

## OKEANOS' METAPHYSICAL CURRENTS IN THE *ILIAD* \*

*Résumé.* — Dans l'*Illiade*, le rôle mythique d'Océan est clairement relevé par ses épithètes remarquables : « origine de tous les êtres » (γένεσις πάντεσσι, 14, 246) et « origine des dieux » (θεῶν γένεσιν, 14, 201 et 302). Nulle part ailleurs le mot γένεσις n'apparaît dans Homère. Océan, le fluide, est clairement un symbole mythique de génération, ou de devenir. Son pouvoir générateur se révèle à travers l'*Illiade* et se manifeste dans un modèle de flux et de reflux. Dans les premier et avant-dernier livres de l'*Illiade*, les dieux olympiens effectuent des visites décisives sur les rives d'Océan. La première signale les effets imminents et profonds qui résulteront de la μῆνις d'Achille; la seconde coïncide avec l'allumage du bûcher funéraire de Patrocle. Après cette dernière visite, lorsque les dieux réapparaissent dans le dernier livre de l'*Illiade*, ils se comportent d'une manière entièrement nouvelle. Tout comme l'image physique d'Océan encadre le cosmos représenté sur le bouclier d'Achille, les deux visites des Olympiens à Océan forment un cadre mythopoïétique analogue pour la vision cosmique véhiculée par l'*Illiade*. Les première et dernière invocations d'Océan dans l'*Illiade* dépeignent donc toute la gamme du drame épique – à savoir le flétrissement d'une époque et la genèse d'une autre.

*Abstract.* — In the *Iliad*, Okeanos' mythic role is clearly marked by his remarkable epithets: "genesis of all" (γένεσις πάντεσσι, 14, 246) and "genesis of the gods" (θεῶν γένεσιν, 14, 201 and 302). Nowhere else does the word γένεσις appear in Homer. Fluid Okeanos is quite clearly a mythic symbol of generation, or becoming. His generative power reveals itself throughout the *Iliad* and manifests in an ebbing-and-surging pattern. In the first and penultimate books of the *Iliad*, the Olympian gods make decisive visits to Okeanos' shores. The first visit signals the impending and far-reaching effects of Akhilleus' μῆνις; the second coincides with the lighting of Patroklos' funeral pyre. After this final visit, when the gods reappear in the final book of the *Iliad*, they behave in an entirely new way. Just as the physical image of Okeanos frames the cosmos depicted on the shield of Akhilleus, the Olympians' two oceanic visits form an analogous, mythopoeic frame for the cosmic vision of *Iliad*. The first and final invocations of Okeanos in the *Iliad* therefore designate the full range of the epic drama – namely, the withering of one epoch and the genesis of another.

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### Introduction

Homer's *Iliad* envisions a river called Okeanos (Ocean) that encircles and bounds the earth. Herodotus expresses some doubt about the provenance of such an idea: "The opinion about Ocean is grounded in obscurity and needs no disproof", he declares, "for I know of no Ocean river; and I suppose that Homer or some older poet invented this name and brought it into his poetry" (*Hist.*, 2, 23). Centuries later, scholars concur with Herodotus: Okeanos was apparently not a figure of widespread cult worship in ancient Greece<sup>1</sup>. Visual representations of Okeanos are also "exceedingly rare before the Roman period", as Fabio Barry has recently affirmed<sup>2</sup>. Instead, the god Okeanos seems to exist in the ancient imagination principally – and peculiarly – as a poetic idea

But if indeed Okeanos never existed, either physically or as the object of cult devotion, why would Homer ("or some older poet") invent him? *What poetic or mythic purpose does Okeanos fulfill?* By examining the evidence presented in the *Iliad*, the present essay attempts to engage these longstanding, fundamental questions about the nature of Okeanos. Indeed, Okeanos' presence and dynamism in the *Iliad* alone have perhaps not been fully appreciated<sup>3</sup>. Yet Okeanos' mythopoeic purpose in the *Iliad* is nothing less than genesis. His remarkable epithets make this mythic role abundantly clear: γένεσις πάντεσσι (14, 246), θεῶν γένεσιν (14, 201 & 302). Moreover, in the Homeric epics, the word genesis – γένεσις – is reserved for Okeanos alone; the word does not recur in any other setting in the *Iliad*, nor does it appear even once in the *Odyssey*.

In the *Iliad*, clearly, Okeanos is the genesis of all things, including the gods themselves. Rather than dissolving form and identity into nothingness (as one might perhaps expect of a water god), Okeanos cleanses, purifies, distils, illuminates, protects, nourishes, invigorates, or transforms those who enter his depths. *All* can be renewed and reborn under Okeanos' fluid auspices. To recognize Okeanos as a god of genesis, however, also requires immersion into the *Iliad*'s deepest metaphysical currents. For as I shall pro-

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1. J. RUDHARDT (1971), p. 108: "Nous devons donc admettre, jusqu'à plus ample informé, qu'Océanos et Téthys n'ont pas eu de culte traditionnel dans le monde grec." See also G. B. D'ALESSIO (2004), p. 33: "Ocean is much more popular in literary texts, but seems never to have matched Acheloios as an actual object of cult."

2. F. BARRY (2011), p. 9. A notable exception is the François vase, circa 570/560 BCE, which depicts Okeanos in the procession of gods in attendance at the wedding of Peleus and Thetis. See also LIMC, s.v. On the other hand, Pierre Bonnechère observes that perhaps the visual record is lacking simply because scholars have not *looked* for Okeanos. He notes that the rims of shields often depict oceanic waves, perhaps imitating the shield of Achilles described in *Iliad* 18 (and discussed below).

3. Limits of time and space prevent consideration of the *Odyssey* here.

pose in this essay, the *Iliad* tells the tale of a profound epochal shift – a change of order endured both by gods and mortals, overseen by Okeanos, the mythic patron of genesis.

### 1. Okeanos and Μῆνις

Let us begin with an epic puzzle. The *Iliad*'s first mention of Okeanos occurs at a remarkable, early moment in the narrative. Soon after Agamemnon fatefully insults Akhilleus, Akhilleus calls upon his divine mother, Thetis. The hero pours out his lament and then asks her to appeal directly to Zeus on his behalf. She agrees (1, 419-420), and at the same time, she leaves her son with an unsettling imperative: μήνι' Ἀχαιοῖσιν, πολέμου δ' ἀποπαύεο πάμπαν (1, 422). Conjure divine μῆνις, she urges her mortal son; direct this μῆνις at the Achaians; and cease altogether from engaging in battle. The goddess' maternal directive is bold and forthright. It marks the first time in the epic, apart from the famous opening line, that the language of μῆνις refers directly to Akhilleus. Our opening puzzle, then, is this: The first mention of Okeanos in the *Iliad* coincides with the first mention of μῆνις after the proem. What significance might such a coincidence bear?

Μῆνις, conventionally translated as 'divine wrath,' carries a charged force, both as a word and as a concept. It signifies something more than an emotional condition, as linguistic and philological investigations indicate<sup>4</sup>. Its consequences never affect only one human being or one god alone, as Leonard Muellner observes. Rather, μῆνις targets and destroys an entire community of gods and mortals, without discriminating between innocent and guilty. Zeus repeatedly threatens the community of Olympian gods with his μῆνις, as the *Iliad* amply demonstrates, precisely in order to bend the entire pantheon to his will<sup>5</sup>. L. Muellner therefore concludes: "Μῆνις is not just a term for an emotional state. *It is a sanction meant to guarantee and maintain the integrity of the world order*; every time it is invoked, the hierarchy of the cosmos is at stake<sup>6</sup>." The ruling gods will necessarily take notice when μῆνις arises, since its force necessarily shakes the cosmic hierarchy *in toto*.

In *Iliad* 1, Thetis clearly employs the imperative verbal form of the powerful and uncanny word when she instructs her son<sup>7</sup>. Her potent speech-act – commanding μῆνις from Akhilleus – coincides precisely with the mo-

4. See C. WATKINS (1977) and L. MUELLNER (1996).

5. L. MUELLNER (1996), p. 7-8.

6. L. MUELLNER (1996), p. 26. Emphasis in original.

7. Thetis' imperative is rarely (if at all) discussed by scholars of the *Iliad*.

ment of the Olympians' collective sojourn to Okeanos in the *Iliad*. Then, immediately after she gives her directive, Thetis tells Akhilleus that she must delay the conversation with Zeus that he (Akhilleus) requests of her. As Thetis explains to her son, the father of gods and men is away visiting the blameless Aithiopians at Okeanos' shores (1, 423)<sup>8</sup>.

The timing of the Olympians' oceanic recreation is particularly strange, as generations of scholars attest<sup>9</sup>. The gods' absence is announced precisely at the moment Thetis directs her son to unleash superhuman, cosmos-roiling rage. But until this moment, the Olympians have been active and close at hand in the narrative<sup>10</sup>. By contrast, however, when Thetis commands divine μῆνις from her mortal son, nothing happens at all. For twelve days, the Greeks, Trojans and their gods seem to live in stasis. As Ruth Scodel observes, during the gods' oceanic holiday, "neither Akhilleus nor the Achaeans perform a particular act worthy of record". R. Scodel emphasizes that this 12-day period of inaction marks "empty time, and the gods' absence seems deliberately designed to introduce it"<sup>11</sup>.

The ancient scholiasts proposed that the answer to the riddle of this "empty time" is a desire on Thetis' part to delay her meeting with Zeus so that Akhilleus might still change his mind and return to battle<sup>12</sup>. But it seems clear in 1, 422 that it is Thetis, not Akhilleus, who first conjures the dark power of μῆνις. The language of the epic is, in this sense, plain enough.

The narrative conjunction of Thetis' menacing imperative, μῆνι' (1, 422), with the immediate revelation that the Olympians are now, suddenly, visiting the Aithiopians at Okeanos (1, 423) surely invites closer consideration. Why is *this* the moment that Okeanos appears for the first time in the *Iliad*?

## 2. Thetis

Thetis is no insignificant goddess, as Akhilleus' early testimony in the *Iliad* makes clear:

8. For relevant discussions of the Aithiopes see G. NAGY (1979/1999), p. 205-208, 213, 216 and J.-P. VERNANT (1989), p. 167-168.

9. See G. S. KIRK (1985), p. 97-98, and R. SCODEL (2007) for fuller discussions of this famous Homeric question and concise histories of the scholarly debates surrounding it.

10. For example: Hera and Athene have freely intervened in the dispute between Akhilleus and Agamemnon (1, 195 & 208); Apollo has accepted, with satisfaction, the offerings of Odysseus and the Achaians who make amends with his priest at Chryse (1, 457 & 474).

11. R. SCODEL (2007), p. 83-84.

12. Sch.bT 421-442 quoted in R. SCODEL (2007), p. 86.

[...] πολλάκι γάρ σεο πατρός ἐνὶ μεγάροισιν ἄκουσα  
 εὐχομένης ὄτ' ἔρησθα κελαϊνεφεΐ Κρονίωντι  
 οἷη ἐν ἀθανάτοισιν ἀεικέα λοιγὸν ἀμύναι,  
 ὁπότε μιν ξυνδῆσαι Ὀλύμπιοι ἤθελον ἄλλοι  
 Ἥρη τ' ἠδὲ Ποσειδάων καὶ Παλλὰς Ἀθήνη:  
 ἀλλὰ σὺ τὸν γ' ἐλθοῦσα θεὰ ὑπελύσασο δεσμῶν ...

[...] many times in my father's halls I have heard you  
 making claims, when you said you only among the immortals  
 beat aside shameful destruction from Kronos' son [Zeus] the dark-misted,  
 that time when the other Olympians sought to bind him,  
 Hera and Poseidon and Pallas Athene. Then you,  
 goddess, went and set him free from his shackles ...  
 (1, 396-401<sup>13</sup>.)

An ancient scholiast glosses this passage with a potent suggestion of Thetis' cosmogonic role: "It is said that Thetis is the arrangement and nature of all things<sup>14</sup>." Akhilleus' speech reveals Thetis' past role in preserving Zeus's cosmic rule, even as a fearsome alliance of Zeus's own, Olympian family attempts to depose him. The remembrance neatly encapsulates what Laura Slatkin names "the power of Thetis"<sup>15</sup>. For elsewhere, too, the *Iliad* depicts Thetis as a divine guardian and protectress: in the cases of the besieged Dionysos (6, 130-137) and outcast Hephaistos (18, 394-398). Still more deeply embedded in the *Iliad*'s story, as L. Slatkin demonstrates, is a darker instance of Thetis' role in maintaining the cosmic order: her grudging acceptance of marriage to the mortal Peleus (18, 85 & 432-434). The fruit of this forced marriage, Akhilleus himself is a sign of the goddess's reluctant compliance with Olympian rule, for any son she would otherwise bear to Zeus or Poseidon is prophesied to overthrow the present generation of gods<sup>16</sup>. Thetis' general aloofness and independence from the Olympians seems therefore overdetermined by her ambivalent mythic relationship with them: Thetis figures as *both* potential bane and proven savior of Zeus's cosmic rule.

L. Slatkin proposes that in the *Iliad*, the figure of Thetis "seems to point to an alternative structure of cosmic relations, one that was neither overthrown by the Olympian order ... nor upheld by it ... but whose relation to it was otherwise resolved"<sup>17</sup>. In the *Iliad*, as I hope to demonstrate, this al-

13. English translations are R. Lattimore's, except where indicated.

14. τὴν θέσιν καὶ φύσιν τοῦ πάντος, scholium T, on *Iliad* 1, 399, quoted in L. M. SLATKIN (1991), p. 61 and J-P. VERNANT and M. DETIENNE (1974/1991), p. 141.

15. L. M. SLATKIN (1991).

16. This prophesy is explicitly recounted in Pindar's *Isthmian* 8; the *Iliad* alludes to it at 18, 85 & 429-433.

17. L. M. SLATKIN (1991), p. 59.

ternative cosmic structure is submerged in the waters of Okeanos, ready to surface whenever the existing cosmic arrangement proves inadequate.

Given Thetis' peculiarly ambivalent potency, it appears hardly coincidental that Thetis utters her baleful imperative, μήνι' (1, 422) precisely at the moment of the Olympians' excursion to Okeanos. For the goddess is not simply proposing that Akhilleus remove himself from the martial campaign against Troy to wait patiently on the beach, while she timidly begs a favor of the great god Zeus. Rather, if one understands the force of her language – that is, the full force signified by the word μῆνις – it becomes clear that the goddess knowingly incites a cosmic revolution. Thetis' divine imperative, μήνι', thus sets in motion the deepest action of the *Iliad*.

### 3. Okeanos and Helios, Death and Rebirth

Okeanos certainly appears to be a water god in the Homeric epics. Yet, clearly, he is also more than a physical or elemental force. Both the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* distinguish male Okeanos from the feminine sea (θάλασσα), as well as all other water sources that might be visible to the human eye. Unlike other bodies of water, moreover, Okeanos is not readily seen – not until Hephaistos crafts his image on the great shield of Akhilleus. (We will return to Hephaistos' representation later in this essay.) Okeanos does not, for example, attend the great assembly Zeus summons in *Iliad* 20, 7. Rather, it seems that Okeanos serves to mark both a physical and metaphysical horizon at the very limit of the earth (πείρατα γαίης, 14, 200 & 301), at the vanishing point of human vision. As the opening scene of *Iliad* 20 suggests, when only Okeanos is absent from the divine conclave, the gods themselves operate *within* Okeanos' sphere. He does not attend the great conference of gods, we may conclude, because he *contains* it, in a fundamental, mythic sense.

Gregory Nagy associates Okeanos with “symbolic boundaries delimiting light and darkness, life and death, wakefulness and sleep, consciousness and unconsciousness”<sup>18</sup>. Further, G. Nagy observes that Okeanos' boundary constitutes a *coincidentia oppositorum*: “a mythological motif”, he elaborates, “where identity consists of two opposites”<sup>19</sup>. The mythic conjunction of opposites marks a *mental* or *imaginative* threshold, as well as a literal or physical one: Okeanos can thus be understood as a place of paradox, where ends are also beginnings. To illustrate: whenever the sun rises or sets into the ocean, seemingly opposite ontological states (light and darkness) mo-

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18. G. NAGY (1973), p. 150.

19. G. NAGY (1973), p. 151. The term *coincidentia oppositorum* is coined by Mircea Eliade. See also D. FRAME (1978), p. 31 and M. ELIADE (1958).

mentarily blur and meld. The sun's nightly descent into Okeanos signifies the depth and range of an all-embracing consciousness. Helios sees what human beings cannot, both above and beneath Okeanos' horizon. Thus, the sun's regular movement into and out of flowing Okeanos serves as a helpful analogue with which to comprehend other movements of consciousness into and out of metaphoric darkness and light in the *Iliad*<sup>20</sup>.

As G. Nagy proposes, "the movements of the sun into and from the Okeanos serve as a cosmic model for death and rebirth"<sup>21</sup>. Moreover, Okeanos' watery depths are distinctly different from those of the chthonic realms of Tartaros or Hades. The defunct gods and mortals who dwell in those underworld regions definitively belong to the past. By contrast, whatever enters Okeanos' depths can resurface and surge forth dramatically, as if reborn. Under Okeanos' influence, the past is never definitively past, it seems: not only vibrant Helios, but other beings, too, including once-forgotten gods and goddesses, can sink into, but then rise again from Ocean's depths.

Consider, for example, the Iliadic simile describing Diomedes' transformation by Athene. Here it is not Helios, but Sirius, the late summer star, that enters and then returns from Okeanos<sup>22</sup>:

ἐνθ' αὖ Τυδείδῃ Διομήδῃ Παλλὰς Ἀθήνη  
 δῶκε μένος καὶ θάρσος, ἴν' ἐκδηλός μετὰ πᾶσιν  
 Ἀργείοισι γένοιτο ἰδὲ κλέος ἐσθλὸν ἄροιτο:  
 δαΐε οἱ ἐκ κόρυθός τε καὶ ἀσπίδος ἀκάματον πῦρ  
 ἀστέρ' ὀπωρινῷ ἐναλίγκιον, ὃς τε μάλιστα  
 λαμπρὸν παμφαίνῃσι λελουμένος Ὠκεανοῖο:  
 τοῖόν οἱ πῦρ δαΐεν ἀπὸ κρατός τε καὶ ὤμων,  
 ὥρσε δέ μιν κατὰ μέσσον ὅθι πλεῖστοι κλονέοντο.

There to Tydeus' son Diomedes Pallas Athene  
 granted strength and daring, that he might be conspicuous  
 among all the Argives and win the glory of valour.  
 She made weariless fire blaze from his shield and helmet  
 like that star of the waning summer who beyond all stars  
 rises bathed in the ocean stream to glitter in brilliance.  
 Such was the fire she made blaze from his head and his shoulders  
 and urged him into the middle fighting, where most were struggling.  
 (5, 1-8.)

Athene here sets aflame both Diomedes' shield and his helmet; the visual image alone is luminous. The subsequent simile adds more than de-

20. See Douglas Frame's considerations of Helios and νόος, especially in D. FRAME (1978), p. 30.

21. G. NAGY (1973), p. 161.

22. G. S. KIRK (1990), p. 53.

scriptive beauty, however, to the divine transaction. Diomedes appears like a late-summer star that rises after having been “bathed” (λελουμένος) in Okeanos. Okeanos’ waters purify this star so that it shines far more brilliantly than others in the firmament<sup>23</sup>. It is a star “of the waning summer” (ὀπωρινῶ, 5, 5). Its shining marks the expiration of a season. The simile indicates that through Athene’s magic, Diomedes will blaze more brightly than other heroes on the battlefield.

In the formal structure of the simile, Athene’s power to enflame and distill Diomedes’ fighting power corresponds directly to Okeanos’ power to enflame and distill the brilliance of the late-summer star. Here, a reader of the epic may pause to wonder: Okeanos seems to be a god of water. In nature, however, water quenches fire. The simile nonetheless depicts the water-god as one who makes a fiery star *even more fiery*. The simile illuminates the identity of Okeanos, for it reveals that the great god of fluidity is utterly unconstrained by elemental nature. Rather, Okeanos embodies genesis, or creativity, itself. As the *Ur*-source of the opposing elements of nature, he transcends the laws of physics. He can submerge fire itself in his waters, only to kindle an even stronger and purer flame. At the same time, as a symbol of flux and change, Okeanos’ name already anticipates both the evanescence and the renewal of the star’s power. From Okeanos the star was born; to Okeanos it will return, faded, at the summer’s end; from Okeanos it will arise again, reborn in its proper season.

Further, it is noteworthy that the simile likens the goddess Athene to Okeanos. Since Athene is a figure of wisdom, it is perhaps hardly surprising when a still deeper transformation, a transformation of consciousness, soon follows her outward glorification of Diomedes. The goddess does not simply change Diomedes’ external appearance: she also transforms the hero’s vision by cleansing it. Athene removes the mist from Diomedes’ eyes so that he can see the immortal beings on the battlefield (5, 127-128). This divine gesture, like Okeanos’ purification of the star’s fire, effects the momentary purification of Diomedes’ senses. Like Helios or the late summer star that plunges into Okeanos’ depths, a purified Diomedes now crosses a threshold of consciousness. For a brief, shining, noetic moment, Diomedes can see what ordinary mortals cannot, the gods themselves in action. He is more than human – more than heroic – for the duration of this quickly-passing moment.

The late summer setting of the simile tacitly reminds its audience that Diomedes also shines brilliantly at the end of a season. His *aristeia* occurs in the final year of the Trojan War. In turn, the Trojan War itself may be

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23. See also M. C. BEAULIEU (2018) on the theme of purification by water.

seen to mark the waning of an epoch. Indeed, ancient writers propose that the war takes place because of a divine plan to bring the age of heroes to a close<sup>24</sup>. A provocative Hesiodic fragment (204, 95-123MW) imagines that the Trojan War happens precisely to increase the distance between human beings and gods –

[...] so that the blessed gods [...], as before  
may have their way of life and their accustomed places apart from men<sup>25</sup>.

Similarly, a fragment from the *Kypria* recounts a time

[...] when the countless tribes of men, though wide-dispersed, oppressed the surface of the deep-bosomed earth, and Zeus saw it and had pity and in his wise heart resolved to relieve the all-nurturing earth of men by causing the great struggle of the Ilian war, that the load of death might empty the world. And so the heroes were slain in Troy, and the plan of Zeus came to pass<sup>26</sup>.

In both of these accounts, the Trojan War's significance is cosmic, consequential for both gods and mortals. The very future of humanity is at stake in the *Kypria*'s telling, while the Hesiodic passage considers the future life of the gods in the aftermath of the Trojan struggle. Both of these ancient sources serve as helpful frames through which to discern the *Iliad*'s cosmic action. The *Iliad*, too, assumes broad-ranging, existential consequences of the Trojan War for both humanity and the gods; like these other texts, it records a tradition that links the war and its consequences to an overarching plan of Zeus.

Thus, the opening simile of *Iliad* 5 quietly reminds us that Diomedes fights not only in the final year of the Trojan War, but also in the final war of the heroic age. The synthesis of the seasonal change with an epochal shift imparts deeper resonance to the simile's elegiac invocation of the late summer. For Diomedes resembles the brilliant, late-summer star not only in appearance. He is like this late-summer star in another, more valedictory sense. He, too, shines only for a season. His own shining, like the star's, signals a season's imminent end<sup>27</sup>. The simile thus emphasizes Diomedes' evanescence – and, in the same instant, the evanescence of all other warriors in the *Iliad* who are like Diomedes in their heroic aspiration.

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24. In the twentieth century, W. KULLMANN (1955); ID. (1956); ID. (1960); G. S. KIRK (1972), p. 79; G. NAGY (1979), p. 130-131; 218-220; R. SCODEL (1982); L. M. SLATKIN (1991), p. 117-122; J. ALVIS (1995), p. 3-6; J. S. CLAY (1999); and, in the present century, B. GRAZIOSI and J. HAUBOLD (2005), p. 91; J. M. GONZÁLEZ (2010), p. 417-418, among others, further explore this thematic link connecting these ancient texts with the action of the Homeric epics.

25. Hesiod, fr. 204, 102-103MW, translated by G. NAGY (1979/1999), p. 220.

26. In H. G. EVELYN-WHITE (1914), p. 497.

27. The etymology of ἥρωες (hero) itself implies seasonality: See W. PÖTSCHER (1961); G. NAGY (2013), p. 32.

#### 4. Okeanos, Genesis of the Gods

The Iliadic simile of the late-summer star, Sirius, provides a further clue to the mythic function of Okeanos in the *Iliad*. Okeanos renews and strengthens forces that are growing weak. We see this phenomenon also in the stories of the two Olympian gods, Hera and Hephaistos. Like Titanic Helios and like Sirius, Hera and Hephaistos, also sink into Okeanos at a moment when their powers are diminished (and even threatened).

The stories of Hera's and Hephaistos's oceanic experiences again emphasize the nourishing and revivifying dimensions of Okeanos' character. Hera's tale yields the *Iliad's* first announcement of Okeanos' remarkable epithet, "genesis of the gods" (θεῶν γένεσιν, 14, 201 & 302). Hera's account also offers some clues about Okeanos' role as a matrix, or crucible, from which divinity emerges with renewed vigor. Hera, the daughter of Rheia and Kronos, was born divine. Okeanos does not, then, *literally* serve as the "genesis" of her godhood. Rather, Hera becomes more fully herself – more absolutely the queen of the Olympian universe – after she rises from Okeanos' waters. Okeanos generates her *power* as a god.

During the great war between Zeus and the Titans, Hera is a vulnerable daughter-figure, even by her own account. She tells Aphrodite:

[...] εἴμι γὰρ ὀψομένη πολυφόρβου πείρατα γαίης,  
Ὤκεανόν τε θεῶν γένεσιν καὶ μητέρα Γηθύν,  
οἷ μ' ἐν σφοῖσι δόμοισιν ἐὺ τρέφον ἦδ' ἀτίταλλον  
δεξάμενοι Πρείης, ὅτε τε Κρόνον εὐρύσπα Ζεὺς  
γαίης νέρθε καθεῖσε καὶ ἀτρυγέτιο θαλάσσης:

[...] I go now to the ends of the generous earth, on a visit  
to Okeanos, genesis of the gods, and Tethys our mother  
who brought me up kindly in their own house, and cared for me  
and took me from Rheia, at that time when Zeus of the wide brows  
drove Kronos underneath the earth and the barren water.  
(14, 200-204<sup>28</sup>.)

As she speaks these words, Hera has no intention of presently visiting Okeanos. She simply wants to borrow Aphrodite's love charms so that she can seduce and distract Zeus. Even so, the truth of Hera's story of the sanctuary she found with Okeanos during her girlhood remains uncontested both within the epic and in the critical commentaries upon these lines<sup>29</sup>.

28. At line 201, I have altered R. Lattimore's translation ("whence the gods have risen") to reflect Okeanos' epithet, θεῶν γένεσιν, more literally.

29. See R. JANKO (1992), p. 180-182 for a review of the literature connecting this passage with other theogonies. R. Janko marks that the formulaic phrase ἀτρυγέτιο θαλάσσης (= the 'barren' or 'murmuring' sea, 14, 204) is a freighted one in this context. For as Hera recalls Kronos' overthrow by Zeus, she deftly deploys a Homeric formula reserved for theogonic contexts, as if to suggest a new theogony is on her mind. Hera's

Why does Hera choose *this* particular lie, rather than any other, to deceive Aphrodite? Certainly, Hera's account of her oceanic exile, with its explicit allusion to cataclysmic theogonic events, broadens and complicates the temporal scope of the *Iliad's* action. Richard Janko proposes that Hera's account of the nurturing care she receives from Okeanos and Tethys derives from a theogony in which Okeanos and Tethys ("our mother", 14, 201) are understood as the primeval parents (rather than Ouranos and Gaia, as in Hesiod)<sup>30</sup>. R. Janko notes further that Hera's remembrance of a past war between the gods "alludes to a threat to the cosmic order of the sort she herself now poses"<sup>31</sup>. As she recalls this moment of oceanic patronage, then, it begins to appear that Hera does not *only* want to seduce Zeus and thereby distract him from the Trojan campaign: it seems that she tacitly threatens to generate an entirely new cosmic order<sup>32</sup>.

Certainly, after Hera's original immersion in Okeanos, as remembered in the story she tells Aphrodite, the cosmos looks different from before. When the sun rises from the ocean, the daylight world on which it shines is also different, having endured the night and all that transpires during its darkness. So also, the cosmos is different when Hera emerges after the darkness of the Titanomachy. Arising from Okeanos' waters, Hera is no longer a vulnerable child (of the Titans), but a commanding queen (of the Olympians). Like the late-summer star in the simile of *Iliad* 5, Hera comes into her own shining power after her oceanic descent.

Indeed, by the time the *Iliad's* action unfolds, Hera's dominion is such that she herself can command the sun to sink into Okeanos:

Ἡέλιον δ' ἀκάμαντα βοῶπις πότνια Ἥρη  
πέμψεν ἐπ' Ὀκεανοῖο ῥοὰς ἀέκοντα νέεσθαι:  
ἡέλιος μὲν ἔδω, παύσαντο δὲ δῖοι Ἀχαιοὶ  
φυλόπιδος κρατερῆς καὶ ὁμοίου πτολέμοιο.

Now the lady Hera of the ox eyes drove the unwilling  
weariless sun god to sink in the depth of the Ocean,  
and the sun went down, and the brilliant Achaians gave over  
their strong fighting, and the doubtful collision of battle.  
(18, 239-242.)

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account of Okeanos and Tethys's marriage also appears in a fragment of an Orphic poem quoted by Socrates in Plato's *Cratylus* (402b). See also M. L. WEST (1983), p. 116-121; J. RUDHARDT (1971); O. GRUPPE (1887), p. 614-622.

30. R. JANKO (1992), p. 181.

31. R. JANKO (1992), p. 180.

32. An ancient scholium (bT) offers a similar gloss. See R. JANKO (1992), p. 206.

Hera's ocean-saturated authority apparently gives her control of time itself<sup>33</sup>. For the sun does not move according to benign natural rhythms in the verses here quoted. Instead, "unwilling" (ἀέκοντα, 240) time now conforms to Hera's divine will. Hera becomes something more awesome than a god of nature. She is a deity who establishes an alternative order, an alternative cosmos, defined by deliberate calculation rather than blind instinct. Meanwhile, Okeanos, who receives and conceals "unwilling" Helios in this passage, himself remains a willing partner in Hera's cosmic rule – and a more faithful partner to her, it might appear, than is promiscuous Zeus.

Hera moves the sun as she wills; similarly, as it appears from her exchange with Aphrodite, she can return to Okeanos whenever she wills. In Okeanos' reservoirs, it seems, Hera finds her own cosmic powers.

### 5. Okeanos, The Iliadic Paradigm of Resurgence, and Exiled Hephaistos

We now see a clear pattern that the *Iliad* establishes in its treatment of Okeanos: descent into Okeanos in vulnerability precedes ascent from Okeanos with renewed potency. Okeanos embodies a realm of miraculous resurgence; he also represents a womb of time – a place of incubation, where time can be slowed, quickened, or even made new, depending on the cosmic circumstance.

The first movement of this pattern – descent in vulnerability – clearly recurs in Hephaistos' tale of his time with Okeanos in *Iliad* 18. The smith-god tells of finding refuge with Okeanos after his mother, Hera, hurls him from Olympos. The second movement of the *Iliad's* oceanic pattern – resurgence with new power – is initially difficult to discern in Hephaistos' experience. Yet the ebbing-and-surg-ing paradigm of oceanic experience recurs also for Hephaistos, as we shall now see. Hephaistos' renewal is an artistic and creative one – a discovery of his own particular powers, the craftsmanship and vision that distinguishes him from the other gods. The ultimate manifestation of his oceanic resurgence is the great shield he forges for Akhilleus, its boundary embossed with the unique, visual representation of Okeanos in the epic.

Hera throws her son from Olympos, Hephaistos remembers bitterly, in order to hide (κρύψαι, 18, 397) his lameness. Hephaistos lands upon the shore of Okeanos, where he discovers nurturing caretakers, the goddesses Thetis and Eurynome:

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33. Hera is associated with time in other ways, as well. See *Iliad*, 8, 392-396, as well as O. M. DAVIDSON, (1980) p. 199; D. S. SINOS (1980), p. 199; O'BRIEN (1993), p.113-119 for the etymological links between the name Hera and the seasons, *Horae*.

[...] τότε ἄν πάθον ἄλγεα θυμῷ,  
 εἰ μὴ μ' Εὐρυνόμη τε Θέτις θ' ὑπεδέξατο κόλπῳ  
 Εὐρυνόμη θυγάτηρ ἄψορροῦ Ὠκεανοῖο.

[...] Then my soul would have suffered pains  
 if Eurynome and Thetis had not received [ὑπεδέξατο] me into the fold [κόλπῳ],  
 Eurynome, daughter of back-flowing Ocean<sup>34</sup>.  
 (18, 397-399.)

The language of this brief passage raises a number of questions, beginning with its curious verb. The verb ὑπεδέξατο (“receive, welcome”) is third-person singular. The singularity of this receiving action is again emphasized in the singular, dative noun κόλπῳ (18, 398); its nominative form, κόλπος, is defined in the LSJ as “bosom” or “lap” or even “vagina”. (P. Chantraine proposes an original meaning of “fold” or “hollow”<sup>35</sup>.) But a grammatical difficulty arises in the subject of this *singular* verb. For the subject of the singular verb first appears to be strangely *plural*: namely, the two goddesses, Eurynome and Thetis. The stringencies of meter alone do not explain such fundamental dissonance in a poetic masterwork<sup>36</sup>.

One could perhaps explain away the incongruous grammar by supposing that Eurynome singularly receives the fallen Hephaistos metaphorically in her lap or her bosom, as Thetis witnesses Eurynome’s retrieval of the spurned god. Other indications in these lines suggest something more unusual is at hand, however. Eurynome’s name appears both before and after Hephaistos is “received” or “welcomed” (ὑπεδέξατο), so that the verse itself pluralizes her<sup>37</sup>. Meanwhile, the verb insists upon a singular – and increasingly mysterious – agent. Poetically, the repetition of Eurynome’s name calls attention to – because it enacts – the back-flowing action of circular Okeanos (ἄψορροῦ, 18, 399). The syntax thus effects a new possibility: not Eurynome, but Okeanos himself provides the womb that nourishes Hephaistos and from which he will be reborn<sup>38</sup>. In this alternative reading, the provocative word κόλπῳ (bosom / lap / vagina) signifies the fold formed by Okeanos, the god who “flows back” (ἄψορροῦ). From Okeanos’ “womb”, or fold, Hephaistos is symbolically reborn after experiencing his natural mother’s rejection<sup>39</sup>. The oddity of grammar in these lines thus calls

34. I have modified R. Lattimore’s translation to hew more literally to the Greek.

35. P. CHANTRAINE (1968/1970/1975/1977), s.v.

36. Pace M. W. EDWARDS (1991), p. 193.

37. M. DELCOURT (1982), p. 45, associates Eurynome’s name with death itself.

38. Cf. M. ELIADE (1962/1978): “The source of rivers was indeed considered as the vagina of the earth. In Babylonian, the term *pû* signifies both ‘source of a river’ and ‘vagina.’” (p. 41.)

39. Falling in the *Iliad* is explicitly linked with birthing, as observed by A. PURVES (2006), p. 197-201. A. Purves notes further that Hephaistos’ fall particularly distinguishes him from other Olympian gods, paragons of physical grace.

attention to the oddity of the circumstance the lines depict: rejected by the mother who bore him, Hephaistos will be received instead into the womb, or vagina, of a male deity, Okeanos, to be reborn<sup>40</sup>.

In this context, the unusual epithet Hephaistos employs to describe Okeanos, ἀψορρόου, is worth closer attention. In physical terms, the adjective (“back-flowing”) evokes a body of water with no source but itself. A body of water that is also its own source suggests an infinity and wholeness impossible in nature. Defying – or transcending – nature’s laws is the prerogative of Okeanos, as we have already seen – in the simile of the late summer star, for example, in *Iliad* 5, in which fire is intensified, not extinguished, by water; or, in the example of Hera driving the unwilling sun to descend before its usual hour in *Iliad* 18. We may now add Okeanos’ capacity for (male!) pregnancy to the growing catalogue of his transcendent and transformational powers.

In fact, womb imagery abounds in these verses. Thetis and Eurynome inhabit a womblike cave (18, 402). Hephaistos resides in this cave for a symbolically significant nine years (18, 400) before his return to Olympos, in an unmistakable evocation of the nine months of human pregnancy. Finally, Hephaistos spends his time in exile honing his distinctive craft – metallurgy. Smithing and metallurgy are also mythically associated with pregnancy and gestation. As Mircea Eliade proposes: “The [smiths’] furnaces are as it were, a new matrix, an artificial uterus where the ore completes its gestation<sup>41</sup>.” The circular and undulating objects that Hephaistos makes during his exile – “pins that curve” (πόρπας τε γναμπτάς, 18, 401), helix-shaped brooches (ἑλικας κάλυκας, 18, 401), necklaces, and even cups – are obvious symbols of his own generative powers. The circular forms of these artefacts suggest wholeness, completion, and fruition. They mimic the ocean’s very form.

Hephaistos’ two divine foster-mothers, Thetis and Eurynome also invite our attention. Thetis is nowhere else associated with Eurynome except in this unique digression in the *Iliad*. Even in the fictive present of the *Iliad*’s action, Thetis dwells with her Nereid sisters “in the depths of the sea at the side of her aged father” (ἐν βένθεσσιν ἀλὸς παρὰ πατρὶ γέροντι, 1, 358 & 18, 36). Notably, Eurynome is not counted among these sisters (who are individually named in 18, 39-49). Nor is Eurynome depicted elsewhere in the epic<sup>42</sup>. Rather, in the *Iliad*’s own account, it seems that the two goddesses Thetis and Eurynome dwell together only during the nine-year period of

40. Cf. M. DELCOURT (1982), p. 117: “Le saut dans la mer indique certainement un degré plus élevé encore : un risque mortel, une perte de conscience, un oubli total, la genèse d’un être différent.”

41. M. ELIADE (1962/1978), p. 57.

Hephaistos' most intense need. Without them, Hephaistos declares, his soul would have endured pains (πάθον ἄλγεα θυμῶ, XVIII 397). From them – and from Thetis in particular, Hephaistos indicates – he receives “saving life” (ζωάγρια, 18, 407).

Why might these two particular and apparently distinct goddesses, Thetis and Eurynome, be paired so strikingly in this episode? One possible answer to this question lies in the traits and histories Thetis and Eurynome share. It is worthwhile now to recall Laura Slatkin's proposal, cited earlier in this essay, that the *Iliad* “seems to point to an alternative structure of cosmic relations, one that was neither overthrown by the Olympian order ... nor upheld by it ... but whose relation to it was otherwise resolved”<sup>43</sup>. For at Okeanos, Hephaistos encounters a different sort of divine reality, atavistic perhaps, but certainly not defunct. Some glimpses of an “alternative structure of cosmic relations” become evident in traditions connected with both Thetis and Eurynome. In these traditions, the goddesses are understood as powerful – and even mighty – figures. Orphic accounts of the pre-Olympian cosmic hierarchy portray Eurynome as an early queen of Olympos who cedes rule to Rheia (mother of Olympian Zeus) either voluntarily or under compulsion, depending on the source. Thetis, meanwhile, is portrayed in Orphic texts as a primordial creator of the universe; she is sometimes associated (and conflated) with Tethys – the consort of Okeanos<sup>44</sup>. As we have already seen, the very language of Hephaistos' remembrance seems to flow backward, poetically and mythically, into a circle of its own making. His curious and rare adjective ἄψορρόου motivates a number of scholars to link the figure of Okeanos to the *Enuma Elish*, the Babylonian creation epic, and particularly to its primordial water god, Apsu. The single adjective thus functions as a conduit through which an arcane Babylonian creation myth flows into the comparatively new form of Homeric epic, linking otherwise disparate mythologies<sup>45</sup>.

Thus, in Hephaistos' recollection of his oceanic sojourn, several alternative cosmic histories – Babylonian creation stories from *Enuma Elish*, Orphic cosmogonies involving Thetis and Eurynome – shimmer elusively,

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42. Hesiod's *Theogony* (358) imagines Eurynome as mother of the Graces, including Hephaistos' wife, Charis. See also M. W. EDWARDS (1991), p. 193.

43. L. M. SLATKIN (1991), p. 59. See *supra*, p. 223

44. For Eurynome's cosmic role, see Apollonius Rhodius, *Argonautica*, 1, 498-511; for Thetis, see Alcman, fr. 5; D. L. PAGE (1962), p. 81; C. CALAME (1983), p. 15-16; also, J-P. VERNANT (1970); J-P. VERNANT and M. DETIENNE (1974/1991), p. 133-174.

45. See particularly M. L. WEST (1997), p. 144-148, 382-385. Other scholars who link Okeanos with Near Eastern and Mesopotamian sources include: A. LESKY (1947), p. 64-66, 80-85, 115-116; J. RUDHARDT (1972), p. 113-116; R. SCODEL (1992); R. JANKO (1992), ad *Il.*, 14, 200-207; G. B. D'ALESSIO (2004), p. 29; J. FENNO (2005).

at once in and out of sight of the main narrative. These subtle – and almost literally submerged – allusions remind the audience that the Olympian order is not the *only* possible order for the cosmos. Other *cosmoi* lurk beneath Okeanos' waters. Hephaistos' pregnant language suggests that, through the mediation of Thetis, Eurynome and Okeanos, he somehow perceives them during his exile. As we have seen repeatedly in the *Iliad*, Okeanos preserves and protects divine powers wholly distinct from – and not necessarily in accord with – the power of the gods who rule the cosmos. Indeed, from the vantage point of Okeanos, cosmic rule is a fluctuating and transient business, as Hera's story of sanctuary during the Titanomachy clearly illustrates. Then, the cosmos roiled, but Hera emerges, invigorated, to find a vital place in the new reality. Similarly, it seems, Hephaistos bides his time and waits, under Okeanos' protection, for another cycle of tumult to end before he too claims his place on Olympos.

Given the multiple allusions to alternative mythic possibilities in Hephaistos' remembrance of his exile, it becomes all the more noteworthy that Hephaistos meditates on circularity during his nine years away from Olympos. He eventually intends to close his own existential circle, of course: ejected from Olympos, Hephaistos will soon return there. Meanwhile, the time he spends in the company of Thetis and Eurynome is an intensely creative one. As we noted above, he creates delicate jewelry, circular and undulating forms. And all the while, as he practices his craft, Hephaistos recalls that “the stream of Ocean / was flowing around forever, murmuring with its foam” (περι δὲ ῥόος Ὀκεανοῖο / ἀφρῶ μορμύρων ῥέεν ἄσπετος, 18, 402-403)<sup>46</sup>. Okeanos encircles Hephaistos – and not merely in a physical sense, it must be stressed. Imaginatively and symbolically, as well, Okeanos influences Hephaistos' work and, more deeply, Hephaistos' own conception of his art.

It is easy to see that in creating so many round, bending artifacts during his oceanic exile, Hephaistos mimics the ocean's very form, its marvelous and uncanny flowing. Like Okeanos, Hephaistos is himself a bending, curving figure. In the *Iliad* he is described as ἀμφιγυήεις<sup>47</sup>, which can mean either that both his legs are curved *or* that his feet can move in opposite directions<sup>48</sup>. Symbolically, the unusual shape of Hephaistos' body and his

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46. I have modified R. Lattimore's translations here.

47. 1, 607; 14, 239; 18, 383, 393, 462, 587, 590 & 614. G. S. KIRK (1985) notes in his commentary: “ἀμφιγυήεις: there has been much debate about this word; [...] Could he have been no more than ‘curved [the root meaning of γυ-] on both sides,’ that is, severely bow-legged?” (p. 114).

48. See J-P. VERNANT and M. DETIENNE (1974/1991), p. 271.

unusual mode of locomotion also reflect the unusual movement of his mind<sup>49</sup>.

The divine smith – with his ever-fluent, always-reflective mind – perhaps aims for something beyond merely superficial imitation of the ocean's physical form. Rather, he mimics the ocean's generative and redemptive *function* in his own artistry. It is this new power – which is to say, the generative and redemptive power of Okeanos himself – that marks the resurgence of Hephaistos.

### 6. Okeanos on Akhilleus' Shield

In *Iliad* 18, Hephaistos inhabits Olympos, the realm of triumph, not Okeanos, the realm of exile, when he forges the marvelous shield of Akhilleus. Yet he makes the armor in grateful tribute to the care Thetis offered during his oceanic seclusion (18, 406-407). Akhilleus' shield is the most glorious of Hephaistos' circular creations in the *Iliad*. It depicts a cosmos, as many scholars have noted: an entire order of being. The cosmos represented on the shield, however, is markedly different from the one that Akhilleus inhabits. Rather, the new order that Hephaistos imagines is perhaps a reflection of what he learns during his nine-year exile in the fold of Okeanos: the pregnant possibility of an “alternative structure of cosmic relations”<sup>50</sup>.

Most notably, and in contrast to the world familiar to Akhilleus, there are no glorious, martial heroes in the world Hephaistos envisions on the shield. Instead, the men depicted there are anonymous. In this sense, the shield foreshadows the coming epoch as imagined in the *Iliad*: a post-heroic age. Moreover, the shield seems to manifest an ever-shifting flux in which a city of peace abruptly into a city of war and then subsides once more into an idyllic pastoral scene of song and dance. Flowing at the edge of the shield – as if at the edge of the earth itself – a single image binds and circles these ever-changing visions: Okeanos himself (18, 607-608).

When Thetis visits Hephaistos to commission this armour for her son, she knows already that no matter how carefully it is crafted, the armour she requests will not shield her son from death. She knows precisely (and tells Akhilleus directly) that his death will immediately follow Hektor's death

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49. W. BURKERT (1977/1985), p. 168. Further, J-P. VERNANT (1982) shows that the abnormality of lameness is repeatedly associated with androgyny (in itself a primal image of wholeness). Plato's *Symposium*, for example, associates androgyny quite explicitly with Hephaistos and also with the idea of wholeness and completion for which human beings long.

50. This is, once again, Laura Slatkin's suggestive formulation. L. M. SLATKIN (1991), p. 59.

(αὐτίκα γάρ τοι ἔπειτα μεθ' Ἑκτορα πόντος ἑτοῖμος, 18, 96). What she seeks for her son, then, is not ordinary armor in the functional, protective, sense. Rather she commissions the armor as an aesthetic frame in which Akhilleus may be seen, dying. Her aim is to attract sustained and awed contemplation of her son's mortality. Hephaistos' radically unheroic world achieves this aim by casting Akhilleus into relief, as it were. For against the background of the divine shield, Akhilleus himself can be seen as the last hero of a waning age – a shining, glorious, god-like man, superior to and distinctly different from the myriad, anonymous mortals engraved in metal. At the same time, as the bearer of Hephaistos' shield, Akhilleus is also the harbinger of the new epoch foreseen in its sobering tableaux. The shield thus makes a *coincidentia oppositorum* of Akhilleus, who becomes the monument of a dying order of being, even as he heralds the new one. As he bears the shield into battle, Akhilleus becomes an absolutely liminal figure, standing heroically at the precipice of his own death and simultaneously prefiguring a new, post-heroic order.

Hephaistos wishes aloud that he could “hide” (ἀποκρύψαι, 18, 465) Akhilleus away from death:

αἶ γάρ μιν θανάτοιο δυσηχέος ὧδε δυνάϊμην  
 νόσφιν ἀποκρύψαι, ὅτε μιν μόρος αἰνὸς ἰκάνοι,  
 ὡς οἱ τεύχεα καλὰ παρέσσειται, οἷά τις αὐτε  
 ἀνθρώπων πολέων θαυμάσσειται, ὅς κεν ἴδηται.

I wish that I could hide him away from death and its sorrow  
 at that time when his hard fate comes upon him, as surely  
 as there shall be fine armour for him, such as another  
 man out of many men shall wonder at, when he looks on it.  
 (18, 464-467.)

The verb of hiding here recalls Hera's hiding in the ocean during the great cosmic war among the gods; we recall that Hephaistos, too, was hidden by his mother in the ocean on account of his lameness.

Mortal Akhilleus, however, cannot be hidden from death. To the contrary, rather than hiding him, the shield will make Akhilleus *all the more conspicuous* on the battlefield. Many men will wonder at the shield (ἀνθρώπων πολέων θαυμάσσειται, 18, 467), precisely as Thetis wishes. Just as the late summer star in the simile from *Iliad* 5 becomes only more conspicuous at the end of its season and more absolutely itself when it rises from Okeanos' depths, so Akhilleus will become most fully himself – most conspicuously and gloriously *mortal* – only after he returns to war in the armor Hephaistos makes for him. The shield is a metonym for mortality itself.

Hephaistos' shield itself becomes an oceanic domain in which the mortal hero, Akhilleus, finds imaginative sanctuary. When Akhilleus sees this new world imaged on the shield, the cosmos without heroes, he accepts its vision – as the other warriors in his Myrmidon army cannot:

Μυρμιδónας δ' ἄρα πάντας ἔλε τρόμος, οὐδέ τις ἔτλη  
 ἄντην εἰσιδέειν, ἀλλ' ἔτρεσαν. αὐτὰρ Ἀχιλλεὺς  
 ὡς εἶδ', ὡς μιν μᾶλλον ἔδν χόλος, ἐν δέ οἱ ὄσσε  
 δεινὸν ὑπὸ βλεφάρων ὡς εἰ σέλας ἐξεφάνθην·  
 τέρπετο δ' ἐν χεῖρεσσιν ἔχων θεοῦ ἀγλαὰ δῶρα.

Trembling took hold of all the Myrmidons. None had the courage to look straight at it. They were afraid of it. Only Achilles looked, and as he looked the anger came harder upon him and his eyes glittered terribly under his lids, like sunflare. He was glad, holding in his hands the shining gifts of Hephaistos. (19, 14-18.)

Notice here the language of intensification and paradox: Akhilleus, the mortal bearer of μῆνις, becomes *more angry* (μᾶλλον ἔδν χόλος, 19, 16) the more he looks at the shield. But at the same time, the shield and the gifts of Hephaistos gladden him (τέρπετο, 19, 18). To be angry *is* to be happy in these verses, in another *coincidentia oppositorum* signaling the oceanic experience. The verb associated with Akhilleus' anger is ἔδν, from δύω: “to cause to sink, sink, plunge in” (LSJ). The language is again oceanic – in the sense of plunging into depths. Anger (χόλος) plunges (ἔδν) into Akhilleus: the more he looks, the deeper this anger sinks into him. It is as if, now, Akhilleus too becomes the ocean, back-flowing into the ocean that the shield also represents<sup>51</sup>.

In depicting Akhilleus seeing – or plunging imaginatively into – Hephaistos' magnificent work of art, the poet of the *Iliad* simultaneously offers an insight into *poesis* more generally. Okeanos, as we have abundantly seen, is not only a physical place in the *Iliad*. Okeanos – genesis – is the force of creativity itself. As Hephaistos' creative artistry reveals, *poesis* can summon Okeanos from the limits of the earth to a place directly in front of a mortal man. In this sense, the shield is an artwork that takes the condition of possibility of art as its subject. It is unsurprising, therefore, that the poet of the *Iliad* also depicts a godlike singer (θεῖος ἀοιδός, 18, 604) on the shield:

[...] μετὰ δέ σφιν ἐμέλπετο θεῖος ἀοιδός  
 φορμίζων· δοιῶ δὲ κυβιστητῆρε κατ' αὐτοὺς  
 μολπῆς ἐξάρχοντες ἐδίνεον κατὰ μέσσοις.  
 ἐν δ' ἐτίθει ποταμοῖο μέγα σθένος Ὠκεανοῖο  
 ἄντυγα πᾶρ πνύματιν σάκεος πύκα ποιητοῖο.

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51. I thank Michael McShane for this insight.

[...] And among them sang a godlike [θεῖος] singer<sup>52</sup>  
 playing his lyre, while with them two acrobats  
 led the measures of song and dance revolving among them.  
 He made on it the great strength of the Ocean River  
 which ran around the uttermost rim of the shield's strong structure.  
 (18, 604-608.)

The sequence of these lines is suggestive. The singer appears, and then, almost immediately, Okeanos appears on the scene, as if the singer himself has created the image of the Ocean River. Indeed, the grammar of the relevant sentence is provocatively ambiguous: "He made on it the great strength of Ocean River" (ἐν δ' ἐτίθει ποταμοῖο μέγα σθένος Ὀκεανοῖο, 18, 607). The subject of the verb "made" (ἐτίθει) is unclear. Most obviously the subject appears to be Hephaistos. Equally, however, the singer himself may also be understood as the maker of "the great strength of Ocean River" (ποταμοῖο μέγα σθένος Ὀκεανοῖο, 18, 607).

The matter becomes yet more interesting if we consider that Hephaistos not only depicts himself as a singer<sup>53</sup> but is himself a figure for the poet of the *Iliad*<sup>54</sup>. In an obvious sense, it is this poet who makes Hephaistos and therefore, the shield itself, and everything represented on it, including, of course the godlike singer and Okeanos. Certainly, the presence of Okeanos on Akhilleus' shield suggests something about Homer's own generative song-making. For just as Hephaistos brings watery Okeanos to Akhilleus, the *Iliad* brings to its audience an image of what human beings cannot otherwise see: a bounded cosmos, in its entirety. The shield and the maker of the shield, whether understood as Hephaistos or Homer, offer a glimpse beyond the vanishing point Okeanos represents, beyond the genesis of the gods, a glimpse into creativity itself.

### 7. Okeanos, Μῆνις, and the Olympians

Let us now return to the puzzle proposed at the opening of this essay: why, after all, do the gods visit Okeanos at the precise moment Thetis summons μῆνις from her son, Akhilleus?

If μῆνις is in fact "not just an emotional state", but rather a force that challenges "the hierarchy of the cosmos"<sup>55</sup>, then, the gods *must* reconstitute

52. I have adapted R. Lattimore's translation to render the meaning of θεῖος literally.

53. ποίει δὲ πρότιστα σάκος μέγα τε στιβαρόν τε, 18, 478. Forms of the verb ποιέω are of course abundant in this portion of *Iliad* 18: see also 18, 482, 490, 573 & 587.

54. A number of scholars (e.g., Schadewalt, Reinhardt, Marg) take this godlike singer to be a depiction of Homer himself. See W. BURKERT (1977/1985), p. 168; M. W. EDWARDS (1991), p. 231.

55. L. MUELLNER (1996), p. 26.

themselves after Thetis commands her son to cultivate his μῆνις in Book 1. The gods therefore journey to Okeanos' shores in a condition of vulnerability. As proposed earlier, their collective power is threatened when Thetis calls into question the very grounds of their authority.

Further, as we have seen from the ebbing-and-surging dynamic in other, more discrete episodes of the *Iliad*, Okeanos is the place of genesis where the Olympians may re-create themselves most fully, most radically. When the gods go to Okeanos in *Iliad* 1, then, they enter an *imaginative* or *noetic* elsewhere, to re-make themselves, just as Helios disappears each evening into the unknown in order to be born again the following day. Mythically speaking, the Olympians' absence from the human realm in *Iliad* I indicates their entrance into a liminal state. From the moment that Akhilleus' μῆνις emerges until it finally resolves, the community of gods necessarily remains in the liminal condition: *becoming* themselves, rather than *being* themselves. Such is the logic of the phenomenon that μῆνις names.

Even though the gods soon return from Okeanos to Olympos in *Iliad* 1, they nonetheless remain in a threshold condition – a psychic, not a physical state – until they return to Okeanos' shores to feast in *Iliad* 23. In other words, this liminal and fluid condition infuses the entirety of the *Iliad*'s dramatic action.

Notably, these two visits – in *Iliad* 1 and 23 – are the only visits the gods together pay to Okeanos. The second and final feast will mark the Olympians' full restoration, the completion of their re-creation under Okeanos' purview. From the oceanic perspective, *Iliad* 24 will mark a new day, the beginning of a new epoch. This new epoch can come into being only after the drama of the gods' collective re-creation resolves.

What happens, then, during the gods' second, final visit to Okeanos? How might it mark the end of their period of re-creation?

The gods' second and final feast at Okeanos' shores will commence in *Iliad* 23, it seems, at the very moment Patroklos' cremation begins. Their visit to Okeanos coincides with the lighting of Patroklos' funeral pyre: At 23, 205, the goddess Iris appears before the winds Boreas and Zephyr and tells them she is rushing to a great sacrifice at Okeanos. Before she can join the other gods there, however, she must transmit a prayer to the winds from Akhilleus. The winds are to set ablaze the funeral pyre of Patroklos, Akhilleus' beloved friend and alter-ego (23, 208-211). Only after transmitting this message can the goddess meet her fellow deities at Okeanos' shores.

The juxtaposition of these events indicates the symbolic weight of Patroklos' death in the *Iliad*. Indeed, well before his funeral takes place,

Patroklos is first mourned poignantly by Akhilleus' immortal horses. These horses, the epic narrator reveals, came to life "beside the flow of Okeanos" (παρὰ ῥόον Ὠκεανοῖο, 16, 151)<sup>56</sup>. Mythically, it appears, the horses were born precisely in order to witness monumental upheavals in the cosmic order. Once, they were witnesses to the forced marriage of Thetis to Peleus (17, 443-444)<sup>57</sup>. Now, Zeus pities the creatures as they stand still as "a grave monument" (στήλη, 17, 434) over Patroklos' corpse. Their absolute immobility marks the gravity of this moment amid the frenzy of the ongoing battle. Struck by the horses' silent and eloquent grief, Zeus utters a disenchanting eulogy for the fallen warrior, Patroklos:

μυρομένω δ' ἄρα τώ γε ἰδὼν ἐλέησε Κρονίων,  
κινήσας δὲ κάρη προτὶ ὄν μυθήσατο θυμόν:  
"ἄ δειλῶ, τί σφῶϊ δόμεν Πηληϊΐ ἄνακτι  
θνητῶ, ὑμεῖς δ' ἐστὼν ἀγήρω τ' ἀθανάτω τε;  
ἦ ἴνα δυστήνοισι μετ' ἀνδράσιν ἄλγε' ἔχητον;  
οὐ μὲν γάρ τί ποῦ ἐστὶν ὄϊζυρῶτερον ἀνδρὸς  
πάντων, ὅσά τε γαῖαν ἔπι πνεῖει τε καὶ ἔρπει."

As he watched the mourning horses the son of Kronos pitied them,  
and stirred his head and spoke to his own spirit: "Poor wretches,  
why then did we ever give you to the lord Peleus,  
a mortal man, and you yourselves are immortal and ageless?  
Only so that among unhappy men you also might be grieved?  
Since among all creatures that breathe on earth and crawl on it  
there is not anywhere a thing more dismal than man is."  
(17, 441-447.)

Zeus here only nominally addresses the immortal horses. More precisely, Zeus is conversing with his own θυμός, the seat of his passions. Zeus' beloved son, Sarpedon, has already been killed by Zeus' own, divine decree. Zeus mourns Sarpedon's death with tears of blood (16, 459-60). Then, Zeus was stilled by the fragility of the human condition, just as Akhilleus' horses are stilled now, in their unwavering vigil over Patroklos' corpse.

In the *Iliad*, Sarpedon's death precedes Patroklos' by Zeus' own design. Patroklos' death, in turn, anticipates Hektor's death, which itself serves as the majestic foreshadowing of Akhilleus' death. The passionate connection that ties the gods to mortal beings is methodically severed in the *Iliad*, one hero at a time. Zeus' darkly reflective speech marks his own crossing of a psychic threshold. Zeus speaks to his own heart when he wonders why an immortal being should mourn over a creature as dismal as a man, because it is his own heart that he now intends to disengage, permanently, from mortal

56. My translation.

57. As noted above, the marriage is a cosmically consequential event. See L. M. SLATKIN (1991).

affairs. This oceanic transformation takes place in the mind of Zeus. Notably, the transformation is occasioned – and perhaps even inspired – by horses born at Okeanos' shores. The horses here appear to be emissaries of Okeanos, the god of genesis and transformation. Genesis is not, after all, without pain. The coming-into-being of the new order requires the destruction of the old.

The significance of the gods' gathering at Okeanos in *Iliad* 23 now becomes clearer. Iris goes to Okeanos to share in a sacrifice with her fellow Olympians. First, however, she must deliver a message that will soon catalyze the burning of Patroklos' funeral pyre. Patroklos *is* the sacrifice. His public cremation signals the beginning of the end of the age of heroes – Patroklos' death, preceded by Sarpedon's, will be quickly followed by Hektor's and Akhilleus'. On some level, this epochal change is perhaps the true story of the *Iliad*<sup>58</sup>.

In *Iliad* 23, then, the gods visit Okeanos' shores to re-create themselves once more, to envision their immortal existence anew, in a new kind of world: a world without glamorous and riveting heroes like Sarpedon, Patroklos, Hektor and Akhilleus. Accordingly, when the gods return to Olympos from Okeanos, in *Iliad* 24, they behave in an entirely new way. Without these gorgeous mortal beings – heroes – to contend over, unanimity rather than fractiousness will now define the gods. The gods return from Okeanos to Olympos with new vigor, new imagination. In their new harmony, the Olympians become capable of soberly and tenderly orchestrating together the sublime encounter of the ostensible enemies, Priam and Akhilleus in *Iliad* 24.

It is surely remarkable that the Olympian gods collectively visit Okeanos only twice in the *Iliad*: once in its opening book and then once again in its penultimate book. In the period marked by their two oceanic visits, it appears, the gods become properly themselves, properly "Olympian" deities, able to deliberate calmly and envision a future consensually together<sup>59</sup>.

### Conclusion

Okeanos' formidable powers are depicted with the lightest of touches in the *Iliad*'s narrative. The mythopoeic function Okeanos fulfills is to embody genesis as the all-embracing cosmic flow from which the *Iliad*'s action

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58. This view, articulated explicitly in ancient commentaries cited above, is shared by a growing number of scholars. See footnote 24.

59. See for example D. F. ELMER (2013).

surges. Thus whenever Okeanos appears in the epic, however indirectly or obliquely, some extraordinary shift is imminent.

The first and final invocations of Okeanos in the *Iliad* therefore designate the full range of the epic's action – the withering of one age, the genesis of a new age. These two occasions of the gods' feasting signal the beginning and ending of an epochal shift, just as the sun's rising and setting marks the beginning and ending of a day. At *Iliad* 1, the gods' visit to Okeanos signals the impending and far-reaching effects of Akhilleus' μῆνις. At *Iliad* 23, on the occasion of Patroklos' funeral, the gods' second visit to Okeanos signals the completion of the profound divine response to Akhilleus' μῆνις: the end of the age of heroes. Consequently, in *Iliad* 24, the gods' relations with each other – as well as with human beings – are entirely transformed. Just as the physical image of Okeanos frames the cosmic vision on the shield Hephaistos forges for Akhilleus, the gods' two visits to Okeanos form an analogous, mythopoeic frame for the larger cosmic vision of the *Iliad* itself.

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