The Secret History of the Soul

The Secret History of the Soul: Physiology, Magic and Spirit Forces from Homer to St Paul

By

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CAMBRIDGE SCHOLARS
PUBLISHING

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This book first published 2013

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

12 Back Chapman Street, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2XX, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN (10): 1-4438-4806-9, ISBN (13): 978-1-4438-4806-0

For Elizabeth,
in memory of wild horses

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

For help with various linguistic questions I am very grateful to Stephen Pender, Patricia Fagan, and Daniel Abondolo. Thanks are due to Paul Hammond for reading and commenting on chapter three, and to Barbara Graziosi for answering questions on Homer. Thanks to Carol Koulikourdi at Cambridge Scholars for her interest in and help with this project, as well as to Emily Surrey and Amanda Millar, and to Laura Summerton and Soucin Yip-Sou for their help with the cover image. I would like to thank Durham's English Studies research committee for financial assistance to cover indexing and cover image. Once again: the long process of research and writing was enhanced by the presence of numerous students and colleagues - for which, many thanks to my recent Americanists and Supernaturalists, and to Ash, Penny, Alison, Helen, Sam, Barbara, Jason, Dan and Marina.

ABBREVIATIONS

The Odyssey
Unless otherwise stated, all references are to: *The Odyssey*, trans. A.T. Murray (London: William Heinemann, 1919).

The Iliad
Unless otherwise stated, all references are to: *The Iliad*, trans. A.T. Murray (London: William Heinemann, 1924).

Plato
Unless otherwise stated, all references are to: *The Dialogues of Plato*, trans. Benjamin Jowett, 4 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1953), and are given by title and section.

Aristotle

DA
PA
DMA
GA

Unless otherwise stated, all references are to: *De Anima*, trans. W.S. Hett (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1957); *Parts of Animals*, *Movement of Animals*, trans. A.L. Peck (London: Heinemann, 1961); *Generation of Animals*, trans. A.L. Peck (London: Heinemann, 1942).

ANT
All references to New Testament apocrypha are to *The Apocryphal New Testament: A Collection of Apocryphal Christian Literature in an English Translation*, ed. J. K. Elliott (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993).

Unless otherwise stated, all references to Shakespeare are to *The Riverside Shakespeare*, ed. G. Blakemore Evans et al (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1997).

INTRODUCTION

As a child I was greatly diverted by a television adaptation of H.G. Wells's tale, *The Invisible Man*. Understandably, the filmed version of this story presented a very different dilemma from those usually accompanying page-to-screen transfers. Normally, the problem might be that you could see too much - or, at least, could see too definitely. In this case, the problem was that you could see too little. And yet the reality of the invisible man, to the childish mind, was never in doubt. Artful camerawork managed to set my own gaping eyes behind his. Warped and staccato movement along an otherwise empty path made it clear that he was there. At one point he was shot, and bled quite visibly. At other times - I seem to recall - his laboured breathing could be distinctly heard. And, of course, like ordinary people, the invisible man did things. He left his mark on the world around him.

This book and its early-modern counterpart trace the life of one of the most important invisible beings in Western history. For about 1500 years the Christian soul was an invisible entity which dominated the lives of millions. It comforted or tyrannised; impelled to outward action, or quailed passively at the inward arrows of conscience. Before the (surprisingly recent) ascendancy of the brain, it processed data and knowledge. It underpinned all the complex dynamics of human physiology. It enjoyed an ambiguous, at times intriguingly elusive relationship with the self.

The present book deals with the pre-history of the Christian soul. *The Smoke of the Soul* examines the fully developed (yet often problematic) soul of early-modern Christianity, focussing especially on Britain. The two works can be read together, and it is partly with this in mind that I begin, in *The Secret History*, with Homer. Here we meet notions of spirit force which are radically different from the dualism of the later Christian soul, in writings which nevertheless would be canonised by the Christian west as the dawn of its literary tradition. Examination of Homeric soul beliefs allows us not only to see how very different these were from fully-developed Christianity, but also shows some intriguing parallels with the nominally Christian works discussed in following chapters.

Having briefly glanced at the powerful ideologies anchored in and catalysed by the later Christian soul, we have already admitted that it was at once invisible, and yet very far from imperceptible. My interest in this

perceptibility is as follows: I am not so much interested in what the soul made people do, as in what the soul itself could do. In what ways was it concretely, empirically apparent or felt, both within and outside the human body? My subject is not ethics, or abstract theologies of the soul. I am concerned instead with what might be called the science of the soul. In the period covered by this first book, both pre-Socratic, classical, and Hellenistic Greece made some impressive contributions to the kind of practical or empirically-based science which would later revive and flourish in Enlightenment Europe. (In the realm of medicine, indeed, the physicians Herophilus and Erasistratus are supposed to have reached (or descended to) a level of scientific ruthlessness which even the Marquis de Sade could envision only at the level of fantasy. Here condemned prisoners were vivisected in the cause of medical enquiry.[1]) To some extent this kind of science underpins my examination of the soul's concrete, sensual, dynamic and worldly powers.

Yet the account is by no means dependent on that kind of relatively systematic or self-conscious form of science. We find this in Aristotle and in the Stoics; to some extent, even in Plato. Elsewhere, we find two rather different kinds of science. At one level, the pre-Enlightenment sense of 'science' (*scientia*) as knowledge matches awareness and ideas about the basic forces of human life. This knowledge is itself often marked by varying levels of empiricism in the world of Homeric epic or of Old Testament Hebraism. At another level, attitudes to the soul are frequently 'scientific' in a way which more narrowly resembles modern hard science. They are concerned with the body - with its concrete substance, fluids, and processes. And, in the world of the New Testament in particular, they are often related to, or definitely embedded in magical cosmologies. As Freud emphasised long ago, magic is at once like and unlike science.[2] One way in which it is unlike is in its lack of a sufficiently complex over-arching theory. And yet it may be partly due to this lack that magically-based societies are so carefully empirical. Those who believe in magic like to see how its powers work. The less theory there is about this process, the more need there is for sensory evidence at the empirical level (it cures people; it moves objects; it seems able to transfer spirit forces from one place to another).

In this sense, then, hard science does have something in common with the worlds of Homer, of Moses, and of Christ. The separate periods of these two books also share another important feature. In theory, dualism has been a persistent and predominant tenet of Christian belief. There are two lives; two levels of reality; there is a body and there is a soul. At the cosmic level, the hierarchy of this dualism is especially clear: there is your

transient earthly life, and there is your eternal and real one. These points hold even for those unlucky beings who spend that real life in hell rather than in heaven. At the human level, the hierarchy is complicated by issues of human responsibility - what care does one take of the soul? how much does one chasten and deny the body? Yet even here the ultimate hierarchy remains clear. The soul is, again, real and permanent; potentially, it is also far better than the body. This ethical dualism should (in theory) have been echoed by a corresponding dualism of matter and spirit. The body was material, the soul immaterial. In reality, the early-modern soul was often part of a continuous, far more blurred and unstable relationship. The supposedly hard line between body and soul frequently wavered, shifted, or melted.

When I began to probe into the oldest historical antecedents of the early-modern body-soul nexus, I had expected that I was going to find a synthesis of pagan and Christian elements. Again, I anticipated that this division (with Plato honorably excepted) would broadly equate to a division between monist and dualist attitudes. Time and again, I found things that were in fact very different. Prepared as I was for a specially alien cosmology in the time of Homer, I found myself repeatedly startled by just how alien its attitudes really were. Again: while I knew that the Old Testament was hardly a Christian record, I was struck by how thoroughly and deviously the Christianity of later epochs had distorted or buried Hebraic ideas of the soul. The same held for Aristotle; even, to some degree, for that supposedly arch-dualist Plato. But the greatest shock came with the New Testament. True, there was dualism of a kind. But most of it belonged to St Paul, and even that very rarely matched the body-soul dualism of Augustine or Aquinas - Paul's main concern was with the urgently-felt opposition between this world and the next. Moreover, *pneuma* (spirit), the potentially metaphysical term which dominates these writings, was frequently a very dynamic, concrete, worldly and empirically verifiable thing. Far from being severely opposed to matter, it was often hand in glove with it. For many people in this context, it seems that spirit was really a superior form of matter - or a superior material agency - rather than something simply opposed to it.

What I came to realise, then, was that it was not in reality a question of New Testament dualism, on the one hand, more or less perfectly synthesised with pagan monism or materialism on the other. Rather, in the area of body and soul, the New Testament - and particularly New Testament culture - was itself often essentially monist and materialist. Christ did not invent body-soul dualism, and here even the industrious St Paul could not take much credit. Long after the deaths of Christ, Paul, and

all his apostles, Origen (a man so pathologically hostile to his body that he was said to have castrated himself) began the task of establishing this seemingly 'Christian' tenet - one which would be reworked and worried over through the centuries by Augustine, Aquinas, and many others.

My opening chapter begins with an animated body worlds away from the attitudes of Origen and his successors. In *The Odyssey* you might show your worth by cutting off someone else's testicles, but your own were highly prized. In this fiercely active and warlike culture, the soul (*psyche*) is a thing which belongs *only* to the next world. Homeric man has a *psyche*, but it is wholly unconscious until after death. And any value which it may have there is sharply undercut by the reduction and misery of the early Greek Hades. Here there is only a dry and pale remnant of earthly life. To be immaterial is to be diminished. The *psyche* is a reluctant custodian of this grey museum, preserving a vanished life in the thinnest and coldest of echoes.

Indeed, it is no accident that the wretchedness of Hades seems strongly bound up with its stasis. For Homer, the forces of life are most powerfully real precisely when they are being lived. Not only that, but three of the most central terms relating to Homeric life and consciousness - *phrenes*, *thymos*, and *menos* - are all strongly marked by their persistent mobility. While the concept of *nous* offers perhaps the closest forerunner of an abstract 'mind', *nous* itself is only one part of a notably plural, at times fragmented picture of the human individual, in which different forces and impulses often jostle for supremacy. At another level, the Homeric world is quite basically unsuited to dualism. For this cosmology has not yet sharply split its perceptions and categories into the material and immaterial, the literal and the metaphoric. With the help of Ruth Padel's valuable study of mind and body in Greek tragedy, the chapter is also able to show how such attitudes partly persist into a later period of Greek culture.

Chapter two brings us to the Old Testament. Here, at what would come to be seen as the very basis of all creation, the Hebrew account of man's formation by Yahweh is markedly different from the dualism of full-blown Christianity. In Genesis it quite definitely states that man *becomes* a living soul when Yahweh breathes into him. He does not 'get' a soul. And, as many other passages of these books show, he correspondingly never has *a* soul in the Christian sense. In life, the compound of body and spirit (Yahweh's breath or *ruach*) makes up *nephesh*. *Nephesh* is appropriately characterised by its sensuous or concrete qualities - desire, hunger, physical weariness, and so on. The Hebrew life-force, moreover, is not an individual soul during earthly existence. As in Homer, most of the Old

Testament also fails to exhibit any kind of dualistic afterlife. There is only Sheol. Like Hades, this is a place of reduction and loss, of stasis and desiccation. It is marked by a pronounced lack of life. And the human life-force itself, absorbed back into the *ruach* of Yahweh at a person's death, is as impersonal and quantitative as a kind of vital gas.

Chapter three finds us in the company of two honorary Christians. Having so stridently rejected Greek rational tradition, Christianity would later decide that it needed a more solid and impressive philosophical framework. But to get this in a suitable form, it naturally had to radically adapt - at times outrightly hijack - the thought of key philosophers. In reality, any dinner party composed of Plato, Aristotle and Origen would not have been a harmonious one. Plato himself was of course far better-suited to Christian attitudes than was Aristotle. Yet even Plato had his weak points. His account of the body and the soul in *Timaeus*, for example, is relatively empirical and materially detailed. He shows some interest in physiology. Worse still, *Phaedrus*'s account of the divine is intimately bound up with a yet more undesirable version of the body - here there is an evocation of homoerotic love which is strikingly sensual, even when it is not outrightly sexualised. Thirdly, although at times Plato seems to present a clearly bipartite dualism within the human individual, he at one point admits a dangerously ambiguous third term into this model. The 'spirited part' of the body is something which fails to clearly side with either its superior relative, reason, or its inferior one, desire.

If Plato can be seen as a dualist who rashly admits some degree of uncertain mediation between body and soul, Aristotle might be viewed as an empiricist who makes some grudging concessions to dualism. Aristotle is a natural biologist and a reluctant dualist. He clearly has little time for those thinkers who 'only try to explain what is the nature of the soul, without adding any details about the body which is to receive it'.[3] This itself comes from *De Anima*, thus warning us that even in potentially more abstract contexts Aristotle seems resolved to spite his sometime teacher. Indeed, even the famous wax-seal analogy which Christianity found so congenial an account of body-soul relations could be seen as an echo of the Old Testament, with its clear preference for an animated body over an incarnated soul. Perhaps most important of all is Aristotle's use of *pneuma*. Although at one point - in notoriously ambiguous phrasing - he gives this some association with the divine, *pneuma* is usually notable for its place within a continuous (potentially monistic) model of organic life. Here 'soul' is typically of interest as a source of vital heat, with lesser or stronger degrees of heat and ensoulment running down and up the continuous scale of existence, including both animal and human life-forms. Time and again,

Aristotle's attitudes to life, and his tellingly equivocal phrasing (humanity is perhaps only 'more divine' than the animal world) suggest a reluctant dualist at very best.

Few things have proved so stubbornly resistant to historical treatment as the events and world of the New Testament. The first chapter on this period attempts to break up the mythic ossification of Christian accounts in two broad ways. First: it emphasises the predominant Greek cosmology within which these events occurred. For the Stoics, all life was material. The cosmos was a monist entity, and *pneuma* - its animating principle - was indeed a superior form of matter, rather than a defiantly otherworldly spirit. Secondly, the chapter foregrounds the contingency of events and beliefs which were once fluidly undecided, rather than fixed in the theological stone of later eras. It stresses the vital role of Paul as the true founder of Christianity, and shows how Paul's aims and methods were very far from those of a systematic theologian.

If events and their ultimate outcomes were fluid and undecided in the lifetimes of Christ and Paul, so too was the fate of the Christian soul. A statistical and thematic survey of the New Testament shows how effortlessly *pneuma* outstrips *psyche*. Even where the latter does appear, its sense can at times be ambiguous, if not outrightly Hebraic. At one point we find that *pneuma* and *psyche* feature in a descending spiritual hierarchy - one in which the two are broadly opposed in the same way that soul and body would later be. At another level, certain Pauline uses of *pneuma* have the conveniently vague and elastic qualities which 'democracy' or 'freedom' often exhibit in political contexts. Accordingly, *pneuma* can also be seen in these cases to fulfil quite worldly, pragmatic functions, often being central to Paul's radical drive toward a universal form of Christianity.

Chapter five looks in detail at a world in which the supernatural was relatively natural for many people. Demons and spirit forces were ubiquitous. They were the causes of disease and the source of cures - as we see with particular clarity in the cases of the Gadarene swine and the Pool of Bethesda. Correspondingly, magic, in such an environment, was equally worldly. It was a profitable, at times competitive business. When the apostles persuade magicians to burn magical textbooks worth 50,000 pieces of silver, they show not only how profitable this art could be, but typify their role as a kind of new magical mafiosi, forcing out existing operators as part of their aggressive spiritual campaign.

By carefully examining a number of relevant episodes, my final chapter shows that *pneuma* was the real force behind Christianity's success. In this world, spirit was not an ethereal idea. It was a potent,

dynamic, transferable force, whose operations and underlying laws were often notably empirical, and on several occasions closely match the psychology of tribal or folk magic. These qualities are illustrated throughout Christ's career, from the moment at which this power is quite literally transferred to him at his baptism, to that when he breathes it out upon the cross. In between these two points, *pneuma* not only features in several famous miracles (the hem of Christ's garment; the healing of the blind) but is very deliberately transferred to the disciples. Consequently, they are able to rival, and in some ways surpass Christ's own cures. Paul in particular makes some strikingly concrete uses of *pneuma* - at one point transferring it to pieces of cloth which are then used to effect cures; at another seemingly darting it from his eyes to blind the rival magician Barjesus during a mission to Cyprus. Meanwhile, when we come to the very highest class of miracle - the raising of the dead - we find that local cosmology fails to recognise a clear division between life and death. In this, as in so much else, New Testament culture is at once very far from dualism, and surprisingly close to the thanatological attitudes of tribal or folk culture.

By using these kinds of anthropological parallels throughout the two final chapters it is possible to significantly re-contextualise the potentially mythic events of the Testament. Ironically enough, the implications of such comparisons have formed a stubborn blind-spot amongst otherwise notably relativising anthropologists. When E.B. Tylor, for example, states that, 'among rude races, the original conception of the human soul seems to have been that of etherality, or vaporous materiality, which has held so large a place in human thought ever since', and that 'the later metaphysical notion of immateriality could scarcely have conveyed any meaning to a savage', he might well have been describing the role of *pneuma* and the theories of animation found in Christ's working environment.[4] Once this kind of comparison becomes clear, we are indeed led to wonder if later Christianity may have opted for *psyche* partly in order to *avoid* the magical qualities of *pneuma*.

We begin, however, in a world which had very different concerns. In Homeric and even in early-fifth-century Greece, there was a readily accepted traffic between humans and the emphatically plural world of the gods. Indeed, as Ruth Padel neatly puts it, 'in Athenian homes', invisible gods 'were a force as live and considerable as electricity in ours'.[5] Recalling our pursuit of invisible and yet real forces, let us now see how such powers ebbed and flowed in the bodies of Achilles, Hector and Sarpedon, and in the tragic crises of later Greek drama.

CHAPTER ONE

THE SOUL AT THE EDGE OF HISTORY: HOMERIC GREECE

> The word is the most imprecise of signs. Only a science-obsessed age could fail to comprehend that this is its great virtue, not its defect.
>
> (John Fowles)

In the beginning was the word; and the word was breath. Breath and speech, breath and thought: from the India of the Vedas, some three millennia ago, to pre-Christian Rome; from the Ancient Babylonians to the Homeric Greeks; from the Book of Genesis to the Old Slavic tongues of Poland, Russia, and Slovakia, the same notions lie crystallised in the buried fragments of past languages. From the Sanskrit 'atman', the Latin 'fumus', Greek 'thymos' or 'psyche', Hebrew 'ruach', Arabic 'nafasun', and Old Slav 'dhuma', we find that terms denoting essential principles of life all derive from or relate to words meaning 'breath, 'blow', or 'smoke'.[1] As we pursue the roots of Christian thought down into subterranean depths of the past, we find ourselves with just two reliable companions: the human body, and human language. And we have to treat even these two guides with caution. What looks familiar is often very strange. Secular as we may now be in many cases, the basic notions of Christian dualism, with its antagonistic forces of matter and spirit, have nevertheless saturated our thinking pervasively. From this perspective, it may be better to imagine the cosmology of the Ancient Greeks as that of another planet, rather than of another civilisation.

Our investigations begin with the era of written history. Yet it was probably some time before this that many peoples began to note the basic mechanics and phenomena of breath as primary forces of life. In colder regions in particular, steam would have issued from the mouth or from a bleeding wound. To ascertain death, you might have sought out the slightest stir of respiration, felt perhaps on your own cheek, or seen to vibrate a leaf or feather.[2] We cannot know just when this consciousness first developed. But we can certainly see it registered in some of the

world's oldest sacred texts, the Vedas and Upanishads of Ancient Hindu culture. In the earliest of these Sanskrit writings, the *Rig Veda* (c.1200-900BC), a hymn called 'The Funeral Fire' features an address to the corpse: 'May your eye go to the sun, your life's breath to the wind ... Take root in the plants with your limbs'.[3] Here 'breath' is 'atman' – a word which would later come to mean something like 'soul'. Nevertheless, as we will find in the case of Homer, what is essential is by no means automatically divine or immortal. The 'atman' at this stage does indeed seem merely to dissolve into air, rather than forming the core of some unique individual afterlife.[4] Around the same time, in a notoriously opaque hymn 'The Riddle of the Sacrifice', we find evocations of a creation myth which broadly mirrors the chaos of Genesis, and which asks 'Where was the breath and blood and soul of the earth?'[5]

Moving ahead to the period around 800BC, we encounter a subtle change in the status of the soul in a much later Vedic text from the Upanishads.[6] The hymn 'What survives death?' seems at first very similar to the earlier funeral song: 'when man here is dead, if his speech enters into fire, his breath into wind, his eye into the sun ... his body into the earth…'. We now also read, however, that 'his soul [*atman*]' goes 'into the ether ... and his blood and semen are deposited in water'. The concluding words, 'what then becomes of this man? – Take my hand, my dear!' warn us that even here there is no certainty as to a blissful afterlife.[7] Yet undeniably there is now some sense of division between merely human, perishable 'breath' (again fled into the winds) and a separate, perhaps more privileged 'atman' or 'soul' (associated with 'the ether').[8]

We find that the human being comes over time to be split into two forms, one of which is more abstract, and can perhaps survive the death of the material body. This tendency is in fact repeated in Greek culture, as well as within that set of texts which are now regarded as the testaments of the Christian Bible. In a sense much of Christian history is a story of how, by prodigious mental effort, Christians kept that abstract element suspended, elevated over the body, until finally, some 1600 years after Christ, the gravity of the material world presently dragged it back to earth. In turning, now, to the epic deeds, furies and lusts of Odysseus, Agamemnon, Achilles and Hector we need once again to remind ourselves that the ferocious dualism of Christian culture was as yet undreamed of, and that abstraction in general was highly alien to the minds of Homeric poets.

Homer

The now mythic tales of the *Odyssey* and the *Iliad* arose, as A. W. H. Adkins emphasises, 'in a society of virtually autonomous small social units termed *oikoi*, noble households under the leadership of local chieftains, or *agathos*.[9] The *oikos* was the largest effective social, political and economic unit'.[10] In this world, democracy could not be conceived even by way of an absent goal or utopian ideal.[11] Nor, it seems, could human rights. As Richard Broxton Onians notes, 'the noblest behave like savages in battle. Agamemnon, after slaying the suppliant son of treacherous Antimachos, cuts off his arms and head, then sends the trunk rolling … when Patroclus … falls, Hector strips his corpse and drags it along in order to cut off the head and give the body to the dogs of Troy'. After being hung up in an agonisingly contorted position, Melantheus is cut down by Odysseus and his men, who then '"cut off his nostrils and ears with the pitiless bronze, plucked out his genitals for the dogs to devour raw, and hacked his hands and feet with vengeful spirit" … When a city is taken, the men are slain, the children dashed to death or enslaved, and the women violently dragged away to serve as slaves and concubines of their married or unmarried conquerors'.[12]

Denying Hector's pleas for mercy moments before he kills him, Achilles is scarcely satisfied with mere slaughter. He briefly considers cannibalism ('Would to god my rage, my fury would drive me now/to hack your flesh away and eat you raw'), and could perhaps be said to partially retain this fantasy when vowing that birds and dogs will eat his victim instead.[13] From our point of view, such habits might summon up images of 'tribal' violence and barbarity, whether mythically distant, or as seen and related in recent years in and after the Afghanistan of the Taliban regime.[14] The fact that such excesses were felt by Homer's peers to support rather than endanger the structure and customs of society (that they were in fact highly meaningful, rather than merely 'senseless') may only make them all the more strange to us.[15]

Rudely jolted to attention by this seeming contrast between savage war-crimes and the ambiguous prestige of epic canonical literature, we do at least start to suspect that we are entering a very, very distant land. As we probably begin to appreciate, the *Iliad* in particular is in many ways an intensely male culture. Perhaps less obvious, but vital to remember as we seek to plot a course down the centuries between matter and spirit, is this: the Homeric poems are tales not of merely exceptional human beings, but of *godlike* heroes - people suspended somewhere between the natural and supernatural worlds. Sarpedon, for example, is the son of Zeus, and

Achilles the son of the sea-nymph (or nereid) Thetis, herself a daughter of the sea-god, Nereus.[16]

We need also to be aware of certain basic practical issues which can affect reading and understanding of Homer's work. Conveniently limited under the name of a man about whom we know almost nothing, the poems are of course the work of many anonymous story-tellers, having survived and mutated in oral versions for at least several decades before they were finally transcribed in the form now bequeathed to us.[17] This could, on one hand, mean that in some ways the *Odyssey* and *Iliad* are indeed genuinely mythic works, insofar as they have distilled the general mentality of a culture, rather than the idiosyncratic talents of a single author. It also means that we should expect to find contradictions and puzzles as we seek to decode words already foreign to us, and perhaps further subject to internal changes of meaning across the long span of composition of the Homeric canon.[18]

These are some of the broad frames of reference for our enquiries, in a world which seems hardly less alien to the Greece of Plato than it does to that of Christianity or imperial Rome. As audiences crouched on the sand to hear tales of Odysseus and Circe, of Priam and Helen, mingling with the hiss of surf or shrilling of cicadas, most of the Old Testament had been neither lived nor written. Great Britain had no city worthy of the name, and, as far as we are concerned, European literature was entirely non-existent. Hesitating on the shores of this *terra incognita*, we might understandably want to grasp the reassuringly familiar human body as a stable point of reference. We can do this, however, only if we accept that the Homeric body is in many ways just as strange as the mythic cruelty and heroism of Achilles, Hector and Odysseus. We may start off looking at something familiar, but it will continually and stubbornly mutate into something very alien. As Padel has so convincingly demonstrated, both body and consciousness are also still very surprising things in the tragic drama of the sixth and fifth centuries. In what follows I will draw at some length on her studies of this slightly later (but still pre-Platonic) material.[19]

I will work in this chapter with areas of the body, and with terms which in part refer to physiological processes or physiological energies. But before we move into these specific regions, we need to be warned about the intriguingly holistic and dynamic nature of Homeric consciousness. This warning can be stated in various ways. At one level, we need to try and free ourselves from a post-Christian sense of the abstractness of selfhood or consciousness; from that pervasive and enduring dualism which tends to insist on some kind of 'us' or some

ultimate 'being' as independent of our bodies. The idea is still lodged in phrases such as 'I have a body'. We do not *have* bodies; we *are* bodies. Those Homeric terms - *phrenes*, *psyche*, *nous* - which very broadly correspond to something like 'mind' or 'soul' in many ways fail to match the post-Christian qualities associated with these two English words. Moreover, even where a term such as *nous* does achieve some degree of abstraction, we find that it can be subordinated to more rudely material forces, such as *menos* and *thymos*.

If that first statement of caution concerns an abstraction which is in many ways religious, a second point touches on the habits of modern scientific culture. A basic question which recurs throughout the history of body-soul relations is this: where do people *feel* that they are in their bodies? For many of us, the answer is probably the heart or the brain. Modern medical science of course leans predominantly to a self or a mind located in the brain. Limiting ourselves for now to that organ, most of us will agree that this is the dominant centre of our thoughts. Yet even the most basic knowledge of biology tells us that the brain can never operate independently. When our body feels different, our brain thinks differently. (Consider, for example, the differences before and after: a large meal; sex; a run or a swim.) Obvious as this may seem, modern science predisposes us to think of the brain as an autonomous palace of rational and controlled thought, ruling over the potentially rebellious domain of feeling with necessary rigour. As we will see, Homer is arguably more honest about the open-ness of the mind to the more general flux of bodily energy.

This modern sense of being able to neatly identify a human quality and a human organ links to a related habit. Partly because of the success of medical anatomy since the seventeenth century, many of us are powerfully influenced by the idea of 'cutting down' to a final truth or certainty. What is the 'real' material stuff underlying the misty vapour of emotions? This anatomically-inspired search for truth can operate on many levels, from the literal realm of medicine and pathology, through varying degrees of metaphor. The truth is 'buried', 'hidden'; as something unpleasant but undeniable, it must be unflinchingly pierced and excised by the cold surgeon of knowledge. Day after day, the word 'analysis' is used with immense authority, and with many of these associations. Semantically, it is closely related to anatomy, and the two were often used interchangeably in the early-modern period. For reasons both practical (anatomy is performed on dead bodies) and psychological (things are easier to understand and control when they are still) this desire to cut down to the knowable, definite underlying truth is one which works best with lifeless or motionless objects.

As Padel has emphasised, the Greeks - both in and after Homeric epic - did not think in terms of this hierarchy of truths (the smoke of emotion, we might say, rising from the foundational matter of the body's factory). For them, life and truth were not a question of cutting down to the basic physical reality of the material world. Padel notes, for example, that *menos* is a bodily force which in some ways behaves like a liquid, and which we may be tempted to further narrow down to blood. But 'if we say *menos* "is really" or "was once" blood, we impose our own story patterns and assumptions about mind ... "Really" implies that the physical is always present in, prior to, and more truthful than the abstract. "Was once" implies a whole mythopoeic narrative behind Greek words for "mind": that they "once" referred to physical organs "and then" developed more abstract meanings'.[20]

On one hand, then, we have to try not to abstract those conscious forces which, in Greek thought, were always caught up in the raw matter and raw movement of the human body. On the other, we must not over-value or artificially stabilise those bodily organs or areas associated with Homeric consciousness. Metaphor is not to be easily tamed or explained away by its reassuringly definite location within the chest or the guts. We can begin to sum up this problem by saying that, for Homer or Aeschylus, the abstract and the concrete had not yet been separated. But here we are indeed only *beginning* to grasp the strangeness of that mentality. It might be fairer to say that the concrete and the abstract had not yet been *invented*. As Padel puts it, if we suggest that the Ancient Greeks '"blurred" distinctions we make between mind and body' we necessarily imply 'that the Greeks perceived two different things to blur, two meanings to slip between'. In reality, 'the distinctions and meanings are ours, not theirs'.[21]

One final caution is no less important. The Homeric body was always moving. Or rather: Homer was rather more ready to admit that bodies do move. Once again, the dubious modern status of the brain reminds us how we may often seek to deny that persistent fizz and pulse of chemical and organic life. The status of the removed, the calmly deliberating brain is all the more insidious just because its movement is not easily felt. We perhaps more readily accept that emotion, by contrast, is mobile and fluid. Yet we also often forget just *how* restlessly embodied emotion can be. This is ironic, given that the word's root stares plainly out at us: 'e-motion' is indeed something which moves us (or moves in us). It was not that long ago, indeed, that the word could refer to a purely physical movement of the body. In 1693, for example, the philosopher John Locke talks of moments when 'exercise has left any emotion' in a child's 'blood or pulse'.[22] With all this in mind, it may now be better to imagine that the

following journey through the Homeric body is more of a vivisection than an anatomy.

Phrenes and Thymos

We begin with the chest. For the Homeric Greeks, the primary centre of this region seems not to have been the heart. The words *kradie*, *ker* and *etor* appear to be the closest terms for 'heart', and there is no shortage of these in the epics.[23] Scholarly analysis shows, however, that these words were usually subordinated to other entities located in the chest: the *phrenes*, *thymos* and *nous*. As we will see, there is some limited parallel between *phrenes* and the heart. English renderings of Homer, however, can make him seem far more heart-centred than he actually was, given the sometimes loose translations which too often use 'heart' for these terms.[24]

Phrenes would come to mean 'mind'. The Greek is still embedded in certain English words, such as the now discredited Victorian science of 'phrenology'. With 'ph' altered to 'f', this Greek mind can also be found in the words 'frenzy' and 'frenetic'. This brings us a little closer to the Homeric sense - though even here we need to realise that such 'frenzy' was less likely to have negative connotations, being associated instead with heightened mental power.[25] More broadly, '*Phrenes* contain emotion, practical ideas, and knowledge. We ourselves think of these as qualitatively different things, but popular fifth-century thought did not. *Phrenes* are containers: they fill with *menos*, "anger", or *thumos*, "passion". They are essentially mobile, too, and they "tremble within". They are the holding centre, folding the heart, holding the liver'.[26]

Notwithstanding what has been said about the dangers of material reductionism, Padel's own description here does clearly indicate the middle regions of the human trunk. In this sense, she is at least broadly aligned with those who thought *phrenes* to refer to the diaphragm.[27] But this question of internal specificity has been a vexed one. Since Justesen's claims in 1928, 'the phrenes have' - notes James M. Redfield - 'been (cogently) identified as the lungs'.[28] Yet Michael Clarke seems to agree with Padel that this equation is too simplistic, and can significantly distort certain passages in Homer.[29]

There is some evidence which points specifically to the lungs. Caroline P. Caswell cites a reference to the *phrenes* '"around the soft heart"', adding that phrenes should 'properly [be] "close-knit"'.[30] This latter quality, as we will see, matches the Homeric sense that *phrenes* contain something like breath. Padel herself quotes a late fifth century doctor's polemic on *phrenes*. While the doctor himself is attacking the (evidently widespread)

notion of *phrenes* as some kind (or part) of 'mind', he simultaneously gives a sense of their anatomical character: '"if someone is unexpectedly overjoyed or upset', the *phrenes* leap and make the person jump. This is because of their fine texture and very wide extension in the body"'.[31] This 'fine texture' could well match both Caswell's 'close-knit', and the relatively diaphanous quality of the lungs.

Phrenes are referred to in ways which clearly imply that they are substantial, and yet also - like the lungs - vulnerable. In the first case, we have Achilles, remarking after his dream of the dead Patroclus that, '"there is in Hades a *psyche* and an *eidolon*, but no *phrenes* in it at all"'.[32] As we will see, *psyche* and *eidolon* (image or shadow) are indeed more or less *in*substantial remnants of the human being. Echoing the typical Homeric fusion of metaphoric and actual, Caswell notes that, when Agamemnon laments, '"I was greatly in error, having relied upon my wretched *phrenes*"', 'wretched' can be better translated as 'torn'.[33] Padel supports this sense of vulnerability when she states that, 'like the heart, *phrenes* have receptor passivity, are acted on by feelings ... Something done "from the *phren*" is like something done "with the heart", done "sincerely"'.[34]

Onians, meanwhile, notes that in Homeric physiology the lungs were thought to absorb drink. Accordingly, to lose mental control, or to be outrightly drunk (in a period when 'drink' was almost always wine) was to have 'wet lungs'.[35] Drink, for Homer, did not 'go to the head' but to the chest. Padel agrees that, 'from earliest lyric, Greek poetry assumes that wine goes into the lungs'.[36]

Here as much as anywhere we realise with a jolt how different Homeric consciousness was. If 'wet lungs' indicate drunkenness, then to at least some degree the lungs must be held to think.[37]

Viewing this matter from another angle, we can say that one might expect the lungs to be relatively dry by comparison with the heart. Clearly, even the most basic knowledge of anatomy (as obtained incidentally through observation of serious wounds, or during animal sacrifices) would show that the heart was less suitable as a repository of dry breath or spirit. The idea is later echoed by Heraclitus, who talks of the 'moist soul', and of how 'living properly causes one's soul to dry out ... One whose soul is moist, like a drunk or a sleepwalker, is unaware of where he is'.[38]

It is clear, then, that if we *had* to choose one area or set of organs, the lungs would be the necessary location. But both Padel and Clarke make strong cases for resisting such rigid specificity. Unsatisfactory as it may seem, we are obliged to accept a 'definition' (the very word is too definite in itself) which hovers close to the lungs, without securely and neatly settling in them.[39] If this makes us feel somewhat at sea, then we have in

fact gained a valuable sense of disorientation, and some degree of sympathy with the often turbulent, storm-tossed nature of Homeric and tragic consciousness. As Redfield puts it in the case of Homer, 'the notion of life which centres on the *menos*, *phrenes* and *thymos* is a notion of life centering on action'.[40]

What was *thymos*? It was the stuff of life, and the speed of life. At the level of the body, *thymos* in many ways behaved like breath.[41] It was, we shall see, a far richer and deeper thing than breath alone. But we should remind ourselves at once that Homer *celebrated* heroic, violent military action as one of the highest of values. That is: while our opening discussion has shown how breath was often registered as something basic and integral to life, Homeric *thymos* unites that recognition with a more precise and emphatic valorisation of breath. Homer's attitude to *thymos* is not just a celebration of breath in its raw vitality, but a celebration sharply coloured by the tempestuous values of Homeric violence and heroism. This holds for the lungs as well as for the breath. Like the heart, and unlike the brain, the lungs could be *felt*. At moments of the greatest heroism, and of emotional or physical stress, they were keenly, perhaps painfully responsive.[42]

But the body is just one stratum of the densely multi-layered nature of *thymos*. It was also, Caswell emphasises, 'the most-used psychological term in Homeric diction'.[43] Accordingly, its range of reference is at once richly varied, and immensely frustrating for a modern translator. 'Modern English can supply no better than a crude approximation, either linguistically or conceptually', for *thymos* partakes 'of the physical and the psychical' in a way that 'defies description but is also totally in keeping with the other glimpses of early Greek psychology revealed by Homeric poetry'.[44] As Caswell further adds, 'the fact that *thymos* is the constant factor in passages describing a large number of emotions suggests that it itself is the neutral bearer of emotion'.[45] Another way of putting this is to say that the one consistent factor in uses of *thymos* is bodily energy. *Thymos* unites the roles of blood, of breath, and of electrical impulse in order to transmit thought or feeling through the body.

We have glimpsed the notion that *thymos* was contained in the lungs. Naturally, it could be felt to move whilst within that relatively limited space. But this containment was itself only provisional. We have also seen that, while the lungs *should* ideally be 'close-knit', they could (for example) be 'torn'. Restating that the relationship of *thymos* and *phrenes* 'seems to be that of contained to container', Caswell adds that, 'when the *thymos* is not contained in the *phrenes*, the intellectual function is impaired and the emotions become uncontrollable'.[46] We still broadly echo this

sense of psychic stability, talking as we sometimes do about the need to be properly 'centred in oneself'. Similarly, to be excessively nervous is to be full of violent (e)motion - at times, indeed, to the extent that this turbulence breaks the bounds of the body itself (sweat, urine, vomit, excrement). This sense of restless, more or less involuntary energy comes across in the case of a Homeric coward whose *thymos* will not remain fixed in his breast, and who "'shifts his weight from thigh to thigh, and from foot to foot"'; while "'within his chest his heart pounds greatly as he thinks of death, and there arises a chattering of the teeth"'.[47] Here the fearful *thymos* is registered in a violent decentring which agitates the body, quite literally, from head to foot.

Significantly, however, one does not have to be an outright coward to suffer something like this degree of inner turbulence. In Book XV of the *Iliad*, we are told that, on seeing Hector, the Danaans 'were seized with fear, and the *thymos* of all men sank down to their feet' (II, 127). At one level, this statement, taken literally, implies a rush of *thymos* to the feet - something quite as physical as that rush of blood to the face which can be seen in blushing.[48] At another level, we can infer that the Danaans feel physiologically decentred, effectively weakened by a kind of spiritual hollowness or vacuum at the crux of their beings.

Thymos can also be seen as mobile - or at least unstable - insofar as it is clearly dependent on material nourishment. As Tamara Neale has emphasised, it has the capacity to feel hunger. In Book XIX of the *Iliad* Achilles' *thymos* has a 'hunger for blood'.[49] Reminding ourselves that this is not mere metaphor, we can also find Circe entreating Odysseus and his men, 'come, eat food and drink wine, until you once more get *thymos* in your breasts such as when first you left your native land of Ithaca'.[50] One likely meaning of this is that *thymos* has been dislocated within the body (rather than having left it entirely). But it could also mean that it has actually been diminished in quantity. This would correspond to a person's real sense of gradations of hunger or fullness, of greater or lesser force of inner vitality. It may, then, have been the case that when *thymos* broke out of the lungs or *phrenes*, it did so not absolutely, but in varying quantities, depending on the extremity of the catalyst.

At times, this impression of *thymos* as behaving like a physical quantity (it can be in different parts of the body at the same time; one can lose some of it, not all of it) helps us guard against a post-Christian sense of *thymos* as *a* soul or spirit. When we hear, of the nearly drowned Odysseus, that 'he revived, and his *thymos* returned again into his breast', we could easily assume that this means roughly 'returned into his body', in the way that a Christian soul might return to one wavering between life

and death.[51] In fact, it probably indicates a quantitative rebalancing *within* the body, *thymos* shifting into its natural centre, and being felt accordingly.

In many ways, then, *thymos* seems to be an intrinsically mobile thing. It moves insofar as it shrinks or intensifies with hunger or satiety. It moves around the body (sometimes in or out of it). And it may also be right to sense that it often enjoys a kind of vibratory 'motion in stillness', simmering within the *phrenes* like milk in a saucepan. So, when the sleepless Agamemnon is looking over the night-time plains of Troy from beside his ships, we are told that he would frequently 'groan from the deep of his breast'. His '*phrenes* trembled within him' and 'in his noble *thymos* he groaned mightily' (I, 437). As well as showing us how misleadingly singular and static such uses of 'heart' can be, this strongly suggests that the *thymos* is *felt* to move in the way that *phrenes* are ('trembled'), despite the fact that Agamemnon is here more or less inactive.

Little surprise, then, that semantically *thymos* should also be an essentially restless and dynamic term. Padel derives it from the Greek '*thuō*, meaning "I seethe", used of an angry man or sea'.[52] Also rooting it in this word, Caswell emphasises the senses "'to run, rush, flow"' - again highlighting movement, and here with verbs which variously suit either liquid or gaseous entities.[53] In Homeric usage, *thymos* often has the motility of 'impulse' or the potential kinetic energy of 'will'.[54] Odysseus, for example, tells Circe after he and his men have eaten and drunk with her that 'my *thymos* is now eager to be gone' (I, 393). In Book VII of the *Iliad* Zeus asks Athene, 'Wherefore art thou come again thus eagerly from Olympus ... and why hath thy proud *thymos* sent thee?' (I, 305). In a slightly more complex passage, Agamemnon tells an aged, veteran soldier: 'old Sir, I would that even as is the *thymos* in thy breast, so thy limbs might obey'. The sense here is broadly 'the spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak', as confirmed when Agamemnon adds, 'but evil old age presseth hard upon thee' (I, 177). In this case *thymos* seems to have become a kind of disembodied, relatively impotent 'will' or 'desire'. Because the man is aged, it has lost its characteristic material force and dynamism.[55]

As something frequently defined by movement or the potential for movement, *thymos* (like breath) is well-suited not only to the speed of action and violence, but also to the speed of thought and feeling. In the latter case, we have the wrathful *thymos* of Achilles (I, 429), and the infuriated breast of Patroclus (II, 215); as well as the 'measureless griefs' of Thetis (II, 569). In terms of thought, the rapid motion of *thymos* is particularly well captured when a warrior, faced with a crisis of judgement, finds one *thymos* (impulse or decision) countered by another.[56] If such moments seem hardly to correspond to the rational heights of

Socratic dialogue, we must remind ourselves what 'thought' meant in this culture: 'the ruminations and deliberations of the Greek heroes are not those of a detached spectator, rather their intellectual reflections always take place in an atmosphere charged with emotions'.[57] Little wonder, then, that a lot of Homeric thought took place, not in the brain, but in the lungs.

Thymos and Homeric Cosmology

If Homer's age tended not to distinguish between matter and spirit, the same also held to some extent for the relationship between human and divine. Just as the heroes of these epics are more or less godlike, so their deities have frequently been viewed as all too human in their lusts, furies and vices, notwithstanding their immortality and supernatural powers. In such a world, the supernatural is at least relatively natural.

What does this conception of divinity mean in the case of *thymos*? Curiously from our point of view, *thymos* seems to in fact be both more physical (it is fed, feels hunger) *and* more supernatural than ordinary breath. The deities themselves have *thymos*. We have seen Zeus asking Athene, 'why hath thy proud *thymos* sent thee?' (I, 305). Elsewhere, the goddess Thetis complains, 'I have measureless griefs at heart [*thymos*]' (I, 429). While we can assume that the *thymos* of the gods is greater than that of Homeric warriors, we also find that it is at times transmitted from the divine to the human sphere. When rallying the Trojans, Zeus states: 'thereby I cause the *thymos* of each one of you to wax' (II, 247); while elsewhere we hear how he 'put *thymos* in the breast of Patroclus' (II, 215).[58]

These two examples of divine inspiration are not very precise or immediate in their physical details (although in the second, *thymos* is characteristically put into 'the breast'). But it seems likely that in such cases Zeus is in fact transferring his *own thymos*, rather than more abstractly, magically conjuring it into the warriors' bodies. A more decisive instance offers us further evidence. In Book V of the *Iliad*, Sarpedon suffers a near-fatal injury. In the version given by Robert Fagles, we hear that Sarpedon's

> ... loyal comrades laid him down,
> a man like a god beneath a fine spreading oak
> sacred to Zeus whose shield is banked with clouds.
> The veteran Pelagon, one of his closest aides,
> pushed the shaft of ashwood out through his wound -
> his spirit [*psyche*] left him - a mist poured down his eyes ...
> but he caught his breath again. A gust of the North wind

> blowing round him carried back the life breath [*thymos*]
> he had gasped away in pain
>
> (5.793-802)

In this case various details indicate some kind of divine transfusion. First, we know that Sarpedon was indeed the son of Zeus; and secondly, as G.S. Kirk has pointed out, the reference to the oak of Zeus is also deliberate.[59] Thirdly, we find that throughout Homeric literature *thymos* leaves the body at death.[60] Sarpedon's *thymos* has in fact done this. Accordingly, it is returned by the medium of boreas, one of the divinely created winds.

While Kirk himself agrees that ‘Sarpedon regains consciousness aided by the breeze', he considers it 'debatable' whether or not this 'literally restores his breath-soul'.[61] We should at once remind ourselves that modern ideas of the 'literal' can be unhelpful or dangerous guides when dealing with Homeric thought. But other evidence suggests that the wind is indeed directly instrumental. To do justice to Kirk's uncertainty, it is necessary to see how Fagles' translation has played up some of the more concrete elements of the incident, and of the Homeric qualities of 'spirit' per se. Murray's much older version leaves some of these points relatively obscure:

> his goodly comrades made godlike Sarpedon to sit beneath a beauteous oak of Zeus that beareth the aegis, and forth from his thigh valiant Pelagon, that was his dear comrade, thrust the spear of ash; and his spirit [*psyche*] failed him, and down over his eyes a mist was shed. Howbeit he revived, and the breath of the North Wind as it blew upon him made him to live again after in grievous wise he had breathed forth his spirit [*thymos*]’ (II, 245).

Reading this, we see with especial clarity how Fagles' rendering has Sarpedon 'catching his breath' almost as 'literally' as one might catch a ball; that is, he catches something which is moving, and which is quite definitely carrying 'the life breath' which 'he had gasped away in pain'. We will see presently that the difference between *psyche* 'leaving' (Fagles) and merely 'failing' (Murray) is an important one. We can add that Fagles appears to have used an intriguing dash of creativity in equating the breath which Sarpedon had first 'gasped away' and the one which returns to him. In this version Sarpedon gets back exactly the same breath which he had lost.

To understand the implications of that editorial decision we need to know more about the roles of both Zeus and the wind. In her impressively painstaking analysis of *thymos* in early Greek epic, Caswell illustrates at some length the repeated tendency to equate *thymos* with the winds. To the