

Narrative Structure and Political Construction: The Epic at Work

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The studies presented here¹ explore an aspect of the dynamism and efficacy of literature so masterfully illuminated by John Foley, especially in *Immanent Art: From Structure to Meaning in Traditional Oral Epic* (1991). The construction of meaning through structure is at the very foundation of oral or “oral-derived” texts, which rely on the totality of tradition to create precise meaning. All the stories and narratives heard by listeners contribute to the creation of every character, every action, and every narrative motif.

My own analyses, along the same lines as Foley’s, have led me to recognize that it is possible for real political thought to emerge *in* as well as by means of the narrative. I am interested in the construction of meaning through structure, not in literature in general, but within a given text. After a dozen or so years spent studying the genre of the epic, it seems to me that epics are precisely the texts in which literature can develop a profound, vital, and irreplaceable meaning not possible anywhere else: a real way of thinking, although without concepts.

Of course, in the first place, an epic presents itself as a narrative, or rather a series of narratives. These narratives are so compelling, and so familiar, that we remain fascinated by them and ready to believe with Hegel or Lukacs that they describe a harmonious and stable world. But if we place these texts very precisely *in their original context* we recognize that the world they describe is a world that is prey to crisis, disorder, and chaos; we may see then that the function of the epic is precisely to allow society as a whole to see, first dimly and then in more detail, a new political order. War is in fact used as a sort of metaphor for the intense political crisis in which Greece finds itself at the end of the Dark Ages and Japan finds itself at the beginning of feudalism. And so the epic will in effect discuss the epoch’s disorder while seemingly “only” telling the stories of the warriors. It will make its public aware of a radically new political form that represents the real solution to the crisis facing them. If we focus our attention not on the psychology of the characters or the unfolding of the narrative surface but rather on the *structural relationships* among these characters as established by the various episodes, that is, if we read these war-stories as a structure, we discern political oppositions as the major stakes. The entire *Iliad* is primarily the staging of the confrontation of two possible forms of political power: on the one hand the *autos* (autocratic) government that Agamemnon seeks to impose by taking Achilles’ captive, on the other hand a government in which the king is

¹ See further Goyet 2006.

responsible before the people, and where his power is absolutely limited, a situation that the Greek world will effectively create with the city.

In other words, we have here an extremely effective way of thinking even though it is very different from the conceptual discourse to which we are accustomed. Through the narrative the epic builds a vision of the world, or, more exactly, it makes possible a comparison of the world visions that are available at that time, it plays out before the public the possible options by developing them in such a way as to allow the audience to judge them all. This is what I propose to call the “work of the epic.” In the major texts I am studying, we can see the development of a radically new concept, never imagined by the listeners, of which the text is the “proof,” whose validity it eventually shows, and which is what history will in fact retain: the city in the case of the *Iliad*, the vassalage pyramid in the *Chanson de Roland*, and the outline of what will later be codified as the Way of the Warriors in the Japanese *Hôgen* and *Heiji monogatari*.

To achieve this goal, the epic uses no other means than the narrative. Its essential tool is the parallel, the intellectual possibilities of which it uses brilliantly, in its two essential forms: parallel-difference (the *sunkrisis* of the Greeks, *comparatio* of the Romans) and parallel-homology. Equipped with only or almost only this one tool, the texts are hurled into attack on contemporary problems. One of this tool’s benefits is that it is always there, before the presence of either philosophy or history, or juridical thought, and also when conceptual thought bogs down—in short, when rational thought is absent.

What I will try to demonstrate in the short space of this article is the very existence of this “epic work” behind the apparently gratuitous narrative that is generally seen as purely celebratory. I will illustrate my theory by examples taken from each of the three texts I have analyzed thus far.² The examples from the *Chanson de Roland* and the *Iliad* will illustrate the operation of parallel-difference, the comparison of two options in order to better understand each one of them. In the diptych formed by the *Hôgen* and *Heiji monogatari*, I will show the efficacy of homology that divides into two in order to reveal the true stakes. In fact, in these texts the distinction between the different sorts of parallels is unimportant. What is important is that, because of them, the epic structures the narrative, and these structures are significant in that they allow for a profound discussion of political situations. To repeat once more Foley’s expression, “from structure to meaning,”³ it is the structure that creates the meaning.

The Old French Song of Roland

Let us look at the first illustration from the *Chanson de Roland*. Dominique Boutet’s criticism of this text—and of the epic—is typical when he defines it as shadowless and dedicated to a simple celebration of established values, although he most certainly is not one of those who deny literature *a priori* any efficacy. His great book *Charlemagne et Arthur* precisely shows in the Arthurian romance that literature is capable of creating meaning and again of challenging

² I am also presently working on the *Nibelungenlied* and the *Aeneid*—aural texts if not oral.

³ Cf. the subtitle of his book (1991): *From Structure to Meaning in Traditional Oral Epic*.

accepted truths. It is only the epic (with the *Roland* as one example) that he relegates to a sort of intellectual nothing; it is supposed to be merely “confirming the solidity” of order.⁴

It seems to me, on the contrary, that the *Roland* articulates powerfully the elements of the political debate of its time. Historians have insisted on the intensity of the intellectual debate of the eleventh century and on the era’s scholars’ inability to develop an adequately strong response in the face of the troubles of what has long been called “feudal anarchy.” The *Chanson*, it seems to me, elaborates precisely this new concept of the world that scholars have not been able to recognize. Thus it achieves far more than just “accompanying the emergence and evolution of civilizations,” as many have put it. It is a protagonist of history in that it *permits* the appearance of new thought and therefore of change.

Let us take, for example, the “horn scene” (or rather scenes) to try to show that the *Chanson* embodies in them the two fundamental options for the audience. The remainder of the epic and its end will then provide the means of making an in-depth judgment—by developing the ultimate implications of the choice offered by each position.

We know that the *Chanson* presents two symmetrical scenes centering on the call of the horn, before and after the first battle against the Saracens. First Oliver, and then Roland, pleads for Charlemagne to be called to the aid of their rear-guard. The two scenes as a whole, far from being mere storytelling for its own sake or for mere praise, constitute in reality a parallel-difference that opposes and distinguishes the two political attitudes of Roland and Oliver. In the second scene there is a reversal of their respective positions concerning the need to sound the horn for help; this is the symmetry. But the essential structure has not changed: the option represented by each of them is constant, and embodies a real political option. The symmetry highlights the political position of Roland in the first scene, and of Oliver in the second—of the one who resists the suggestion of a call for help; and so there is no sense of repetition or monotony. But it is the same debate that continues, very coherently. In the end this is the real subject of the whole beginning.

I shall try to show that these attitudes are precisely those available at the time and that Oliver’s is the choice of the future. To summarize, when Oliver sees Marsile’s huge army, he expresses the opinion that they should call for Charlemagne’s help. Roland refuses because it seems shameful to him: “Rather I’ll die than shame shall me attain.” In fact the rear-guard under his command joins battle and wins, killing or putting to flight hundreds of thousands of Marsile’s troops. But a second enemy wave appears; the rear-guard kills them all, but themselves are killed to the last man. At this point it is Roland who announces that he is going to call for Charlemagne’s help to avenge their dead, and Oliver who protests that it would be shameful.

⁴ Cf. Boutet 1992:584: “Plus conservateur, le genre épique s’intéresse surtout au cadre juridique, à la place qui est celle de chacun dans une société stable, aux attaques qui peuvent être menées, de l’intérieur comme de l’extérieur, contre cette fixité, et aux moyens de la rétablir. La diversité des situations narratives et des cas juridiques s’accommode d’autant mieux de cette fixité de l’ordre, qu’elle a toujours pour objectif d’en confirmer la solidité.” (“The epic genre, being more conservative, is particularly interested in the legal framework, in the position that is everyone’s in a stable society, in the attacks that can be made, both from within as from without, against this steadiness and the means of reestablishing it. The diversity of the narrative situations and the legal cases is an even better fit with this steadiness of order, in that its objective is always to confirm the steadiness.”) *Charlemagne et Arthur, ou le roi imaginaire*, Paris, Champion, 1992:584.

The text takes pains to compare the two positions, one with the other. What may be essential is that they are both tenable, and that they represent the two possible political choices at the end of the eleventh century.

Oliver's position is the one with which we moderns are most familiar. What gradually evolves is that the rear-guard placed under Roland's command is *in the service* of Charlemagne. Its destruction (which will be total) deprives Charlemagne of a precious instrument. Since these 20,000 men are the best of his army, they are his most precious instrument: of Roland alone it is often said that he is "el destre bras del cors," the right arm of Charlemagne. He has with him the "twelve peers" and the flower of the knighthood. In Oliver's eyes, every consideration must give way to the need for Charlemagne to preserve these political means. "Sweet France" has need of them in order to be strong and for Charlemagne to be respected—in an Empire that appears as disjointed as France is in the eleventh century. In short, Oliver is a soldier whose personal glory is only part of the glory of the empire.

Roland's position is the better known to readers of heroic stories: he is the "pure warrior," who typically advises Charlemagne (who is hesitating between accepting the possibly false surrender of Saragossa and continuing to exhaust himself and his army in the effort to take it by force) as follows: "To Sarraguce lead forth your great army. All your life long, if need be, lie in siege" (xiv). For such a warrior, the whole of his life is an infinite succession of battles. He goes from exploit to exploit, and whenever a city resists him it becomes an object worthy of his efforts; there is no need to go in search of others.

Behind the heroic archetype, however, we can clearly see the formation of the other political figure of the eleventh century, confirmed and overwhelming. He is the nobleman who scarcely recognizes any authority but his own. Roland acts according to his personal honor, in a grandeur that calmly ignores any higher horizon whatsoever. If at first he refuses to call for help, it is partly because he considers his own little army strong enough to fight the tens of thousands of men who are attacking. But it is also that he is allowing himself the chance to preserve the honor of his family by keeping secret his kinsman's, Ganelon's, betrayal—even if the flower of knighthood must die for it. The exploit, for such a warrior, is autotelic, and has no other aim than itself: any idea of "service" is as remote for Roland as that of any future project that will go beyond the continuation of his own exploits. The honor of France is only ever seen as the extension of his own honor and that of his kinsmen. In the eleventh century, when every lord is concerned only with his own power, Roland stands for every lord's self-interest that overrides all other considerations.

What is interesting is that whereas Roland's position is well known to everyone, and forms the very framework of life at that time, Oliver's is new. And it is also important that the text drives both of them so far that the full details are clear to the audience: the causes and, more importantly, the effects. Roland's grandeur is all the stronger for the support of the whole intertext of heroic tales. Despite everything, however, Oliver's position is able to develop and gradually assumes a place that it unquestionably did not have in the world as it existed when the tale was being told. In the end his position can construct and receive an attention that at first is evasive but becomes increasingly profound as the text advances.

In the eleventh and the beginning of the twelfth centuries, Oliver's political posture is indeed very new. Contemporary scholars try to define the position of the king, but have difficulty

finding an answer. All those who lived in the Francia of the West were far more aware of the omnipresence and demands of the noblemen than of the distant presence of a king whose authority was completely limited. It is for good reason that this period has long been called the century of “feudal anarchy.” Thus with the *Roland* we see a text emerging from the eleventh century that exceeds contemporary political reality in world vision, and in which a feudal pyramid is constructed that will gradually take shape in the twelfth century.

This parallel-difference between Oliver and Roland is obviously not the only instrument of this elaboration. The parallel-homology between Roland and Charlemagne will also play a part (as Charlemagne resumes his role of chief, a role that until then had fallen to Roland, much will be changed). Also necessary is the parallel-homology that is built in the whole text between Roland and Ganelon (and which takes its full force in the trial at the end). But we seem to sense already in this passage the efficacy of the structure and the role the text can play in developing real options for the listener and opposing them to each other, in a confrontation that allows for definition, understanding, and judgment. The example is very simple, and the *Roland* that we thought was transparent will possess subtleties that go far beyond. But it is already possible to understand one essential point: the story itself is the vehicle for the intellectual debate.

The Ancient Greek Iliad

The *Iliad* provides us with a more complex example. My thesis is that the entire text is involved in elaborating a new concept of the king and royalty. At first this new royalty is fleshed out by Hector. The great duel between Hector and Achilles thus becomes a means of comparing two concepts of power—of opposing the two political postures that have been established from the beginning. Let us note, however, that one of the most important features of the epic is that it assumes the right to use every means available, one of which is the magisterial freedom with which it portrays the novelty in several successive characters. After Hector it is Agamemnon who will assume for himself this completely new political role, then Achilles himself and Zeus, converted *sub fine* to a way of governing diametrically opposite to what they have represented throughout the text.

We shall examine here one of the links in the intellectual chain that leads to the duel between Achilles and Hector: the double parallel-difference, put in place in Books V and VI, between Hector, Diomedes, and Paris, which allows for the definition of the new political option represented by Hector.

Let us remember where we are. The first four books relate how Achilles’ anger is triggered by the denial of justice inflicted on him by Agamemnon (Book I), how it was on the verge of affecting the entire army but was checked by the Assembly Session (Book II), the duel between Paris and Menelaus that, it was hoped, would end the war (Book III), then the preparations for battle (Book IV). Book V represents the beginning of the military action proper, but very quickly in Book VI this action is interrupted by a long passage that shows Hector returning to the city to order sacrifices and to search for Paris in his house; it is this passage that contains the “farewell of Hector to Andromache.”

This moment, I think, finds its in-depth meaning in the confrontation involving the three heroes. The result will be the appearance of a type of hero different from both Diomedes and Paris. By “comparing” Hector with them—by making him parallel and *distinct from them*—the text begins to detail the figure that he so profoundly embodies. Here we are dealing with what the Greeks called a *sunkrasis*—which we still know by the Latin term *comparatio*, even if only in the *comparative* sciences: literature, but also anatomy or grammar. It is always a question of comparing two facts that effectively form a relationship (e.g., the Romance languages among themselves and with Sanskrit, the anatomy of man and ape), in order to see at the same time what they have in common, and also, sometimes especially, to reveal their differences. In a world where the only known type of royalty is patriarchal, it is not possible to imagine something completely different except by making the existing models interact with one another in order to “see” something else appear.

Book V centers on Diomedes: it is his *aristeia*, the celebration of his exploits. In it he is shown as greater than the greatest: so great that a goddess, Athena, is not afraid to become his charioteer and take him to wound a god. Diomedes, therefore, is the warrior hero par excellence—as such, he can be considered a prototype of Achilles, the pure warrior. The characteristic trait is that Diomedes is iteratively said to “be” a wild natural strength. He is the river in full flood, the wild boar, the ravaging fire.

Allied with the figure of Diomedes, the figure of Paris helps us to understand Hector. The *Iliad* does not condemn Paris in the same way as we and other traditions do. On the contrary, he is closely associated with the idea of opulence that strongly characterizes Troy. The expedition in which he carried off Helen is not presented as shameful, but as one of those raids that alone in this world significantly increased wealth—and were greatly appreciated. He is also a great hero who does not hesitate, at least no more than do others, to confront Menelaus in single combat. However, the shame that his name triggers in us fits reality: I think this is because, as developed in this passage, Paris is the symbol of a different universe. In the middle of a city besieged by war, he is concerned only with his own personal life and interests. When he is in danger, Aphrodite carries him away from the duel with Menelaus and takes him to his chamber in the depths of the city, where he enjoys Helen and attends to his business as if they were at peace. In the war that envelops Troy, he alone has not changed his world. He alone can consider taking refuge in his chamber and living an everyday life there. He is the very opposite of Diomedes: by refusing war as the overwhelming law of existence, he is in retreat from the city and all its inhabitants, and is detested because he withdraws from the confusion that has engulfed everything around him.

It seems to me that we must look at the central scene of Book V, “Hector’s farewell to Andromache,” the subject of so many schoolboy discourses, from this double perspective. The real importance for us is that this encounter is placed in strict parallel (in *sunkrasis*) with the meeting between Hector, Paris, and Helen that occurs just before. While the battle is raging outside, Hector returns to the city to sacrifice to the gods but also to look for Paris in order to take him back into battle. From a strictly narrative point of view, this is absurd: protagonists never know, in the *Iliad* or in the *Odyssey*, where a god has taken his protégé. But even more, Paris is not such an extraordinary hero that his presence in the battle would justify taking the trouble to go find him and convince him to return—at a moment when Hector does not even

have the time to purify himself in order to make the sacrifices in person that he has just ordered. But when something important is at stake, the epic never bothers with narrative likelihood. Here this long detour (60 verses) makes it possible to distinguish between the two couples. As we have seen, on the part of Paris and Helen there are all the marks of the individual, civic life: wealth, peace, and voluptuousness despite an entire society at war around them. They are apart from it, in deep isolation that inevitably is underlined by Aphrodite's action in removing Paris from the duel with Menelaus that was meant to put an end to the whole war.

Andromache and Hector, on the other hand, are in the heart of the city. Andromache is described at length in Book VI. Her extreme wealth is emphasized, a wealth that had marked her formerly as a suitable wife for Priam's eldest son, fit to reign over Troy "of the wide streets." But equal emphasis is placed on her current deprivation: all twelve of her brothers, and her father, were killed in a single day by Achilles. As she holds her infant in her arms, she is not just any woman. She is the future king's mother. And that is all she is, having lost all her relations and her own wealth. Before we go the modern route of seeing in this conversation a touching family scene, we should look at the terms it uses—that speaks of social relationships (*kleos*, the "fame," l. 446; *aideomai*, the "shame," l. 442), and Hector's prayer that his son should "rule all Troy in power" (l. 570), that he should distinguish himself in battle "and one day let them say, 'He is a better man than his father!' when he comes home from battle bearing the bloody gear of the mortal enemy he has killed in war—a joy to his mother's heart" (572-75). Hector's love for Andromache is "structural": it is the love of a king for the queen, and his only gesture—a gentle caress on the cheek suggesting a pact rather than a gesture of love—points to the contrast with Paris' love for Helen, which ends in voluptuousness.

Andromache's words serve to clarify the meaning of the scene. Contrary to how it is usually understood, she is not asking him to quit the battle—to return to their chamber where she, like Helen, could take pleasure in him. She is, once again, speaking as a queen who has in mind the wellbeing of her city. She is even speaking as a wise tactician. The place where she wants him to gather the Trojans is "where the city lies most open to assault Three times they have tried that point Perhaps a skilled prophet revealed the spot—or their own fury whips them on to attack" (513-20). That is the remark of someone who has observed the battle closely, arguing carefully the imperatives of battle, and not the lament of a woman wanting to protect her husband. But at the same time she firmly refuses the alternative option, that of Diomedes: Hector is king, king of a city that he must defend—and not, like the Greek heroes, "kings" of small groups of soldiers they have brought with them and whom they are content to lead into battle. By demanding that he defend the walls, that he protect the city, she is forbidding him to be "the river in full flood," or the "ravaging star" that characterizes Diomedes. Astyanax, "he who reigns in the city," refers first to Hector prior to its reference to his son.⁵ His royalty is rooted in the plain, and he cannot, like other heroes, become great in ravaging it. If he does, his destiny will be to die in combat, and he will have betrayed Troy, which by his death will be left as distraught as Andromache. In fact, nothing is farther from Hector than the choice offered to

⁵ The child is called moreover Scamandrios; if the Trojans always call him Astyanax, it is in reference to Hector.

Achilles between a short and glorious life and a long existence without glory: for him the short and glorious life amounts to shame. Nothing is more foreign to him, except perhaps the existence of Paris, participating in the wealth of the city but almost as an individual: leading raids, and then turning away from the fate of the city when the war engulfs it.

Neither Paris, nor Diomedes. The encounter presents a different destiny. In the last analysis, Hector is here defined as responsible for the city and its inhabitants—and responsible before their eyes. That is the meaning of the great interior deliberation at the moment of confronting Achilles (Book XXII, 99-130). If Hector remains outside the walls waiting for the hero who the whole world (himself included) knows is “a hundred times better than him,” it is because he sees it as the one chance to make amends to his people for a fault. And this fault is that he did not pay heed to Andromache’s injunction, and that he yielded to heroism “like Diomedes,” or like Achilles, that he has to die that day in a last effort to save his city.⁶ After Book VI, Hector will have become a new political possibility, unknown to previous centuries, far removed from the figure of the Mycenaean king or the chief exercising *autos*, “all alone,” a patriarchal power that would not lead to such anguish. The *Iliad* will encompass the complete development of this new figure, and its triumph, despite Hector’s defeat in the duel with Achilles; the end of the text brings the transformation of all the heroes. Thus, at the time the Greek city is beginning to emerge, the *Iliad* successfully provides a concrete definition of the political power it will finally impose.

The Japanese *Hôgen* and *Heiji monogatari*

The Japanese *Hôgen* and *Heiji monogatari* offer a distinctive feature that is always noted, even in the short accounts found in encyclopedias of literature: their three parts are in strict parallelism, and there is scarcely any episode in one of them that does not have its exact equivalent in the other.⁷ From our point of view, as can be imagined, this structure might offer an essential interest. As a diptych is a parallel that organizes the whole, then the “work of the epic” consists of redoubling and comparing, to an almost infinite degree, the facets of a confused political situation until clarity emerges. In fact, the text fully exploits the structure it has created—and which to my knowledge appears nowhere else.

My aim here is to show the effect of this structure on one aspect of the text that has, however, a central meaning. The parallel structure will make it possible, among other things, to “judge” a question that haunts the first tale—the first *volet* of the diptych—the *Tale of Hôgen*,

⁶ The Trojans had won the day’s battle and advanced across the plain almost to the Greek camp. Instead of bringing his troops safe and sound back into the city, Hector wanted to push his advantage. Despite the advice lavished on him, he made camp outside the Greek wall. In the morning, the Greeks had reseeded the advantage and decimated the Trojan troops. Hector feels responsible for what he considers a catastrophe, and that is a novelty: it is the first time in the poem. For the role of Polydamas, parallel to the one I describe for Andromache, and concerning the same consciousness, see Goyet 2006: Part I.

⁷ In each work, Book I is said to be “the book of preparations” and Book II “the book of battles,” while Book III depicts the consequences.

but which cannot be answered by this *volet*: does Yoshitomo have the right to kill his father at the command of his emperor? The question is central and offers a true case study, for which it is not even necessary to know the precise historical situation.⁸ It is enough to recall the elements of the dilemma.

Yoshitomo was in command of the Emperor's troops. The opposing camp (followers of the retired emperor) was led by his father and his brother. Their family is not famous, and Yoshitomo is expecting an important promotion for his engagement on the emperor's side against the rest of his family. He is the victor, despite the extraordinary heroism shown by his brothers (he finally conquered them by setting fire to the palace where they were assembled). The emperor grants the promotion, but in doing so orders him to execute his father, the leader of the rebellion. Even more than in our eyes, this is a major dilemma: in this country shaped by Confucianism, father and emperor are thought of in the same way, and the absolute requirement of respect is as strong in the one case as the other.

The *Hôgen* stresses this dilemma at length, which takes up the whole of the end of book II—assumed to be the book “of battles.” Yoshitomo will finally make the decision to execute his father, after the text has developed no fewer than three complete arguments by three of its protagonists. For all that, the question of conscience has not been solved.

The case is essential, because it epitomizes the actual confusion of civil war. The characteristic of the events of the Hôgen era, constantly repeated in the texts, is that in every family of the empire father fights son, brother fights brother—beginning with the antagonistic emperors who are brothers. This is a typical dilemma that seems to offer no honorable escape. The alternative “solution” is in fact totally unacceptable: if Yoshitomo had refused to put his father to death, it would mean rebelling against an order of the emperor's. Thus this episode can be considered as the heart of the *Hôgen*, in that it expresses what is basically at stake, and indicates the failure.

The *Tales of Hôgen* and *of Heiji* are, in fact, very strange epic texts, in that they constantly proclaim the failure of the “celebration” and the inadequacy of the values. I know of no other non-parodic epic in which one of the principal warrior chiefs is seen to fall miserably from his horse while trying to lead his troops, and another grumbles futilely and turns his back on the enemy, whereas a warrior who follows the classical discourse of heroism is treated as an idiot by the narrator. We are still in the time period immediately following the civil war—as compared with the familiar texts that address distant if not fabled events. At this point the country has not yet recovered from its self-inflicted wounds and they are described without complacency.

However, the reader or listener who comes to the end of the diptych is no longer the confused individual, buffeted by events, who is so often portrayed in the text itself. Not that the

⁸ Simply put, after four centuries of the almost absolute peace of the Heian period (794-1185), Japan has toppled into civil war. At the heart of the conflict is the claim to the throne of two candidates who have apparently equal rights: on the one hand a retired emperor (who has abdicated), who is thinking of retaking the throne, and on the other hand his very young brother, who had just been placed on the throne. Note, by the way, that for once the epic texts are dealing with authenticated historical facts: the *Tales of Hôgen* and *of Heiji* (first testimony 1290), but also the better known *Tale of Heike*, are *Kamakura gunki monogatari*—warrior tales from the time of Kamakura (1185-1333). The deeds they describe begin in the middle of the twelfth century, “Hôgen” and “Heiji” being the names of the two historic periods: the Hôgen era, 1156-59; the Heiji era, 1159-60.

second *volet*, the *Tale of Heiji*, would have succeeded in exorcising the anti-heroic tone in order to return to the celebration. On the contrary, it is here, for example, that we find the scene where the leader falls miserably over the other side of the horse as he tries to mount and go into battle. But the “work of the epic” succeeds in bringing to light totally new values, unknown in the preceding epoch. Again, our example is central: the epic transcends Yoshitomo’s dilemma, it finds the seemingly unobtainable solution. In doing so, it provides an Ariadne’s thread, producing a strong, almost immobile point of anchorage on which it will be possible to base an action in the world. In fact, in the seventeenth century it is along these lines of force that Japan will actually emerge from its interior troubles. By the end of the diptych, we have left behind the confusion of civil war, the conflict in which each side is literally torn between equally imperative but contradictory duties.

It is the strong epic structure that makes this dynamic possible. The solution to the crisis is brought about in two steps. At first the parallel established by the diptych reveals the general implications of Yoshitomo’s action, and clarifies them; on this occasion it issues a sure judgment of his action. In a second step the parallel-differences “replay” the same situation but with different actors, revealing a truly heroic solution ignored by Yoshitomo.

Every episode of the *Hôgen* has its homolog in the *Heiji*. Yoshitomo’s dilemma thus has an equivalent in the dilemma of one of his own vassals, precisely in relation to him. The situation is homologous: Yoshitomo is now in disgrace and flees. He counts on the help of Tadamune, a vassal who is moreover his relative—just as his father had come to seek his aid. But the emperor wants the death of Yoshitomo. So Tadamune in turn finds himself faced with the same dilemma (to be a faithful subject to the emperor by bringing Yoshitomo’s head to court, or to help his lord to flee). The text “replays” the same situation in homology, with different actors. But on this occasion it takes no time at all for Tadamune to salve his conscience. He welcomes Yoshitomo warmly and kills him in his bath.

Through a sort of black humor the text emphasizes the parallel in the acceleration and downfall. For Yoshitomo, this takes place in a long passage in a very subtle tone, a series of three complete arguments; for Tadamune, it is only a few lines, a case of conscience resolved in advance by the irresistible appeal of profit (he hopes for some recompense for the capture), a tone of peasant bargaining while deliberating in secret with his son. The parallel, however, is absolute. Even if the vassals of that period had a very limited understanding of their duties towards the lord, Tadamune is a special case. He is one of the “hereditary vassals” (with the families bound together, not just the men), he is a relative of Yoshitomo’s. So he is expected to remain firmly on the side of his lord.

The parallel both creates the situation and allows for its solution. It creates the situation because Tadamune is only repeating his lord’s action that brought about what was unthinkable. There is not even a need for long deliberation, because it has already been done by Yoshitomo to solve his own dilemma: the parricide is the “precedent” that creates the jurisprudence. But the parallel also brings about the solution. Comparing the two is one way of showing the action’s implications. The story “thinks”; it makes it possible to judge the actions and the political positions by showing their ultimate results. Yoshitomo’s action is a political stance. The parallel shows that, although killing his father in obedience to his emperor was assuredly a way out of a dilemma that had to be resolved, the price was breaking the first of the bonds, that of filial piety.

To hide behind the subject's duty (the "public" duty) in order to avoid the "private" duty in reality means destroying all bonds, both public and private. The parallel implies that the choice carries within itself the death-blow to the social organization that it seemed to privilege over the private sphere. The case is emblematic, since it is Yoshitomo himself who suffers from the destruction he brought about.

Obviously this does not mean that the dilemma should be resolved in favor of the inverse "solution," the rebellion against the emperor. Like all profound dialectics, the epic goes beyond the aporia that seemed to completely enclose it, and does not merely totter from one extreme to the other within the dilemma.

After the homology has allowed us to pass a sure judgement on the parricide, it is the role of the parallel-differences to suggest the way out of the dilemma. I will mention only two of these parallels, in a series that forms a paradigm, constructing a complete world vision. The first, the death of Tadamune's daughter, takes place right after the death of Yoshitomo. Despite its anecdotal aspect, it is important because it immediately indicates another possibility. We can then return to the mirror image, a homologous episode in the *Hôgen*: the "death of the little ones," which then takes on a larger meaning.

Tadamune's daughter was the wife of Kamada, Yoshitomo's foster brother and loyal friend. She again embodies the same dilemma; having learned of her father's intention to kill them, she has the choice either to betray him by warning her husband—and therefore Yoshitomo—or betraying her husband by taking the side of her father. Imprisoned at the moment of action, she is prevented from intervening. But nevertheless the response is definitely there. The imprisonment prevented her from having to oppose her father. On her release after the death of her husband, she refuses to take her place with the members of the party opposed to her husband; she throws herself on his body and kills herself. The most important thing perhaps is that her action is completely useless in the plan of the diagesis. Nothing will in fact change as the result of the action. And yet it is perhaps the most profound moment of rebirth in the text. By sacrificing herself on her husband's corpse, she succeeds in reconciling the two duties: she is faithful to her husband *and* to her father—against whom she does not rebel.

In turn the episode throws light on a homolog in the *Hôgen*. Just after putting his father to death, Yoshitomo receives the emperor's order to put to death his young brothers because the emperor fears their future vengeance. He obeys this time without hesitation (note that in this passage there is once more an effect of "precedent," in that it is the parricide that also stands behind this quick decision-making). The four children are very young. Yet they will die with a bravery that still draws tears from the public today. This dilemma is in the first place their tutors'. Should they save the children in defiance of the imperial order (thereby condemning Yoshitomo who will not have carried out the order)? Or should they let them die, these children whom they love and have a mission to protect? But the dilemma is resolved by the children themselves: the eldest, Otowaka, who is thirteen, takes the decision on himself and so transforms its significance. Now the choice is: defy the emperor (and bring about the death of their brother) or die, and the text insists, with extraordinary pathos, on the strength of their acceptance of their own death.

Voluntary death is the third way not recognized by Yoshitomo. It was actually possible for him to solve the dilemma in which the emperor's order seemed to enclose him. By doing it he

would make the only comment that a vassal could address to his emperor: he would denounce the prince's arbitrary command, responsible ultimately for the horrible disorder around them. If a son may not act so as to incur the guilt "of the first of five capital crimes," the emperor may not order him to carry it out. In the world depicted in the *Tales*, the action would not have been without repercussions. Each and every one always knows everything happening in the four corners of the social world. Even the most secret deliberations are discussed (and with what political savvy!) by the "riff-raff of the town." The sacrifice itself would be sure to play a role far beyond the purely private sphere. This is the case with the death of the children, and also with another character's sacrifice—the "lovely Tokiwa's" devotion to her own old mother, and with a whole series of other characters whom the *Heiji* can reintroduce once Tadamune's daughter has set the example of virtue. This virtue is contagious, and sows the interior of the text with the seed of the country's future reconstruction.

One may find (as I do!) that this reconstruction of values is really terrible. But the importance of this rebirth should not be underestimated. It is certainly a solution that transcends the crisis. It is on the basis of this acceptance, in the constant presence of voluntary death, that Japan will, much later, reorganize into what will be called the "Way of the Warriors." The peace finally reached in the seventeenth century is dependent on it. The seeds are there in a diptych that, though obscure, is hugely efficacious. Our texts provide all the elements for a reconstruction, a universal reconstruction. For the most striking trait is that all the heroes of this new virtue are "insignificant"—women without protection, children, lesser vassals—to whom society and literature in the past had paid no attention. The efficient virtue proposed in the *Tales of Hôgen* and *Heiji* is accessible to everyone. The medium represented by the epic is available to everyone. Recited at street corners, it eventually brings about the clarity that the conceptual reasoning of the epoch looked for in vain, that it will not for a long time know how to use for social reconstruction, but which is already providing the stable intellectual basis for it.

These three examples are only meant to show the subterranean yet intense activity that reigns within the epic: the "epic work"—the work of the structure—that to my mind is the basis of the genre. Depending on the texts, the results are very different: what is apparent is that royal power could just as well be reinforced (*Chanson de Roland*) as drastically limited (*Iliad*) or, again, a paradoxal path to liberty could be invented (*Hôgen* and *Heiji monogatari*). What is constant is the novelty of the ultimately validated option and the way of achieving it; the epic "thinks" in the heart of the story and with its tools.

Thus I think the epic must be seen as superior to rational discourse in two major ways: it allows us to think outside of current prejudices and it speaks to everyone. It allows us to consider something new. As is well documented, in every epoch the radically new is unthinkable—impossible to imagine *ex nihilo*. People of the eighth century B.C.E. have difficulty thinking rationally, explicitly, of a political power different from a patriarchal type of power. Similarly, in twelfth-century Japan or eleventh-century France it would be difficult to rethink from the beginning the relationships between prince and vassal. Going back to rational political thought inevitably means thinking along traditional lines. The useless efforts of the (great) intellectuals of the Japanese Middle Ages, as well as the French, clearly show how almost impossible it is to change the way of thinking from what has gone before. The story itself allows for the novelty to emerge because it plays out for the listener, as long as necessary, all the

elements of the political situation. It reveals trait by trait all the lines of force, it follows the consequences of each of the choices that could be made, even to their most distant effects. Furthermore, it plays it out all the possibilities *at the same time*, within a story that will intermingle quite naturally the trajectories of all the characters.

The process gains strength from the fact that it is oral, making it possible for the reflection to be available to and participated in by everyone. Or rather, in this precise case, the medium is aural, since all the texts on which I have worked have in every case been heard.

Not read, that is, but recited. This includes the Japanese epics that appear in a civilization that has been literate for many centuries, but where these texts are constantly recited, everywhere, and in all layers of society. The profound work we have seen taking place involves the whole of society. It is addressed to everyone, but also responds to everyone's expectation, to the in-depth questioning of the time. The classic vision of the epic as a "transparent," "non-problematic" text is therefore the result of the remarkable success of the process. The newly created way of functioning corresponds so well to the details of the problem, it so profoundly reshapes society, that it obliterates the ancient world and the endless, useless, and sometimes bloody attempts to go beyond it. The solution is so effective that it erases both the problem and the length of time it required to forge a solution. Only oral/aural literature, because it allows everyone to participate in the construction of meaning, could achieve such a tour de force.

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