

Traditional Epics

Epic stories have never suffered from lack of attention, but all too often they have been viewed as extensions of something else: most commonly of myth, ritual, or history.¹ Granting that epic stories have almost always drawn something from these three areas, I hope to show that epic is best regarded as a unique category.

Nevertheless, the “myth and epic” approach has been fruitful in studying the *Mahābhārata*, since it has settled two points. First, the leading heroes of the epic, the five sons of Pāṇḍu and their wife Draupadī, “transpose” into human or heroic terms a mythic, apparently Indo-European, theologem. The oldest son representing sovereignty and moral virtue as they are connected with what Georges Dumézil has called the Indo-European first function, is Yudhiṣṭhira, the son of Dharma (the latter plausibly a substitute for the Vedic god Mitra). Representing the brutal and chivalric sides of the second, warrior, function are Bhīma and Arjuna, sons of Vāyu and Indra. Representing the third function are the twins, Nakula and

¹ On both myth and history as prior to epic, see Mircea Eliade, *Cosmos and History* (New York: Harper, 1959), pp. 34–48; *idem*, *Myth and Reality* (New York: Harper & Row, 1963), p. 190. For reflections on such assumptions in critical studies of Germanic legends, see Georges Dumézil, *From Myth to Fiction: The Saga of Hadingus*, Derek Coltman, trans. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1973), pp. 15 and 26. On the evolutionary order ritual-myth-epic, see Gertrude Levy, *The Sword from the Rock: An Investigation into the Origins of Epic Literature and the Development of the Hero* (London: Faber and Faber, 1953).

Sahadeva, sons of the twin Aśvins, who show, like their divine parents, a capacity for service, beauty, healing, and a connection with cattle and horses. Complementing them all is their wife-in-common Draupadī, incarnation of Śrī. Following the seminal work of Stig Wikander,² Dumézil and Madeleine Biardeau have both continued to use this type of analysis and have filled the dossier of meaningful transpositions so as to include almost every major figure in the poem.³ Second, with more controversy and with each of the three scholars pointing in a different direction, there is still agreement that the great *Mahābhārata* war, taking place at the end of the Dvāpara yuga and the beginning of the Kali yuga, is—at least in part—the epic reflection of a mythic eschatological crisis.⁴

The search for mythic foundations has also led Dumézil and Wikander to insights concerning the manner by which other Indo-European peoples have shaped their epic material. Not all is by “transposition”: the euhemerized Scandinavian and Welsh stories, in which gods retain their names but are given human status; the Scandinavian, Roman, and Iranian “histories of origins” in which successions of kings are arranged to reflect the order of the functions; the Roman histories in which the trifunctional gods interact with various heroes, but without an expressed mythology. All of these cases present their own peculiar problems, but the prevailing assumption, the tool by which these discoveries have in fact been made, retains its value. Epic, legend, pseudohistory, and “roman” are all better

² See initially Stig Wikander, “Pāṇḍava-sagan och Mahābhāratas mytiska förutsättningar,” *RB*, VI (1947), 27–39; trans. by Georges Dumézil, *Jupiter, Mars, Quirinus*, IV: *Explication de textes indiens et latins* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1948), pp. 37–53; discussed and amplified, pp. 55–85, hereinafter *JMQ*, IV.

³ See Dumézil’s summary work on the *Mahābhārata* in *ME*, I, pp. 33–257. On Biardeau, see the bibliography cited and discussed in later chapters, especially 2, 3, 6, and 13.

⁴ See below, Chapter 13.

understood through an appreciation of their mythic backgrounds.⁵

I do not wish to take issue with the results, or even the methods, of such a successful, stimulating, and scrupulously carried-out enterprise. However, as a means of interpreting epic, the underlying assumption can lead to excesses and oversimplifications. Such I fear are what we find in two efforts to discover mythic foundations for the *Iliad*.⁶ But this point is not crucial. One cannot fault a method because some have overextended its use or followed it uncritically, yet I think there is a lesson here. The assumption that myth has an inherent priority over epic has led scholars, discontent with epic tales as tales in themselves, to manufacture mythic patterns and prototypes for them. One result is that the epic story is ultimately robbed of autonomy. Taken to the extreme, epic becomes, in essence, a replica of myth.

In order to move beyond this impasse, it seems we must work toward a definition of the relationship between myth and epic. First I must admit—or better, insist—that my own usage is tailored to meet the requirements and the character, which are in some respects peculiar or exceptional, of the *Mahābhārata*. The generalizations that follow will thus proceed from this base, and there is no denying that the relationships between other epic and mythic traditions might suggest, and indeed

⁵ For general reflections, see Dumézil, *Myth to Fiction*, pp. vi to xi, and *idem*, *The Destiny of the Warrior*, Alf Hildebeitel, trans. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970), pp. 4–6.

⁶ Jan de Vries, *Heroic Song and Heroic Legend* (London: Oxford University Press, 1963), pp. 227–33, viewing Achilles, Agamemnon, and Helen as heroized divinities; C. Scott Littleton, “Some Possible Indo-European Themes in the *Iliad*,” *Myth and Law among the Indo-Europeans*, Jaan Puhvel, ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1970), pp. 229–46, who wanders all over the Aegean to find heroes and themes to fit Dumézilian categories. Cf. Dumézil, *Destiny of the Warrior*, pp. 82–83, on the overapplication of the label “Odinic hero.”

have inspired, other approaches. I do not, of course, suggest that the *Mahābhārata* is to be viewed as the norm of epic.

We must assume that the various Indo-European epic and mythic traditions survive, in their written form, as casualties: segmented, fragmented, or uprooted from the cultures which produced them. The final redactors of such epic traditions as are found in the *Shāh-nāma*, the *Mabinogion*, the *Táin Bó Cuailnge*, and in Saxo Grammaticus' account of the Battle of Brávellir conserve epic material that is no longer enriched in the authors' own minds by any contact with a living mythology. On the other hand, the various euhemerizers who conserve mythic traditions under the guise, or within the dimensions of, "history," are obviously prevented (even if the material in their hands retains a mythic structure⁷) from allowing their humanized gods any significant interplay with the mythic beings they once were. Only in a few cases is there a sustained interaction between the figures of myth and epic: for instance, in Rome, Greece, and India. In each of the first two cases, the mythology to which the heroic traditions allude has in one way or another been denatured. In Rome the primal kings of the "history of origins" interact frequently with the trifunctional divinities through prayers, omens, blessings, and punishments. But as Dumézil has emphasized, these gods are essentially without mythology, there being no divine adventures with which to compare those of the legendary kings. And in Greece, although Homer's Olympians interfere constantly in the affairs of the heroes, they appear essentially as "symbolic predicates of action, character, and circumstance"⁸ whose adventures "are not myths in any strict sense, but literary inventions that have something in common with the ingenious mythological

⁷ This is Kees Bolle's argument: "In Defense of Euhemerus," *Myth and Law among the Indo-Europeans*, pp. 25–32.

⁸ Cedric H. Whitman, *Homer and the Heroic Tradition* (New York: Norton, 1965), p. 223.

elaborations of Euripides.”⁹ Only in India, then, are the epic poets not only fully aware of, but deeply involved in, a living mythology.

Such a continuum between myth and epic need not be regarded as totally peculiar, yet here terms have often been used loosely. Epic, whatever its stylistic features and its origins as a narrative and poetic genre, should be regarded, in terms of content, as falling under the heading of legend. And legend, with epic as a subcategory, should be distinguished from myth. All this is made problematic by authors who have treated myth as an imperialistic category.¹⁰ William Bascom has shown that the distinction between myth and legend has a long scholarly history and is definitely applicable to the different types of narratives found in primitive societies.¹¹ In fact, one distinguishing feature, according to Bascom, is that while both myths and legends tell “true stories,” they do so with different time referents: the former evoking the remote past, the latter a more recent past.¹² Moreover, as M. L. West has shown in the “Prolegomena” to his edition of Hesiod’s *Theogony*, continuums between theogonic myth and heroic genealogies are also found in Hesiod, in Genesis, in the *Bundahishn*, the Purāṇas and

⁹ G. S. Kirk, *Myth: Its Meaning and Functions in Ancient and Other Cultures*, Sather Memorial Lectures, vol. XL (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1970), p. 174.

¹⁰ See *ibid.*, pp. 9–10, 19, 179 (but also 34, 40, and 173); Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Raw and the Cooked*, John and Doreen Weightman, trans. (New York: Harper & Row, 1969), p. 4 (and then, defying his own refusal to make “preconceived classifications,” p. 138).

¹¹ William Bascom, “The Forms of Folklore: Prose Narratives,” *JAF*, LXXVIII (1965), 3–20; Kirk’s argument (*Myth*, p. 32) that “the categories drawn by unsophisticated peoples can be confusing” is unworthy of refutation.

¹² Bascom, “Forms of Folklore,” pp. 3–6; this double classification of “true stories,” as distinct from the “false story” or “folktale,” adds useful precision to the discussions by Raffaele Pettazzoni, *Essays on the History of Religions*, H. J. Rose, trans. (Leiden: Brill, 1967), pp. 11–12, and Eliade, *Myth and Reality*, pp. 8–9.

Mahābhārata, the *Kojiki* and *Nihongi*, in Polynesian oral literature, and in the *Kalevala*.¹³ With such continuities in mind, let me thus propose the following definitions, solely in terms of the contents of the two genres.

Myths are stories which take place in the fullest expanses of time and space (they articulate a cosmology); they deal with the origin, nature, and destiny of the cosmos, and their most prominent characters are gods.

Legends are stories which take place at a specific time and on a specific terrain; they deal with the origin, nature, and destiny of man, and their most prominent characters are heroes.

Each item in this pair of definitions is capable of refinement, and there will certainly be some overlap.¹⁴ But the main purpose is to provide definitions which, while maintaining distinctions, allow important rapports between the two genres to show through. With such distinctions in mind, and with epic seen under the larger heading of heroic legend, an epic morphology can be discerned. One should not confuse this subject with the "heroic morphology" of Angelo Brelich,¹⁵ whose research points out a direction in which future *Mahābhārata* research might well evolve. Brelich tries to show the complex of associations, from both legend and cult, which the Greek heroes have with certain particular themes: death, combat, athletic contests, prophesy, healing, mysteries, oracles, founding cities, the initiation of young adults, and the founding of clan groups. While I shall often draw on Brelich's beautiful

¹³ M. L. West, ed., *Hesiod. Theogony* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1966), pp. 1-16.

¹⁴ Certainly these definitions allow "myths" about men (the Crucifixion of Jesus, the Buddha's Birth and Enlightenment), and hardly imply that gods do not make appearances in legends or epics. Also, I seek to avoid identifying myths solely with the past; obviously, eschatologies deal with the future.

¹⁵ Brelich, *Gli Eroi Greci: Un problema storico-religioso* (Rome: Edizioni dell'Ateneo, 1958).

work, it is my intention to concentrate directly on a complex of various features within epics and heroic traditions themselves, rather than on the relations between such traditions and matters of cult. While the themes are not necessarily all unique to epic, together they constitute a complex whose outlines become easily intelligible once the place of epic is recognized in a continuum with myth. My hope here is to be suggestive rather than exhaustive, to set the exploration of the *Mahābhārata* in a comparative framework.

Fate

Brelich points to the way myth and legend, and the two dimensions of time which they present, are often related. Discussing the place of “la struttura eroica” with the larger “collettività mitiche” of Greece, Brelich says that whereas the activity on the mythic level concerns a past which involves the formation of the world and the childhood, or in any case, the not-yet-fulfilled life of the gods, “the heroes have an analogous position, only with respect to the formation of the human world.”¹⁶ This analogy, this coincidence of planes, between the formation and direction of the cosmos and the formation of the world of man, gives the lives of heroes their special gravity. Their activities are weighted with a burden of recompense. Whereas the gods and goddesses play out their intrigues in the fluid, formative, and free realm of myth, identical or similar intrigues, when acted out by heroes or heroines, take shape in a different mold which, in fact, hardens into their destiny. The cosmic order which the gods (whether polytheistic or monotheistic) create and sustain is nothing else for the hero than fate, sometimes happy, but usually cruel and harsh. Indeed, in epics where such themes are already articulated, the relation between these two forces—cosmic order and human destiny—is often a matter for great reflection. From

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 375 (my translation).

the heroes' standpoint, the forces may coincide, as with two of the *Mahābhārata's* words for fate: *vidhi*, "what is ordained," and *daivam*, "what pertains to the gods."¹⁷ But fate is usually at least something with which the heroes must come to terms, as can be seen from Helmer Ringgren's study of epic fatalism in the *Shāh-nāma* and Cedric Whitman's essay on "Fate, Time, and the Gods" in the *Iliad*.¹⁸

What is important, however, is not so much that certain epics—the Greek, Persian, and Indian especially—have worked out clear formulations of fatalism, or that they reveal important correlations between the concepts of fate in the epics and those that have been worked out elsewhere in those cultures, in other types of texts.¹⁹ What is significant is that epics present a context in which the heroes, coming to terms with the origin, nature, and destiny of the universe as it impinges upon them, inevitably make some type of response—submission, defiance, courage, faith, self-discovery, stoicism, humility, vacillation, doubt, cowardice—which takes on determinative symbolic value in terms of an understanding of the origin, nature, and destiny of man.

I thus suggest that the concept of epic fatalism can be extended beyond those heroic traditions in which a specific philosophy of fate is worked out. In this respect, it would be more fruitful to compare the related themes in various epics directly, rather than try to interpret the fatalism of the *Shāh-nāma* and the *Mahābhārata*, for instance, as common derivatives from an

¹⁷ On fate and destiny in the *Mahābhārata*, see Dumézil, *ME*, I, 162–70, and the bibliography on p. 163, n. 1.

¹⁸ Helmer Ringgren, *Fatalism in the Persian Epics*, Uppsala Universitets Årsskrift, No. 13 (Uppsala and Weisbaden, 1952), especially Chapter V, "God and Destiny," pp. 111–23; Cedric H. Whitman, *Homer and the Heroic Tradition*, pp. 221–48 (Chapter X).

¹⁹ This is essentially the focus of Ringgren, *Fatalism*, and also of R. C. Zaehner, *The Dawn and Twilight of Zoroastrianism* (New York: Putnam's, 1961), pp. 240–42, as if epic fatalism were a sort of phase—aberrant at that—in the religion.

anterior Indo-Iranian philosophy of fate.²⁰ In this sense, the term “fate” would, of course, have to be used open-endedly, implying that the heroes face the conditions that “determine” human existence, that “shape” human destiny. Examples are not necessary here, except to say that one highly visible type, the hero who faces up bravely to the conditions which will bring on his death, is responding to, or fulfilling, a personal fate, whether this be stated explicitly, as with Achilles, Karna, Siyāvosh, or Gilgamesh, or implicitly, as with Cúchulainn, the Christian martyrs, or the Australian heroes of the dreamtime. The lives and activities of heroes, then, imply a sort of crystallization of fate. Mythic meaning has impinged into human life, and the hero defines himself by his response to conditions which may never occur again, but are “true” for all time. For many heroes, their response of greatest import is in the case of their deaths. We thus move from the abstract to the concrete.

Births, Deaths, Fatalities

The devices which link the divine and the heroic are highly informative symbols of the relationship between myth and epic. Incarnations,²¹ possessions,²² and relations of favor or disfavor between particular divinities and individuals²³ all find their

²⁰ Ringgren, *Fatalism*, pp. 40–47, is unconvincing on a genetic connection between Indian Kāla- and Iranian Zurvan-speculation. He seems more credible when, noting the great number of terms for “time” in the *Shāh-nāma*, he says: “This must imply that the important thing is the conception of time, and that epic fatalism is no mere reproduction of ancient Zervanism” (p. 47).

²¹ H. Munro Chadwick and Nora Kershaw Chadwick, *The Growth of Literature*, 3 vols. (Cambridge University Press, 1932, 1936, 1940), II, 525, see no parallel (I think correctly) to the *avatāra* theme in Western heroic literature, although several authors will speak of Cúchulainn as an “avatar” of Lug; cf. the incarnations in the Tibetan Gesar epic: Alexandra David-Neel and the Lama Yongden, *The Superhuman Life of Gesar of Ling* (rev. ed., London: Rider, 1959), pp. 30, 54–59.

²² See, along with Śiva’s possession of Aśvatthāman in the *Mahābhārata*, that of Hektor by Ares in the *Iliad* 17. 210–11.

²³ Out of countless examples, see the relationship between Odinn and Haraldus Hyldetan at the Battle of Brávellir, discussed below, Chapter 5.

places, in various epics, as indexes to a hero's "true" identity. The most common device is that which links heroes to gods by means of their births. As indicated at the beginning of this chapter, nowhere are the divine-human origins of heroes and heroines more significant than in the *Mahābhārata*, but, as is well known, pairings between mortal and godly parents also lie behind such illustrious names as Achilles, Aenias, Sarpedon, Helen, Heracles, Cúchulainn, the "two-thirds divine" Gilgamesh, and the Tibetan Gesar. But when Homer and Hesiod describe the heroes of Troy as "demigods" (*Iliad* 12. 23; *Works and Days* 160), they refer to a conception that extends beyond the immediate birth of every hero.²⁴ In addition, the heroes' closeness of contact with the gods, their life in a time when such contact was the norm rather than the near-impossible exception, a time when humans were greater than they are now, gives the heroes a special intermediary position between gods and men for which their births may serve as a primary symbol.

Such divine origins or affiliations, however, are never the "whole story." In and through the lives of the heroes, these conditions, these divine rapports, vanish, and in contrast to the conditions under which their lives are begun, their ends are marked by all-too-human themes.²⁵ As Brelich remarks,²⁶ very few of the Greek heroes die a natural death, while an incalculable number are slain. Most of the heroes, we are told

²⁴ See Chadwick and Chadwick, *Growth of Literature*, I, 13, who cite Jordanes' description of the "chiefs" of the Goths as *semideos*; also Dumézil, *Destiny of the Warrior*, p. 117, noting that in the *R̥g Veda* the hero Trasadāsyu is called *ardhadevām*, "demigod."

²⁵ This generalization might be refined by pointing out that where the link with the gods is by means other than birth—such as by a possession or by initiation—this still constitutes a "new beginning" or "birth" in the hero's career. Heroes who die a "divine death"—like certain "Odinic heroes"—still do so as heroes and actually die, unlike Odinn (whose death at the Ragnarök is of a different order), in the corresponding conditions; see Dumézil, *Myth to Fiction*, pp. 129–53.

²⁶ Brelich, *Gli Eroi Greci*, pp. 88–89.

by Hesiod, died in war at Thebes or Troy, others in single combat; some were slain through treachery, some by near relatives; some were torn to pieces, some turned to animals, and some were destroyed by Zeus's thunderbolt; some fell victim to certain types of incidents, such as snake bites or mishaps during chariot races, hunts, or training exercises; and others committed suicide. One may certainly also recall here the two deaths most highlighted in the *Iliad*: those of Patroklos and Hektor. Before Achilles slays Hektor, he says to him: "I only wish that my spirit and fury would drive me to hack your meat away and eat it raw for the things that you have done to me" (22. 346–48). Then, when Hektor is slain and all the Achaeans stab his body (22. 371), there follows the "shameful treatment" (22. 395) by Achilles, who drags the corpse before the walls of Troy, then across the plain to the Achaeans' camp, and there three times around the body of Patroklos (24. 16). As to the latter's death (16. 784–867), three times (as Achilles' stand-in) Patroklos attacks the Trojans and kills nine each time, is then disabled by Apollo who strikes him on the back, is speared by the Dardanian Euphorbos between the shoulders, and then again in the belly by Hektor whom he tells, with his dying words: "You are only my third slayer" (16. 850). I do not know whether scholars more familiar with Greece have pondered the meaning of these various symbolisms. The invitation is to be found in some apt words of Victor Turner: "Since most epics are replete with combats, battles, wars and assassinations, the killing scene is often an epitome or multi-vocal symbol of the scheme of values underpinning the whole work."²⁷

Although such matters will be taken up in subsequent chapters, let me mention here some general points. I will try to show that the *Mahābhārata* has taken special pains to lend coherence to thematic material of this type. Certain deaths follow

²⁷ Victor Turner, "Comparative Epic and Saga," p. 7 (unpublished essay).

directly on others, and I believe the symbolisms are related. Second, the heroes' deaths often involve mythic themes which, as the latter provide a background for "human" events, shape them into inevitable fatalities. The clearest case is the death of Karṇa: what is a mythologem on one level, a divine opposition between Indra and Sūrya which leads, in the mythology, to no more than the latter's loss of face and a gain for one of Indra's human protégés, is, on the heroic level, an intrigue shaped by a preceptor's curse which predestines the hero, Sūrya's son, to his death at the hands of Arjuna, Indra's son. But whereas the mythic drama involves an opposition between the gods of Storm and Sun—a drama which takes place at no particular time, or in a perennial seasonal time, and which demands no final resolution in terms of the relationship between the two gods—the heroic drama takes place once and for all and requires human motivation, a series of fatalities, to account for the hero's end.²⁸

In later chapters I will discuss several cases where the causalities which bring on heroes' deaths have mythic dimensions. But even where no related myth is known, the deaths of the epic heroes are charged with symbolism. Almost always, and especially in the battle scenes, certain fatalities set up the conditions whereby a particular death becomes possible: not only curses and blessings, but oaths or vows (the deaths of Dhṛṣṭadyumna, Droṇa, Duṣśāsana, Jayadratha, Duryodhana, and others) and personal prohibitions, whether dishonored (as with Śiśupāla, who dies when he commits one more than the hundred offenses permitted him) or honored (as with Bhīṣma, who falls because he refuses to fight anyone who was formerly a woman). It is as if the hero were invulnerable to death—that his closeness to the gods, whether by birth or by his activities,

²⁸ For fuller exploration of this episode and the background myth, see Dumézil, "Karṇa et les Pāṇḍava," *OS*, III (1954), 60–66, and *ME*, I, 130–38. Added commentary can be found in my doctoral dissertation, *Gods, Heroes, and Kṛṣṇa: A Study of the Mahābhārata in Relation to Indian and Indo-European Symbolisms*, University of Chicago, 1973, pp. 5–8.

would make him immortal—were it not for some intruding and apparently arbitrary human factor, or series of factors, which, in his dealings and interactions with other heroes, has brought a nonetheless inevitable mortality upon him.

It would be instructive to examine the world's epics for the variety of forces which seal the fates of their heroes. No doubt the Indian stress on the power of curses, blessings, and vows owes something to Hindu asceticism (although parallels are easy to find elsewhere). But the device of the personal prohibition, which in Bhīṣma's case appears essentially as a negative vow, finds a close analogue in Ireland. There, a hero or heroine will have his or her destiny shaped by a *geis* (plural *gessa*), a personal prohibition, which may set the conditions for a woman's marriage (as with Medb of Cruachan, according to the *Táin Bó Cuailnge*²⁹) or a man's death. Unlike Bhīṣma, who falls because he virtuously upholds his negative vow, Irish heroes often fall because their *gessa* are broken (as with Conaire) or, more particularly, where they have been broken because one *geis* has conflicted with another (as with Cúchulainn).³⁰ In any case, such epic devices are no doubt as ancient as the myths in which we find parallel dramas.³¹

Character and Psychology

The details of the hero's death and the fatalities that bring it on are telling strokes in the portrayal of his character. But throughout a hero's life, compelling motivations are produced

²⁹ See Dumézil, *ME* II, pp. 337–39; on Medb's *geis*, see below, Chapter 8.

³⁰ On Cúchulainn, see Whitley Stokes, trans., "The Tragical Death of Cuchullin," *The Cuchullin Saga in Irish Literature*, Eleanor Hull, comp. and ed. (London: David Nutt in the Strand, 1898), pp. 253–58, and the discussion (also covering Conaire) by Alwyn Rees and Brinley Rees, *Celtic Heritage: Ancient Tradition in Ireland and Wales* (New York: Grove Press, 1961), pp. 326–33. On *gessa*, see John Revell Reinhard, *The Survival of Geis in Medieval Romance* (Halle A. S.: Max Niemeyer, 1933).

³¹ Comparisons of fatalities will also reveal devices peculiar to specific epic and heroic traditions, such as prophesies, prayers, horoscopes, hecatombs, auguries, interpretations of omens, divinatory practices, games of skill and chance.

by desires, demands, and conflicts which, together, constitute the basic texture of epic drama. Aristotle appreciated long ago the importance of character in epic;³² W. P. Ker, in contrasting the stress on character in epic and the emphasis on mood and sentiment in romance, picked up on Aristotle: "Without dramatic representation of the characters, epic is mere history or romance; the variety and life of epic are to be found in the drama that springs up at every encounter of the personages."³³ This conception very properly leads beyond the single figure to the more revealing depiction of the relations—conflicts and solidarities—among characters.³⁴ Indeed, if one admits at least the general importance of character in epic, it should be possible to regard epic, and perhaps most heroic stories, as primary vehicles for the expression of psychological values. It is certainly no accident that the "Oedipus complex," the "Electra complex," and, as Brelich would have it, the "Iphiclus complex,"³⁵ all take their names from Greek heroes. Psychological disequilibrium seems to be a fundamental given of epic conflict and drama.

In this connection, certain problems arise with a point made by Dumézil, who seems to let the ease with which he finds

³² *Poetics* 1460. a. 5: "Homer is the only poet who knows the right proportions of epic narrative; when to narrate, and when to let the characters speak for themselves. Other poets for the most part tell their story straight on, with scanty passages of drama and far between. Homer, with little prelude, leaves the stage to his personages, men and women, all with characters of their own."

³³ William Paton Ker, *Epic and Romance: Essays on Medieval Literature* (2d rev. ed., 1908; repr. New York: Dover, 1957), p. 17.

³⁴ This point is made partly to delimit the value which I attach, at least as regards epic research, to certain studies which deal with only one type of hero and his "monomyth," especially what I would call the composite "Oedipal Bodhisattva" of Joseph Campbell in his *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (New York: Meridian, 1957).

³⁵ Brelich, *Gli Eroi Greci*, p. 243, n. 52, suggests that if Freud had known the Iphiclus legend, he would have used this term for the "castration complex"; see Apollodorus, *The Library* 1. ix. 12: as a child, Iphiclus ran away when his father laid beside him the bloody knife he had been using to geld rams; later, he had to be cured of impotence.

trifunctional and other mythical themes transposed into the *Mahābhārata* suggest a misleading contrast with the *Iliad*, where such patterns are harder to come by. According to him, in the *Mahābhārata* (and also in other non-Greek Indo-European epic and legendary traditions), “the personages, entirely defined by their function, present scarcely anything of psychological interest. Yudhiṣṭhira, Bhīma, Arjuna, Dhṛtarāṣṭra, Bhīṣma are all of one piece, and one can readily predict what each of them will do in each new circumstance.” In contrast to the many-sided and open-ended character of Achilles, free of mythic prototypes, Dumézil sees Karna simply as the “son and copy of the Sun, of the enemy of Indra, . . . [who] can only confirm to his mother his inflexible resolution to kill Arjuna, Indra’s son, or die by his hand.” And he adds: “In brief, Greece has chosen, as always, the better part: to settled reflections, to the preestablished relations between men and things which she inherited from her ancestors of the North, she preferred the risks and chances of criticism and observation.”³⁶

This is a surprising paean to the West. Granting that Homer’s psychological characterizations are largely free of pre-established mythological patterns (though hardly free of divine promptings) and have a critical and objective quality, this does not mean that other modes of epic characterization lack psychological interest. The depiction of Arjuna, the “warrior yogin,”³⁷ provides the basis for as complex a psychology as one could wish. But even where there are mythic models, the epic continuations (I avoid here the mechanical tone of terms like “copy” and “transposition”) can be of the greatest psychological subtlety. Things occur differently on the two different planes, and that is the value—and for the *Mahābhārata* the purpose—of having both. It is perhaps presumptuous, and probably impossible, to analyze the psyches, the motivations,

³⁶ Dumézil, *ME*, I, 633 (my translation).

³⁷ See Madeleine Biardeau, *Clefs pour la pensée hindoue* (Paris: Editions Seghers, 1972), pp. 95–96, 160–66.

the inner struggles of the gods; from the human point of view, there is something whimsically pure about their actions. But when the themes of myth are viewed in terms of the lives, fates, and deaths of heroes, they can be examined with great psychological depth. Thus the motivations of almost every major figure in the *Mahābhārata*—except Krishna, who plays his hand mysteriously—are constantly under review. In the example already cited several times, Karṇa's inner struggles are actually of the highest interest: rich in loyalty, pride, courage, stubbornness, determination, and especially resentment, obvious but never overstated. Moreover, some of the *Mahābhārata*'s most intriguing characterizations emerge directly from a juxtaposition of mythic and epic themes. One thinks of Arjuna, the son of Indra who is reluctant to fight, and of certain other mythic-epic correlations handled with restrained but unmistakable irony.³⁸ As for Krishna, although his mind can never be read, his involvement is often the foil by which the thoughts and true dispositions of others are bared. In the *Udyogaparvan* especially, his alleged peace mission is the catalyst by which all the various conflicting claims and desires are brought into the open, and thus into inevitable opposition.

One is thus compelled to think of different devices and different "epic psychologies" for different cultures. As to the *Mahābhārata*, one need only look to Irawati Karve's delightful and provocative *Yuganta* and to Vishnu S. Sukthankar's *On the Meaning of the Mahābhārata* to see how the epic has provided material for character studies and psychological delineations of considerable subtlety.³⁹ Sukthankar, in particular, interprets

³⁸ For example, Yudhiṣṭhira as incarnation of Dharma and Draupadī as incarnation of Śrī, topics discussed in several chapters below.

³⁹ Karve, *Yuganta: The End of an Epoch* (Poona: Desmukh Prakashan, 1969), and Sukthankar, *The Meaning of the Mahābhārata* (Bombay: Asiatic Society of Bombay, 1957). In Karve's work, one enjoys in particular her portrayal of Bhīṣma as a consistent woman hater (pp. 36–38) and her appreciation of the tender side of the relation between Bhīma and Draupadī (pp. 128–32). In Sukthankar, see the portrayals of Vidura and Dhṛtarāṣṭra

the epic in terms of a specifically Hindu psychology which, so long as he checks his impulse to fabricate new “complexes” à la Freud,⁴⁰ has much to teach us. Not unassimilable to my depiction of Krishna as a foil, Sukthankar’s psychology is based on the recognition of Krishna as the “Inner Self” (*Paramātman*) and Arjuna, the warrior yogi, as the incarnate soul (*Jīvātman*). From this foundation, says Sukthankar: “If you pursue steadily the indications offered by the symbolism underlying the lineaments of Arjuna and Śrī Krishna and dive yet deeper into the plot of this great drama, you will discern as though in a dim twilight unmistakable traces of an exhaustive but carefully veiled allegory underlying the whole narrative, a very delicate tracery of thought reflected, as it were, in the subconscious of the poets and finding an elusive expression—now refined and subtle, now clumsy and, to us, grotesque—in the characterization of most of the *dramatis personae* as well as in the delineation of many of the scenes.”⁴¹ Preferring to see a mythic background for specific character traits rather than a subconscious allegorical patterning of various components of the psyche—like the empirical ego (= Dhṛtarāṣṭra), the *buddhi* (= Vidura), and various desires (= the Kauravas)⁴²—I would nonetheless agree with Sukthankar’s starting point, Krishna, and his conception of the sweep of an “epic psychology.” After all, such a psychology becomes intelligible in a religious tradition which places such regular emphasis on the belief that the divine is found in every man, the center to which all else relates. One would hardly expect a psychology like this from Homer. It is one, nonetheless.

(pp. 54–57), and the concluding statement: “When we read the poem with attention we discover that from end to end the interest is held on character.”

⁴⁰ See Sukthankar, *Mahābhārata*, p. 53, where he speaks of Karṇa’s “frustration complex.”

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 102 and, more generally, on the allegory of the psyche, pp. 102–10.

⁴² Allegorical interpretations of the *Mahābhārata* by Indian authors go back at least to the thirteenth century *Tātparyanirṇayaaprārambhaḥ* of Madhva.

Sins and Virtues

Contrary to popular assumptions, the epic hero is rarely a uniformly ideal figure. Peter Hagin says of eighteenth-century English efforts to create epics around idealized noble statesmen: “The numberless qualities of the neo-classical hero only conceal his narrative weakness.”⁴³ Rāma, one of the few heroes to approach a standard of complete perfection, appears idealized.⁴⁴ When we find complex character and subtle psychology, however, we may expect characterization in depth. And in most cases, epic heroes—even the most honored and the most despised—are depicted ambivalently. Thus, when two of the *Iliad*’s most noble heroes, Aenias and Achilles, meet each other in combat, Aenias can say: “There are harsh things enough that could be spoken against us both, a ship of a hundred locks could not carry the burden” (20. 246–47). Similarly, Reuben Levy has remarked that the “lapses” of the heroes of the *Shāh-nāma* are no less evident than the nobler side of its villains.⁴⁵ Such ambiguity—wickedness among heroes, goodness among their foes—has misled some scholars, expecting heroic perfection, to propose the so-called “inversion theory” of the *Mahā-bhārata*: that the “bad” side must originally have been the good and the “good” side the bad.

One of the most stimulating treatments of this darker side of the hero is that of Brelich. The Greek heroes, he says, com-

⁴³ Peter Hagin, *The Epic Hero and the Decline of Epic Poetry: A Study of the Neoclassical English Epic with Special Reference to Milton’s Paradise Lost* (Bern: Franke, 1964), p. 58.

⁴⁴ Rāma commits only one truly nefarious act, the treacherous and much-discussed slaying of the monkey king Vāli (*Rāmāyaṇa* 4:13–18); see most recently V. Raghavan, *Ramayana-Triveni* (Madras: Ramayana, 1970), pp. 1–12, giving it a dharmic interpretation; see also Benjamin Khan, *The Concept of Dharma in Valmiki Ramayana* (Delhi: Munshi Ram Manohar Lal, 1965), pp. 143–50; see pp. 140–41, for Rāma’s less glaring offenses: two untruths.

⁴⁵ Reuben Levy, trans., *The Epic of Kings. Shāh-nāma* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966), pp. xx–xxi.

monly present two types of characteristics: “physical monstrosities” and “moral imperfections.” The list of the former⁴⁶ is one which might be instructively compared with unusual physiological traits found elsewhere. Indian heroes of all sorts are described by their *lakṣaṇas* (“marks”),⁴⁷ one trait in particular having been compared to the famous *riastrad* (“distortion”) or *delba* (“forms”) that affect Cúchulainn; and one may also think of the *lus-nán* (“bad body”) of Gesar.⁴⁸ Brelich, in fact, thinks that physical and moral abnormalities are intimately connected, sharing a “common denominator” of “monstrosity”; and he suggests that his proposed distinction may actually be culturally conditioned, imposed on the heroes through the more recent perspectives of Greek rationalism and Christianity.⁴⁹ Although I will not follow this lead, it is certainly true that physical and moral defects may complement each

⁴⁶ See Brelich, *Gli Eroi Greci*, pp. 233–48; giganticness and dwarfishness, theriomorphism, traces of androgyny, physical deformities of teeth (cf. Harald Hyldetan), of inner organs, humpbacks, headlessness, many-headedness, defects of legs and feet (wounds and lameness: see Claude Lévi-Strauss’ treatment of this feature of the Oedipus cycle: *Structural Anthropology* [Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1967], pp. 210–13) and the eyes. One notes the apparent absence of the theme of arm loss which is so prominent in Roman, Irish, Scandinavian, and Indian (Bhuriśravas, Bhīma’s son Sutasoma, Savitṛ) myths and legends.

⁴⁷ India’s most famous case is the thirty-two major *lakṣaṇas* of the Buddha; see Eugène Burnouf, *Le Lotus de la bonne loi*, II: *Appendice (Mémoires Annexes)* (Paris: Maisonneuve Frères, Editeurs, 1925), 553–647; on Krishna’s auspicious bodily features, see A. C. Bhaktivedanta, *The Nectar of Devotion: A Study of Śrīla Rūpa Gosvāmī’s Bhaktirasāmṛta-sindhu* (Boston: Iskcon Press, 1970), pp. 158–60. *Mbh.* 12:102,6–20 gives an intriguing list of heroic marks (*śūra . . . lakṣaṇani*; 6). In this vein, Dumézil, *Destiny of the Warrior*, pp. 161–64, discusses the strange but similar grimaces—one eye raised, the other lowered, or, as with Arjuna, high cheekbones—of Cúchulainn, the Viking Egill (on these two, see also de Vries, *Heroic Song*, pp. 82–85), and Arjuna. Indeed, *Mbh.* 12:102,14 tells us that the brave are those of “crooked [or squinty] eyes, prominent foreheads, and fleshless jaws [or cheekbones]” (*jihmākṣāḥ pralalāṭaśca nirmāmsahanavo*)!

⁴⁸ See Rolf-A. Stein, *Recherches sur l’épopée et le barde au Tibet* (Paris: Imprimerie Nationale, 1959), pp. 544–45.

⁴⁹ Brelich, *Gli Eroi Greci*, p. 232.

other, as, for instance, with the doubly blind Dhṛtarāṣṭra and perhaps the pale and “impotent” Pāṇḍu.⁵⁰

As this suggests, the sins of a hero, or of a group of heroes, may sometimes form a significant symbolic structure; but material of this kind is not always systematized into coherent patterns. For instance, I would not superimpose the scheme of the “three sins of the warrior”—which I shall discuss later—on the single episode in which Achilles, insulted, resolves not to fight.⁵¹ Yet there is no doubt that his behavior in general—his wrath and hubris—is ambiguous and far less than “ideal.” Such incidents, however, invariably provide important indexes to key cultural and religious values—whether they are systematized or not. Brelich has called attention to certain “moral imperfections” among the Greek heroes that find interesting analogues in the Indian heroic tradition: excessive violence and sexuality, incest, untruthfulness, deception, and insolence.⁵² Equally important for comparative purposes, he observes faults that find few if any analogues in the Indian epos: hubris itself (“pride” is a common moral defect in the *Mahābhārata*, but it never has as much play, and certainly not the same connotations, as in Greece⁵³), and also madness, patricide,

⁵⁰ On these traits, see, for both Pāṇḍu and Dhṛtarāṣṭra, Dumézil, *ME*, I, 151–52, 155–57, 162–74, and, for Pāṇḍu, *idem*, *JMQ*, IV, 76–80.

Regarding Brelich’s thesis, it seems to me that the two types of “monstrosities” point in different directions: the physical defining the hero as *materia prima*, an emergence into human form of a mythic identity; the moral defining the hero not in relation to myth (or some inherent natural disposition) but to the structures of human society. Although such a formulation requires further thought, one may think of Śiśupāla, whose physical abnormalities at birth (three eyes, four arms) define him in relation to Śiva, but whose sins correspond to the three social functions; see Dumézil, *ME*, II, 59–68.

⁵¹ See Littleton, “Indo-European Themes in the *Iliad*,” p. 238, and see my article, “Dumézil and Indian Studies,” *JAS*, XXXIV (1974), 133–34.

⁵² Brelich, *Gli Eroi Greci*, pp. 248–65.

⁵³ For the most part, pride (*darpa*, *abhimāna*) seems in the *Mahābhārata* to be a fault confined to Duryodhana and to others whose pretensions to specifically royal prerogatives must occasionally be smashed: see, for example, Indra’s pride, 1:189,17 (discussed in Chapter 7) and that of Yayāti (discussed in Dumézil, *ME*, II, 274).