit literature. Early in its first book, the *Ramayana* recounts the story of its composition, which may also be read as offering a tentative theory about the origins of poetry. Walking on the banks of the river Tamasa, the sage Valmiki sees one of a pair of mating birds killed by a hunter's arrow. Filled with sorrow and compassion, he pronounces a curse on the hunter and later realizes in amazement that the words he spoke were uttered in metrical quarters, in the form, indeed, of a *sloka*, or verse. Then follow the famous lines linking *soka* (grief), to *sloka* (poetry). In translation, this is how the passage reads:

> "And the pious seer, seeing the bird struck down in this fashion by the Nisada, was filled with pity./Then, in the intensity of this feeling of compassion, the brahman thought, 'This is wrong.' Hearing the *kraunca* hen wailing, he uttered these words, 'Since, Nisada, you killed one of this pair of *krauncas*, distracted at the height of passion, you shall not live for very long.'/And even as he stood watching and spoke in this way, the thought arose in his heart, 'Stricken with grief for this bird, what is this I have uttered?'" (Goldman 127-28)

Upon reflection, the sage decides that the utterance produced in the moment of grief, *soka*, shall be called *sloka*, poetry, and nothing else. Not only does the passage suggest that poetry is born from emotion – and specifically, from compassion – it also tells us that it is born, as it were, spontaneously, without conscious meditation. But the lines are more provocative, for we notice that although Valmiki names the source of his utterance as grief, and though the later aesthetic tradition, as far as I know, accepts that reading, the words he pronounces seem also to be spurred by anger against the hunter. One could even say that since they take the form of a curse, the anger manifests itself in an impulse toward justice. Are all these elements part of the general theory of poetry suggested by the passage? The connection between art and justice would not be entirely foreign to the Sanskrit aesthetic tradition – the great treatise on Theater, the *Natyashastra*, also begins by indicating that part of the task of theater is to address and remedy the ills of social hierarchy. Pursuing this analogy would open an unexpected connection between poetry and drama, and perhaps guide us in arriving at a more nuanced conception of the literary/aesthetic realm and its place in the social world.

However, the Ramayana *sloka*, famous as it is, has not ordinarily been read in this manner. It has, nevertheless, been read in a way that marks a difference between the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*, such that, extrapolating partly from the passage I quoted, the primary emotional mood conveyed by the former text has been understood to be compassion, and the one conveyed by the *Mahabharata*, peace. The great 10th century Kashmiri aesthetician Abhinavagupta discusses this distinction at length, and it has made a lasting impact on the way the tradition has read these texts.

Thus we see that within the Sanskrit literary tradition, the two texts that we now so quickly designate as "epic," have not always been assembled in the same category. Perhaps these distinctions are minor enough not to disturb the larger structural or thematic affinities between the works, but they do nevertheless show that the concept of heroic narrative may not even enter certain discussions waged on the indigenous terrain.

This brings us to a central theme in terms of the reception of these texts in the West. In their desire to see these works as being analogous to the Greek epics, many European Indologists have argued that the stories in their pure form were about mortal heroes, and that the transformation from hero to god, especially in the case of Rama and Krishna, is a later intervention. To support this argument, scholars such as Lassen, Jacobi, and most recently Brockington, have argued that those portions of the epics which explicitly portray the heroes as incarnations of divinity do not belong to the original story at all, but instead must be seen as secondary interpolations. This view

has been quite passionately critiqued, not only by Indian scholars like V. S. Sukthankar, but by western readers as well, most notably Sheldon Pollock and Robert Goldman. While there is general agreement that the works evolved over time – perhaps even over several centuries – and that additional episodes were gradually absorbed within the matrix of the tales, it is not clear whether this new material changed or preserved the fundamental themes of the texts. There is, as one might expect, sharp disagreement over the status of these accretions. Thus Pollock, in his essay "The Divine King in the Indian Epic" writes that "interpolation often serves, not to introduce altogether new narrative material, but rather simply to expand or make manifest the elliptical or latent; what at first sight might appear to be innovation may in reality be amplification or elucidation" (507). He supports his claim by offering a sensitive and detailed reading of the *Ramayana*, arguing that the riddle of Rama's identity is indeed a central concern of the work, and that the story as a whole draws its power mainly from what he calls the "presumed mortality" of the hero (510). Following a somewhat different trajectory, Goldman suggests that Western scholars have found the status of these heroes confusing partly because they have not been sufficiently attentive to the idea of the *avatāra* (the incarnate, or more literally, 'descended' god), in Hindu theology. In a provocative article called "Gods in Hiding," Goldman proposes that a central feature of the representation of avatars is that their divinity might be sporadically hidden, even from themselves.

If what is at stake is heroism itself, the question of the hero, and of the hero's story, the epic, then determining the ontological position of the hero would clearly be important for understanding these works. Readers of the Homeric epics return recurrently to this terrain in order to comprehend the place or the function of the epic in Greek society, and the lack of a heroic ethos then becomes implicitly representative of an aesthetic or political lack in the Indian tradition. Even when the divine status of the hero is exalted, as in Ruth Katz's reading of Arjuna, the analysis remains symptomatic of the same underlying divisions, for finally such exaltation seems to contribute towards a vision of Indian culture as a spiritual site where devotion alone both legitimizes and restores heroism.

Recently a growing body of scholarship on contemporary, or living, epic traditions has also emerged. Though the focus in such studies is usually anthropological, troubles with locating and defining genre inevitably surface here as well. Thus in the introduction to their book *Oral Epics in India*, Stuart Blackburn and Joyce Flueckiger find that they have to tamper with certain boundaries in order to proceed with their study: "By expanding the 'heroic' to include female and non martial heroes and by replacing "poetry" with "song," we suggest that [contemporary] Indian oral epics are a cultural variant of an international genre" (5). In itself, this seems to be a logical and

sensible move, but when the development of living epic traditions (studied with regard to ritual, performance, communal status, etc.) becomes a guide for retrospectively reading the Sanskrit texts, something rather strange happens. We find then that in the name of history itself – that is to say, in the name of attending to variations and developments in local traditions – a history is effaced. For instance, the Valmiki *Ramayana*, which, at least at a certain time, perceived itself as inaugurating something quite specific called poetry, is now in danger of becoming indistinct from song, performance, narrative, etc.[2]

But this does not mean, of course, that such studies have nothing to offer those who are concerned with the Sanskrit texts. Particularly intriguing in Blackburn's analysis of oral epics is the relation he traces between heroic tales, panegyrics and laments, which allows him to think of these tales as a cultural response to death. The death event, he says, "operates as the 'generative point'" (22) for heroic stories in India. There is nothing surprising about this, since mortality, of course, is the very ground of heroism. This is also related to the way some western anthropologists have read the Homeric epics, though the conclusions they have reached are somewhat different, focussing not so much on the deification of the hero, as in Blackburn's analysis, but on the establishment of certain secular values.

One of the most eloquent of these readings comes from Jean Pierre Vernant, who has been thinking and writing about the Greeks for several years, and who understands the epic not as a formal category as such, but as a narrative that belongs to, and makes possible, a particular society. Reading the Homeric epic as being essentially concerned with the mortality of the hero, Vernant suggests that it might be understood as part of the funerary rite itself. "In this sense," he writes, "epic is not only a literary genre. Together with the funeral and following the same lines as the funeral, it is one of the institutions the Greeks developed to give an answer to the problem of death in order to acculturate death and integrate it into social thought and life" (86). The epic confers praise on the hero, inscribes him in the collective memory of the people, and thus completes the work of the honorable funeral reserved for the hero. In this account, public or civic life is intrinsically shaped

2 One of the questions I am trying to ask here is: Even with texts that originally belonged to an oral tradition (and in the case of Sanskrit texts, that does not necessarily mean an improvisatory tradition); once we have a set of recensions, a critical edition, something which has had a fairly fixed form for hundreds of years, does that not become an entity quite distinct even from its own adaptations in dance, drama, or song? In the West, this question would rarely arise; in South Asia, where hundreds of *Ramayanas* exist, and where access to specific versions is always also a matter of hierarchy, it is relatively easy to blur that distinction. Nevertheless, in making this apparently egalitarian gesture, perhaps there lurks the danger of a loss.

by the ideal of the hero, the one who becomes the touchstone of honor and virtue, or, one might say, the one who draws in shining colors the horizon of the secular realm.

Vernant writes that "the same strategy for dealing with death both inspires the treatment of the corpse and presides over the development of oral epic.... By turning that ultimate trial in which the hero loses his life into the criterion of perfection ... *the essential values and social virtues appropriate to this world here below are enhanced*. Heroic death sublimates and transforms these qualities and confers on them a brilliance, a permanence, and a resistance to destruction that they do not enjoy in the duration of present existence" (Vernant 82; my emphasis).

Following a similar path, Nicole Loraux in turn situates the funeral oration – the *logos epitaphios* – within the history of the democratization of Athens and suggests that the genre of the funeral oration is linked to earlier forms such as the epic. Even as the funeral oration marks its distance from these forms ("In the new funeral oration ... the supernatural had no place," [53]), it remains, nevertheless, "under the sway of epic" (Loraux 55). Tracing this double movement of debt and transformation, Loraux seems to suggest that the seeds of democratic discourse were already present in the epic, although many features of the epic glorification of heroes had to be radically altered in order for the funeral oration to become, properly speaking, a democratic discourse, "a political genre, in which, governed by civic laws, the logos becomes in turn a civic norm for speaking of Athens" (14).

There is a story here, and it is, in many ways, a compelling one. The contours might emerge more strongly if one reads Vernant and Loraux, as I think one should, along with Hannah Arendt, for whom the pursuit of excellence (arete) in the agonistic life of the public realm becomes not only emblematic of the Greeks, but also their greatest distinction. In her book *The Human Condition*, she writes, "Of all the activities necessary and present in human communities, only two were deemed to be political and to constitute what Aristotle called the bios politikos, namely action (praxis) and speech (lexis) out of which rises the realm of human affairs....The stature of the Homeric Achilles can be understood only if one sees him as 'the doer of great deeds and the speaker of great words'" (25).

The arena of public space, which provides room for the exhibition and recognition of human excellence, makes possible the idealization of the mortal hero. Such a concern with defining and glorifying the limits of *human* excellence gives shape to the Homeric epics. In time, such concerns become, as it were, even more clearly secularized and democratized in the genre of the funeral oration, which confers praise not on the aristocratic hero, but on the anonymous warrior, and indeed, on the city to which he belonged.

The "weakness" of the Sanskrit works is that the contest is decided in

advance, as it were, since the heroes all turn out to be gods, and the outcome of each battle seems to be determined, not by valor or skill, but by an earlier blessing, curse, boon, or related extravagance of language. From here on, a familiar saga about the otherwordly tendency of Hindu culture, its spiritual or fatalistic orientation, its devaluation of human will, human action, and human potential begins to unfold. It is not accidental that Vernant should consider the renouncer as occupying that position in early India which the hero occupies in early Greece. "As for the Brahmanic Indian communities," he writes, "they do not seek to implant their permanence in this earth, but find their roots instead in the world beyond" (Vernant 79).

While the Greek epics provide for us a secular model of public space where skill is valorized and distinction conferred by the judgment of peers, the Indian texts, according to this narrative, had either already degenerated into devotionalism by the time of their earliest extant versions, or had always been more concerned with gods rather than men, with the affairs of the afterlife, rather than the life we know.

There is much that appears persuasive and true in this narrative, and yet it is not entirely satisfying. It is not a mistaken or false narrative, but perhaps it is incomplete. Something else subsists in the experience of reading the works, something lingers, especially once the battle cries have receded, and it is the impress of the concluding passages that remains with the reader. For it may not be a question of who the hero or the god is, but of what actually happens in their interaction.

Let us recall briefly how our four major works conclude. At the end of the Valmiki *Ramayana*, the divine king Rama, having rescued his abducted wife Sita, defeated the demon Ravana, and reclaimed his kingdom, banishes his pregnant wife to the forest to avoid the displeasure of his subjects, who consider the queen impure for having spent so much time in the home of the demon king.[3] After a period of several years, Rama meets his two sons at a royal celebration and asks that their mother return to him, on condition that she can, once again, prove her chastity. Sita, who is also an incarnation of the goddess Lakshmi, appears before the King, but she has already suffered too much. She attests to her innocence, and invoking the Earth herself as witness, asks to be granted refuge from the world. As she disappears into the lap of the Earth, Rama is stricken by grief. In Sita's absence, the world appears empty (*sunyam*) to him, and he is bereft of peace. As the story progresses, we

3 This might be the place to note that the quest for fame appears most powerfully in this text in its inverse form: as the fear of infamy, of calumny (*Lokapavad*). It is because of this fear that Rama banishes Sita, though he knows that she is innocent. Hence even the divine King is bound by social laws; publicly accountable, not necessarily to *Dharma* (Righteousness), but to popular tradition and custom.

learn that yet another separation awaits him, for he is also forced to "renounce" his brother Laksmana, in order to prevent a catastrophic destruction of the world. Thus Rama's own death, which, in the last passages, becomes his "return" to heaven, is preceded by a long saga of grief which effectively undermines the elation of his victory over the demons.

Similarly, the *Mahabharata* does not end with the victory of the righteous brothers, the Pandavas, over their evil cousins, but goes on to describe the annihilation of the entire family, the futile death of the Pandavas' ally, the god Krishna, at the hands of a hunter, and finally, the difficult ascent to heaven of all five Pandava brothers and their wife Draupadi. The *Sauptika Parva* and the *Stree Parva*, which portray, respectively, the horrible night massacre of the Pandava clan, and the women's lament over a field of dismembered bodies, seem to presage the desolation of the concluding books. In the *Mausala Parva*, we read of the death of Krishna, followed by the defeat of the great hero Arjuna, who finds himself weak and powerless – unable to save the women in his protection from a band of robbers. "I am now a wanderer with an empty heart," he says, echoing some of Yudhisthira's laments earlier in the text. Perhaps taking their cue from the medieval aestheticians, several readers have written about this stupefying accumulation of loss. P. Lal calls the Mahabharata a "doomsday narrative" (293), and Krishna Moorthy says that its conclusion is "a tragedy unmitigated" (141).

The conclusions of the Greek epics are perhaps different in their tone and effect. The *Iliad*, we remember, concludes not with the end of the Trojan war, but with the burial of Hektor. The burial is made possible because Zeus, sending Hermes as escort, arranges a meeting between Achilles and Priam, where Priam not only retrieves Hektor's body, but in one of the most haunting scenes of the book, begins to feel a strange admiration for his son's killer: "But when they had put aside their desire for eating and drinking, Priam, son of Dardanos, gazed upon Achilleus, wondering at his size and beauty, for he seemed like an outright vision of gods" (Lattimore 492). Achilleus in turn gazes at Priam and wonders at his "brave looks." This meeting between archenemies, who relate to each other across the slaughtered and defiled body of Hektor, is suddenly graced, as if by art: a merciful forgetting sent by the gods.

The gods appear again to save the day at the conclusion of the *Odyssey*, not only helping Odysseus and his son Telemachos to prevail against the suitors who have besieged their home, but also restraining and transforming the anger of the hero. "With a terrible cry, much enduring Odysseus, gathering himself together, made a swoop, like a high-flown eagle. But the son of Kronos then threw down a smoky thunderbolt, which fell in front of the gray-eyed daughter of the great father. Then the gray-eyed goddess Athene said to Odysseus, 'Son of Laertes and seed of Zeus, resourceful Odysseus, hold hard,

stop this quarrel in closing combat, for fear Zeus of the wide brows, son of Kronos, may be angry with you.'" (Lattimore 359)

Thus we see that in both the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*, the gods who come to save the earth and reestablish the reign of *dharma* (Law, Righteousness), return to the other world, partly victorious, but also defeated and sad. Their trials have been great, and they themselves have made peculiar compromises in fulfilling their duties. The *Mahabharata* persistently shows us that the path of *dharma* is dense and twisted, curiously marred by treachery and deception. The *Ramayana*, on a smaller scale, similarly suggests that justice, even when brought by the gods, rests upon some unaccountable wound of injustice. In contrast, the Greek epics end by suggesting that even the most traumatic events in the lives of humans may perhaps be redeemed by the intervention of the gods. The gods, who have always participated in the affairs of human beings, are able to grace, and hence to complete, the projects of the heroes. The values of the polis: excellence, beauty and virtue – "secular" public values – are maintained precisely because the gods have not abandoned the human world. In keeping their distance from it, they have preserved it. Conversely, the Sanskrit works suggest that the otherworldly tendency of the culture, its devaluation of the social bond, may not be directly predicated on excessive spirituality, but on a tragic sense that the gods themselves may fail, that their successes also take tolls, and that finally, they too might be defeated by the world of humans. It is perhaps when the gods are too close – walking the earth in the guise of men – that one perceives how tenacious, how far, is the reach of mortality.

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