Pope, the Odyssey and the Ontology of Language

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By

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For Paula—*deae absconditae*

who has never forgotten

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PREFACE

And, by the way, I like to talk
As much of dishes, feasts and cork,
In my capacity as rhymer,
As you did, Homer, bard divine
Whom thirty centuries enshrine.

Pushkin, *Eugene Onegin* 5.36

This study is something of a literary Cerberus, a dog with three heads, but became so only by accident. In the beginning its heads were two, and that seemed quite enough: a guide to Alexander Pope's translation of the *Odyssey* of Homer, that flawed but unjustly neglected masterpiece by the greatest poet of the eighteenth century, its intention to take the reader on an Augustan tour of the highways and byways trod by Odysseus, the man of many wiles. Aside from this there was an interesting back story to put into the mix, for it turned out that Pope was a man of many wiles too, planning to deceive his reading public in a piece of shameful behind-the-scenes chicanery. Surely *ça suffit*, one would have thought; but the gods apparently had other plans, as is often the case.

It is embarrassing to speak of having a Damascene moment while standing in a newsagent's, absorbed in reading a review in a literary magazine, but that is in effect what happened. Though bathetic to record it here, writers and scholars nevertheless have a duty to be honest with such readers as they have, and a Preface is the default Customs Area for such declarations, if they are to be made. I had become engrossed in a provocative discussion of a book called *Object-Oriented Ontology* by the contemporary philosopher Graham Harman, whose thinking seemed to offer a dazzling new way of looking at the stuff of the universe and—alarmingly—to challenge my philosophical beliefs, which in essence were derived mainly from Spinoza. Piqued (in both senses of the word), I ordered the book and then worked my way through it, being disturbed at first, then enchanted and finally persuaded by its presentation of a new metaphysical way of looking at the universe: as a world of "objects" and what it means to be one, and why we need to move away from viewing everything through the restrictive lens of an anthropocentric human/world relation, that *sine qua non* that has acted like a ghost in the machine of philosophy from the pre-Socratics to the present day. Even more significant for a literary scholar like myself was the realisation that Harman's view of the world offered a new way of looking at figurative language and its metaphysical contexts, the very kind of elements that form the warp and weft of poetry: its metaphors, similes, allusions and the like. Further still, everyday objects—the sort we pass over and whose silent functioning we take for granted—suddenly became metaphysically interesting in the way they sometimes draw attention to themselves, whilst at the same time retreating from scrutiny. The thought of applying this way of looking at language to Homer was dizzying, for here was a poet hugely interested in objects, some very far from the everyday: objects that are fantastic, magical or strangely other in some way, suggesting a rich and mysterious ontology with subterranean depths.

As I began to reconsider my initial approach to this project I saw that Harman's metaphysical universe was offering me two related paths to follow simultaneously: not only did figurative language generally create separate objects to be considered in and of themselves, but both quotidian and fantastical objects lay strewn across the *Odyssey* like brazen shells on a populous shore, just waiting to be picked up and examined. The book that I originally thought I was going to write began to take on a unique (and worryingly uncharted) aspect as I pursued these thoughts.

Thus Cerberus. What it came down to was this: the main thrust of the book's focus was still to be a critical examination of Pope's translation of the *Odyssey*, but now an interpretation of some aspects of Object-Oriented Ontology (OOO henceforth for convenience, to be read as "triple O") would be folded into the dough as and when it illuminated the language and objects thrown up by Homer and Pope. The word "interpretation" is critical here, for I make no claim to be a philosopher or to understand every nuance of the rich polyphonic complexity of Harman's thought; but neither did I need to in order to extract the handful of necessary metaphysical tools required to do the specific ontological jobs to which the *Odyssey* draws attention. One can tinker under the bonnet of a car doing small but still important operations without having to know every detail of the workings of the internal combustion engine.

I am aware that the abstruse technicalities of much philosophical expression can often serve to screen the flower of a philosopher's thought and have thus taken care in the Introduction to lay out only the primary tools which are required for the work ahead; but no reader should worry if all the salient points there are not grasped, as in the succeeding Chapters I recapitulate frequently on the wing. This book is a conversation with two great poets, and as in all conversations, we need to repeat ourselves from time to time in order to shore up the little patch of ground upon which we stand. To be clear: this is not an academic study in contemporary philosophy in any sense, nor am I equipped to write one; it is rather a study which engages with some aspects of OOO (itself a critical offshoot of what is generically called *speculative realism*), offering a unique individual lens with which to examine the often dazzling elements of one of the two earliest cornerstones of European literature in both its own language and Augustan English. Details of my approach to both languages are fully laid out in the Introduction, so there is no need to reproduce them here.

Despite the impudence (and possibly imprudence) of zigzagging across three discrete academic areas over most of the following pages, I have been sustained in the hope—it is no more than this, for no one actively engaged with the ancient world can be unaware of the dangers of *hubris*—that there will be something for any visitor from each of these three academic areas, quite apart from the general reader. I do not believe in special pleading as I think a book of this sort should speak for itself, but because of the comparative newness (and thus likely unfamiliarity) of its metaphysical underlay when applied to literature, there is one point I should stress from the outset. It is not necessary to accept any of the axiomatic statements of OOO as true in themselves in order to appreciate the subsequent interlocking arguments arising from their exposition; all that matters is the *validity* of those connections, not their truth or falsity. To put it another way, a car in Russia during the Second World War could still run more or less on close to 100% vodka moonshine, with a substitute pair of stockings for a broken fan belt; but that is not how a combustion engine is supposed to work. It was not a "true" engine, running on distilled grain and kept in motion by women's hosiery; but it could get you where you needed to go. And so it is here: one does not have to sign up to a belief in OOO to appreciate that our perception of the art of Homer and Pope can be both enlarged and deepened at the same time through its insights. A hammer snapped clean in two can still knock in a nail.

INTRODUCTION

1. Preliminaries

If one were asked to choose a span of a quarter of a century which most contributed to the birth of modern Britain in the greatest number of ways, the dawn of the eighteenth century presents not only a most compelling choice, but a dazzling *embarras de richesses*. Shopping lists are inherently dull, but this one almost demands attention. From the death of William of Orange in 1702[1] to the death of George I in 1727, the Acts of Union in 1707 saw England metamorphose into Great Britain, resulting in the largest free trade area in Europe, with ramifications that are still with us today. A nascent technology spurred on by the inventions of Jethro Tull provided the basis of modern agriculture, beginning with a horse-drawn seed drill in 1700, while in early factories the process of smelting iron was greatly improved, enabling industrial expansion; this was also the period of the seminal development of the steam engine (though used initially just for pumping water out of mines). Meanwhile the British army under the command of the Duke of Marlborough repeatedly defeated the French, then the most powerful nation in the world, in 1704, 1706, 1708 and 1709 respectively, with huge implications for commerce, prosperity and the burgeoning British Empire. Politically, the office of Prime Minister emerged as central in the government of the country during this period, and, in an ominous foreshadowing of financial events in the twenty-first century, the South Sea Bubble occurred—in essence the first modern banking crash—resulting in a great reduction of the national economy on the one hand, but the consolidation of the Bank of England's position as banker to the government on the other.

This is not even to mention events of cultural, medical and social significance, but they too proliferated: Daniel Defoe published his seminal *Robinson Crusoe* in 1719, the first modern realistic English novel, initiating a genre that is still flourishing; Lady Mary Wortley Montagu began to advocate and practise smallpox inoculation between 1718 and 1721, initiating a controversy of a sort still familiar to us today; and in 1714, with the death of Queen Anne, the dangling seventeenth century finally gave way to the coming age with the ill-starred house of Stuart being replaced by its distant German cousins from Hanover, whose direct descendants have evolved into the present royal house of Windsor. Multiple seeds of modernity were thus sown in these early years of the eighteenth century, and to a discernible extent the harvest is still coming in.

During this same period a young man came to maturity, one who by the time of King George's death in 1727 had established himself as the greatest poet of his age, an age that for religious, personal and social reasons he largely disdained—or at least from which he felt removed. This was Alexander Pope, who in a period of six miraculous years produced a handful of the greatest poems in English literature: *An Essay on Criticism* (1711), *Windsor-Forest* (1713), *The Rape of the Lock* (1712/1714), *The Temple of Fame* (1715), *Eloisa to Abelard* (1717) and *Elegy to the Memory of an Unfortunate Lady* (1717). Considered as quantity, this is barely more than a slight output; as quality, it inspires awe. Pope produced no original work at all in the eleven years from 1715 to 1726, his time and energy being consumed in the two great translation projects of the eighteenth century, his rendering of Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, as well as an edition of Shakespeare. The translation of the *Iliad* brought Pope European literary fame, and (after a slow start in sales) an impressive, envy-provoking financial independence, half of which income he subsequently lost through investments in the South Sea Bubble crash. But it also brought him the general admiration of a literate English readership whose acquaintance with this poem of poems (if they could not read it in the original) was dependent on either a quirky inaccurate and tortuous translation by George Chapman published a hundred years before, or various Latin translations then available.

Pope's *Iliad* has justly been celebrated for centuries as a poetic work of art in its own right and has received much attention from scholars and literary commentators; by contrast, his *Odyssey* is neglected and regarded as something of a poetic also-ran. Although there are extraneous reasons that have contributed to this neglect, the genesis of this book was the result of a profound belief that such neglect serves only to hide a magnificent poetic light under an unworthy and quite unnecessary bushel. Pope's subtle art usually needs no special pleading; but because it is often submerged, it does benefit from having an attentive gaze drawn to it, especially when negotiating an unfamiliar poem. The focus of what follows is on directing that attention in a sustained critical attempt to repay a long overdue debt to one of our greatest poets. This is the first complete book ever devoted to its subject, which accounts for the lack of an apologetic tone that might have had to have been supplied were its subject Pope's *Iliad*; but even Cinderella required a glass slipper to help her come into her own.

This study then seeks to provide this by offering a critical appraisal of Pope's engagement with Homer's *Odyssey* on a literary, linguistic and philosophical level, whose three elements are embedded in the title *Pope,* *The Odyssey and The Ontology of Language*. This title is intended to signpost an engagement with poetry and philosophical thought that crosses the millennia: a great poem in ancient Greek—a stylised translation made two and a half thousand years later by the greatest poet of the age—and ideas culled from the forefront of contemporary philosophy to help dig deep beneath the topsoil of language.

I hope this does not sound too forbidding. The book's readership net is purposely cast as wide as possible. Aside from the general reader, it is hoped that the Popeian, the classicist and anyone interested in seeing how aspects of the latest developments in philosophy might be applied to the aesthetics of literature will find something of value in it. It is thus a book where three ways meet, a book of interfaces. But such disparate elements necessitate careful balancing, or—to put it more bluntly—juggling. Where primacy is allotted, it is to Pope, whose study this is, but degrees of interest naturally grade off, necessitating a sensitivity to balance; the general lover of English poetry may not be particularly familiar with the stylised forms and conventions of what is usually labelled "Augustan" verse, but the student or scholar of eighteenth-century literature will be meeting an old friend. The same applies to the classicist, coming to the book through the pull of Homer's *Odyssey*, perhaps curious to see what the greatest poet of the eighteenth century made of one of the two founding pillars of western European literature. But classicists grade off too, from the Greekless fan born of a revitalised interest in the ancient world courtesy of television and films, to the scholar of the language and its literature—and this in itself brings with it possible tensions in discussion. Finally, a smaller but significant group who may know neither Homer nor Pope particularly well but are approaching both poems from a specialised philosophical perspective, about which I shall say more below. Different groups then forming different interfaces, with both complementary and competing interests—but with the accent placed firmly on the complementary in the way they are addressed.

The layout of the book attempts to recognise this. All quotes from the Greek, from single words to complete passages, have been translated into plain serviceable prose for the convenience of the Greekless reader; this is to make clear how far the comparative English translations presented either stray from or remain faithful to the Greek. The Greek itself (except for single words or short phrases in the main text, which are both translated and transliterated on an *ad hoc* basis) is appended in the endnotes for the convenience of the student, scholar or general reader able to read Homer in the original, wishing to make comparisons. Works cited in the Notes appear in standard short form throughout, with their full details listed in the Bibliography.

All quotes from Pope are naturally presented in the main body of the text, but in modernised spelling and clarified punctuation. In this I have followed the principles I have adopted previously for the sake of ease of negotiating the text,[2] so that "thro" becomes "through", "curst" becomes "cursed", "publick" becomes "public", and so on, while the standard eighteenth-century procedure of eliding the "e" from past participles has been silently corrected: "view'd" becomes "viewed", etc. More seriously perhaps, Pope's very different approach to punctuation—which displays an eighteenth-century fussy overuse of commas to the point where the flow of the rhythm can be impeded, especially when lines are read aloud—has also been edited to meet modern expectations. By our standards this overuse of the comma is especially noticeable in Pope's prose, and has been similarly edited where appropriate, whilst the Augustan preference for the full colon (where we would use a semi-colon) has also been silently adjusted. I am aware that purists will likely balk at this utilitarian approach, but in a complex text featuring a range of English culled from many centuries (quite apart from the accompanying Homeric Greek) the reader requires all the logistical support that he or she can get, and that is the prime and only directive for these editorial adjustments. The text as Pope actually wrote it is available in the magisterial Twickenham Edition of the poet's complete works, referred to throughout this book, the full details of which are in the Bibliography.

Finally, a word about the transliteration of Greek names into suitable English equivalents. This is an old and thorny problem that has bedevilled many a text and about which there is a wide range of often fiercely defended opinions. On the one hand, any attempt to insist upon an exact equivalence of Greek to English (which might be thought to be the obvious choice) produces some unwieldy horrors: Peleus' son is traditionally rendered into English as "Achilles", and is universally recognised as such, but from the Greek it should strictly be "Akhilleus", or at best "Achilleus". Circe is "Kirke", Calypso is "Kalypso" (or more accurately, "Kalupso") and so on. The dominance of Latin culture over the centuries has ensured that standard translation practice has resulted in a norm still prevalent today, converting the Greek *-os* ending of masculine names to a Latinised *-us*: thus, Telemachus instead of "Telemakhos". Latinisation has further ensured a renaming of all gods but Apollo: Zeus becomes "Jupiter" or "Jove", Athena (or Athene) is "Minerva", Hades is "Pluto", Hermes is "Mercury", Hera is "Juno", Ares is "Mars", Aphrodite is "Venus", Artemis is "Diana", Hephaestus (Hephaistos) is "Vulcan". Even Odysseus becomes "Ulysses" to the Romans—and to Pope. With one eye on an audience entirely familiar with Latin but mostly unfamiliar with Greek, Pope opts for Latin nomenclature throughout the poem, with the somewhat puzzling exception of Athena, whom he refers to as both “Athena” and “Minerva” (for no apparent reason, given that they are equivalent in scansion and rhythm). The utilitarian principle adopted in this book is a combination of common practice and visual ease for the reader, which means choosing *-us* endings for masculine names and generally opting for what is most familiar, viz. “Achilles”, “Athena”, “Circe” and so on.

2. φύσις κρύπτεσθαι φιλεῖ (Nature loves to conceals itself)

Although the two principal texts under discussion in this book are Homer’s *Odyssey* and Pope’s translation of it, others will be brought under their combined aegis: two of them poetic translations of the *Odyssey* made before Pope was born—George Chapman’s in 1616, Thomas Hobbes’ in 1673—and at least six others from the past sixty years to the present day, selected as representing different aspects of the process of translating an alien poetry into a contemporary one. Still others could just as easily have been chosen in place of the ones selected, for translations of the *Odyssey* are legion—in one year alone two have appeared in English, the first by Emily Wilson and the second by Peter Green, in 2017 and 2018 respectively—which, apart from much else, is testament to the poem’s enduring fascination as a tale of profound and enthralling adventure. It is of course more than that; but if we lose sight of its primary narrative power, a power by turns magical, realistic and mythical—and as Homer and Pope would have it, ethical too—we cut ourselves off from that engine of the imagination which has so engaged audiences, listeners and readers since Homer first sang.

The literature on the art of translation is vast, but when the last avenue of critical theory has been explored (if it ever can be), we are still left with just two different approaches between which translators end up vacillating—or dancing, to put it more kindly: the source text can be translated as faithfully as possible come what may, or it can be adapted to meet the perceived needs of an audience radically different from the one which first experienced it. The reality is that translators usually work with both approaches within a single text, whilst still privileging one in particular; in the *Odyssey*, extreme ends of the spectrum are represented by Chapman’s dedicated fantastic Jacobean confection on the one hand, and the line-by-line literal translations of Anthony Verity and Peter Green on the other. But wherever translators pitch their tent, when the poetry of one language is being brought across into another, the capturing of meaning is always threatened by a tension inherent in allusion, simile and metaphor, causing the narrative to shimmer or oscillate momentarily in the reader's (or listener's) imagination. The most famous phrase in all of Homer, "the wine-dark sea", illustrates this to a nicety, its suggestion of colour prompting many unbidden associations.[3] It is a provocative tension, and a fruitful one; indeed, it will prove to be an Ariadnean thread as we pull on it. A surprising tenson also, for to arrive at its philosophical endpoint is to discover a helpful tool with which to work under the bonnet of two vastly different poetic dictions. Our goal will be to understand how Homer and Pope engage with the figurative and rhetorical language they use—and how it involves us as readers and listeners in an unexpected way. It is here that the ontology lodged in the title of this book makes its bow.

To this end—and before we begin to grapple with Homer and Pope—I want to take a philosophical detour in this section and the next in order to ground an exploration of the figurative language employed by both poets. This is offered to the reader with a reassurance that no prior knowledge of philosophy is assumed in what follows. As the Preface made clear, the arguments which follow are not my own: they are derived from Graham Harman, the philosopher who has developed them over the past ten years or so in a series of diverse books, public lectures and blog posts. Taken as a whole, Harman refers to them under the banner of *Object-Oriented Ontology*, a title which might seem forbidding, but which (as I hope I will show) provides an umbrella for discursive thought and analysis that is actually sympathetic and welcoming to the reader interested in literature. Where I adapt or simplify Harman's thinking in OOO (and perhaps take it into regions he would not wish it to go) I will try to make clear as and when it arises.[4] This book then is offered to the reader in the belief that OOO has much to contribute to focusing our literary gaze on texts of all sorts in fruitful and original ways, offering us an integrated and revealing approach to Homer and Pope; the hope is that it will uncover deep aspects of compositional art that are not normally noticed, inviting intimate conversation with two of the world's greatest poets. This is the only justification I can offer for an unusual approach to what would have otherwise been a conventional literary study—but it should be enough if my assessment and presentation of Harman's ideas are judged to be useful.

It will be best to begin with nomenclature, and particularly with the first word *object* in the title, because in getting this clear all else will follow. This word is misleading, but *Entity-Oriented Ontology* is too much of a mouthful, while *Thing-Oriented Ontology* just sounds ridiculous; *Object-Oriented Ontology* at least has a certain alliterative charm.[5] It is misleading though because we are predisposed by quotidian experience to think of an object as being something hard and material and usually visible to the eye; but this is crushingly restrictive, allowing no place for things immaterial, quantum-sized or imaginary, and OOO is deeply concerned to give equal attention to these. The conventional view will consider a pebble, the President of the United States, a galloping zebra and the planet Saturn all objects in their different ways: but not a quark, Sherlock Holmes, Narnia or a metaphor like Homer's "rosy-fingered dawn". If we want to admit these latter as objects—and OOO certainly does—we are going to have to find a way of widening the definition of what it means to be an "object" in order to accommodate them, one with real explanatory force.

We can do this by asking three questions about any entity/object/thing in the universe, which, if they can be answered at all, will do the job—though two of these questions come with huge stings in their tails, as we shall see. Put simply, the questions are these:

1. Does it have an autonomous existence?
2. What is it made of?
3. What does it do in the world, to what relational effect?

Our answers, even if they cannot be put so simply, must at least be as clear.

In response to the first question, an object can of course be something single, such as a fish in the Black Sea, but it can also be an aggregate—a shoal of such fish—because autonomy is not to be conflated with singularity. Further, it can be a nexus of constituents sharing a certain level of reciprocal relations such as the Black Sea itself, with all its biological and mineral wealth. Thus, a coffee stain on a tablecloth is an object just as much as the tablecloth is—or indeed the company that controls the fifty factories in India making such tablecloths.

Next, if we ask what the entity is made of, the tools we use to produce the answer will vary according to what we are looking at. If we are enquiring about the constituents of water, for example, we employ the apparatus of a laboratory; with a more complex thing such as a bouquet of flowers we might employ a botanist, biologist and florist combined. Crucially, we can ask this question of something that has existence but no palpable or material reality, such as Sherlock Holmes or the crock of gold at the end of the rainbow, because OOO does not privilege bigness, solidity or palpability over the quantum world, the numinous or a theoretical existence. In other words, *not all objects are equally real, but all objects are equally objects*. This will prove to be a point of profound importance in the discussions ahead as we examine the linguistic nitty-gritty of Homer and Pope's poetry.

The third question asks about what the object does in the world and what its effects are: here we are in essence asking a question about its *relations* to and with other objects. A bowl of sugar has a network of different relations to sweetening tea, general diet, the health of diabetes sufferers and the sabotaging of petrol engines, just as the Khatlon region of Tajikistan has a complex set of relations of which social, political, cultural, geographical and historical considerations are just a few. Taken in the round then, the bar for admission to object-status turns out to be at once very low and very wide indeed.

There are two stings-in-the-tail however, problems arising from the very nature of the second and third questions. When we reduce an object to its constituents alone as the scientist or materialist does, we never get to the bottom of what the object actually *is*: we only find out what it is made of, which is an answer to a different and purely reductive question. The object-in-itself remains hidden,[6] veiled and withdrawn from such scrutiny. Consider the Mona Lisa. When the most exhaustive scientific and painterly analysis imaginable is conducted on the picture, her smile and its effect on viewers over five centuries remains essentially unexplained and inscrutable—or as the composer Verdi put it in relation to his own medium, "There is something in music that is more than melody, and more than harmony: music."[7] Such an autopsy of an object's constituents is called *undermining,* by Harman, and compels us to acknowledge that an object is necessarily more than the sum of its properties. Something—to which the unfashionable word *essence* is applicable—withdraws from all access, staying veiled and hidden in depths beyond our reach.

But, as the third question suggests, might we not gain access to those depths if we reduce the object in the opposite direction (that is, looking upwards and outwards rather than inwards) and examine its use, effects and relations instead? A flat no is the answer to this. Staying with the Mona Lisa, we can discuss from every angle this totemic painting's cultural and artistic significance and its dynamic effect on the world, from the valorisation of Renaissance art to the reproduction of that enigmatic smile on coffee cups, postcards and tee-shirts, but this excess of information (however interesting) does not give us access to the depths of the Mona Lisa; she remains as withdrawn from our gaze as she was through undermining. This opposite approach Harman neatly characterises as *overmining.* In fact, as Harman makes clear, we can go further: in everyday life when we consider an object we do not usually just undermine or overmine it as if it demanded an either/or approach, but rather run the two processes in tandem. Harman coins the term *duomining* for this. It will be obvious that this combined approach no more uncovers the real object than either of the two single approaches.[8]

Here two linked objections present themselves: if these real objects are essentially hidden, how do we know anything about them at all? And how is any interaction with them possible? What, it will reasonably be asked, is the world that surrounds us, this world of dust, plastic water bottles, chimpanzees, grand pianos and orbiting planets? The answer is that what we apprehend are limited *sensual* objects (as opposed to *real* ones), presented to our experience through various qualities and attributes which they radiate in order to be in the world, such things as colour, smell, touch, weight, decay, sound, and so on. Objects in their real dress exist in isolation and can have no *direct* relation with anything else because of this; they require a sensual intermediary, another object in its sensual aspect, to seduce something out of them. That intermediary picks up on sensual qualities which, at their firmest, provide a meaningful caricature of the object's hidden real qualities, allowing the universe in which they find themselves to make navigable sense; at their most tenuous, they merely allude to what those real qualities might be like in a kind of metaphorical whisper.

It is at this point that the traditional anthropocentric assumptions of philosophy cease to have cash value, for a bifurcation of the universe placing human experience on one side and everything else on the other becomes unsustainable. A sensual intermediary is by no means always a human pair of eyes, ears or hands: in the flatter (though not completely flat) ontology of OOO a traffic warden is no more a traffic warden than a roof tile is a roof tile. A roof tile possesses sensual qualities which allow it to engage with other objects in the world, just as the traffic warden does: it sits on a roof pressed against other tiles, its angled smoothness channelling the rain, changing colour according to the light and its temperature in the sun, suffering tiny but unique alterations of texture through bird droppings and moss and has perhaps once taken flight in a gale and brained a passer-by, to record but a few of its qualities and effects. That the traffic warden has a vastly richer and more complex sensual story is only a matter of degree.

Anthropocentric seduction is a siren song, so perhaps the point is better illustrated by speaking of cats rather than traffic wardens. A cat, proverbially, can look at a king, and when she does so she apprehends through her feline brain certain qualities which are certainly different from those which a human being processes; similarly, when the king moves off his throne and the cat jumps up onto it to settle down for a nap her interaction with it impresses certain qualities (bodily warmth, weight causing fabric yield, temporary darkness as the seat is hidden from view, the transfer of bacteria, and so on) that are assumed by the inanimate throne. We have then two real objects (the cat and the throne) who, unable to relate directly, do so indirectly as sensual objects through the interaction of their sensual qualities.

In sum, cats, thrones, traffic wardens and roof tiles all belong to an immeasurably larger world whose ontology gravitates around four poles: withdrawn *real objects* with concomitant *real qualities* presenting limited aspects of themselves in the world as *sensual objects* with *sensual qualities*.

No reader is expected at this point to be convinced by such a bald and makeshift outline of the grounds of a complex ontology: all this talk of real and sensual objects can seem a world away from the subject of this study, Pope's translation of the *Odyssey* of Homer. But we can bring things closer to home by remembering that a simile or a metaphor are as much objects as anything else, so that we can track the path of a piece of figurative language within its world as much as we can the presence of a cat on a chair or the Mona Lisa's image on a tee-shirt. The concern above has been just to outline the four poles of OOO and to draw a distinction between existence and palpable reality, but as we leave theory and move to praxis in the chapters ahead the hope is that we will see in their application to the objects of Homer and Pope's figurative language how this illumines their poetry in new and insightful ways. I hope at least that this section's gnomic subheading, "Nature loves to conceal itself" (which comes from a fragment of the ancient Greek philosopher Heraclitus)[9] is now self-explanatory.

3. Relations, symmetry and the simile

At the risk of stealing a little thunder from what lies ahead, it might be helpful at this point to bring Homer and Pope back to the table to consider some aspects of their figurative language, given what we know of OOO so far.

Homer has been justly praised for millennia for the arresting quality of his similes, metaphorical resonance and figurative allusiveness; a wonderfully poetic *chiaroscuro*, producing a scintillating effect against the backdrop of literal language. The contrast is often stark, heightening the effect, for Homer is above all direct, swift and immediate, so that what is functionally literal in his diction has unhindered access to the sensual (i.e. it is palpable, not withdrawn). Take for example a standard recurring formulaic phrase, a statement such as "all the ways grew dark", used by Homer for closing a scene; it has some poetry about it (at least in the Greek), but its meaning and associations are so lucid as to make it unnecessary to push beyond its literal meaning. The sensual object of a road or path in the twilight is clear before us, easily apprehended through its straightforward qualities; we have no interest in investigating further the veiled reality of the road as a real object behind it: literal expression and its meaning emasculates poetry. Very different though is the simile. Across the range of Homer's figurative language, it is the simile which most compels attention: its sheer frequency, its diversity of use, its range, its not infrequently arresting beauty—the simile is the most prized of jewels in the crown of Homeric diction. William Scott put it like this:

> The similes in Homer are treasure troves. They describe scenes of Greek life that are not presented in their simplest form anywhere else: landscapes and seascapes; storms and calm weather; fighting among animals; aspects of civic life such as disputes, athletic contests, horse races, community entertainment, women carrying on their daily lives, and men running their farms and orchards.[10]

Still, we might ask why a singer would lard a performance of swift-flowing narrative, pathos and dramatic interaction with quite as many similes as Homer does. There is approximately one simile every forty-six lines in the *Iliad* and one every ninety-four lines in the *Odyssey*,[11] but these bald statistics give a very skewed picture of the simile's true presence, as many extend over multiple lines. Book 23 of the *Odyssey*, for instance, has two similes alone elaborated over seven lines, the first comparing Penelope's joy at seeing her husband again with the joy of shipwrecked sailors sighting land[12] and the second, a stunning comparison of Athena's pouring grace over Odysseus in the manner of a cunning man overlaying silver with gold.[13] There can be no clear answer as to why Homer does this, beyond a delight in artistic creation, in professional pride in gilding the lily of his art; but it is worth recalling that, beyond a singer's pleasure in words, in the delivery of extended oral rhapsodies similes can help to highlight aspects of characters in relation to the plot, as well as serving to introduce thematic contrasts, in so doing emphasising the importance of certain actions.

In Homer, most similes offer a figurative comparison between two dissimilar objects, as opposed to a literal one. For example, in Book 24 it says this about Odysseus: οἴμησεν δὲ ἀλεὶς ὥς τ᾽ αἰετὸς ὑψιπετήεις[14] (*oimēsen de aleis hōs t' aietos hupsipetēeis*), "he swooped upon them like a high-soaring eagle". Let us look briefly under the technical bonnet here before entertaining any ontological considerations. According to convention, a basic simile such as this has three parts to it: the *tenor*—its subject, here *he*, incorporated in the verb οἴμησεν; the *prothesis*, ὥς, *like*—discounting irregular approaches, Homer employs ten different ways of expressing *like* in the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*;[15] and the *vehicle*, the object with which the subject is being compared. Occasionally the prothesis is absent, its part subverted by other grammatical constructions; for example, “σοὶ δ’ αἰεὶ κραδίη στερεωτέρη ἐστὶ λίθοιο”[16] (*soi d’aiei kradiē stereōterē esti lithoio*), “But your heart is always harder than a stone” (technically, an example of the genitive case with a comparative adjective).

Let us posit a vector along which degrees of a simile’s function can be plotted, bookended from the point where it begins to work as a recognisable simile to the farthest point where it breaks down; the unremarkable quality of the Odysseus/eagle simile places this one only a little way along such a line, there being nothing about it that stretches either imagination or credulity. However complex a simile might otherwise be—and as already noted, some run to as many as seven lines—all similes are defined by a reciprocity between two unlike entities (or objects, as we will have it), the tenors and vehicles, meaning that both relate to one another on some level and are dangerously open to being described in *literal* non-metaphorical language. Odysseus is a man—an eagle is a bird of prey—and there we have it. Both meaning and expression are literal and as such convince, however poor, satisfactory or dazzling we may consider their poetic yoking to be. The specific sensual qualities Odysseus exudes at this moment—a mélange of speed, aggression, vocalised noise perhaps, and the like—all become intimately bound up with the specific sensual qualities that an eagle might exhibit when attacking different prey. As the prothesis indicates, one briefly becomes like the other, creating a reciprocal relation, entailed by that likeness; it will help to label this relation *symmetrical*, because later on it can be contrasted with relations that are asymmetrical and non-reciprocal, to be found in metaphor.

What we have gleaned from OOO so far reminds us that the simile’s eagle-qualities attached to Odysseus are sensual; that is to say, they are limited, they require two real objects (Odysseus and an eagle) to exist hidden away in the depths, each having a multitude of real qualities that are never used up or come fully to the surface of the world. The sensual qualities on the other hand merely present limited caricatures or adumbrations for our perception. Their nature is limited, as is the simile’s: at this moment we are asked to apprehend Odysseus as nothing more or less than a dangerous bird of prey moving in for its kill. OOO also reminds us of what the simile closes off: the *real* Odysseus (of which killer, warrior, lover, husband, father, ruler, deceiver, moral agent, favourite of Athena are but the beginning of a list that we can never exhaust) and the *real* eagle, whose unknown life as a member of another species is framed by a range of experiences at which we can only guess. What the simile opens up—and by extension any simile at all—is a severely limited number of symmetrical qualities which are brought momentarily before our gaze before we move on, unless our attention is arrested by some special property the simile seems to exude, such as its being egregiously ill-fitting, unusual or beautiful. This is worth dwelling on for a moment.

Even as ordinary a simile as Odysseus' being like an eagle may, if we pause over it, offer something of interest when we look back over its context. For example, going over the scene in which the Odysseus/eagle simile occurs, we notice again—perhaps for the first time really notice—that leading up to it Odysseus gives "a terrible cry", σμερδαλέον δ' ἐβόησε[17] (*smerdaleon d' eboēse*), which is not something an eagle actually does: the cry of most eagles is high-pitched and weak and unlikely to be uttered as it swoops on its prey for fear of alerting it. In other words, the reciprocity of qualities—their symmetry—here breaks down if we pursue the simile to its contextual lair. This is unremarkable, trivial even; but then so is this particular simile. Such as it is, the OOO lens here exposes a small but distinct ontological rift when the simile's expanded context is considered, one unlikely to be noticed by any but the reader who is knowledgeable about nature. In ontological terms the point is more significant than its squawking referent, because ontology is always going to be more interested in rifts in its fabric than in the contingencies of the world.

This labouring over a comparatively simple figure of speech has been undertaken with the sole intent of establishing a simple base line for bigger things. When our attention is caught by similes that we immediately find interesting in some way it becomes more likely that we will pause over them and perhaps unearth something other from their soil. To bring this section to a close, here are three such which require us to do a little more work than before, presented in incremental order of the demands they make.

The first records the moment in Book 5 when an almost despairing Odysseus, shipwrecked and alone on the sea—or so he thinks—catches sight of land in the distance:

> On the eighteenth [day], there appeared the shadowy mountains of the land of the Phaeacians where it was nearest to him; it seemed like a shield on the misty sea.[18]

This is an arresting image, beautiful in its way, and the symmetry of its qualities is finely balanced. The quality of enshadowment (implying a hindering of perception) is matched by the mistiness of the sea; the real object that is Phaeacia presents its otherness (and it will turn out that there *is* something slightly mysterious about this island, even in its sensual aspect) is mirrored in the sensual quality of enshadowment that Phaeacia presents to Odysseus' perception. But this is not what the simile is about; the reciprocal nature of the simile holds between the landmass of the island (the tenor) and the shield which it resembles (the vehicle)—or, to be more accurate, the mirroring of a convex boss of such a shield. We should distinguish therefore between the *pivotal* sensual qualities of an object without which that object could not be that object, suggestive in some way of its hidden real qualities, and the purely *accidental* ones, those dependent on things like light, distance, sound, mood or nature of the object experiencing them, all of which are subject to fluctuation or change. It is only an accidental quality of Phaeacia to look shield-shaped at this particular moment to this particular object, Odysseus; another object—an eagle flying overhead, for example—would have no such apprehension.

But the symmetry of relations obtaining in the literal language of the simile allows us to push this further: when we are interested—and this "we" encompasses humans, eagles, stones—qualities beget more qualities, creating a shimmering kaleidoscope of images. To human perception they will appear as ramifications that can be idle, speculative, tantalising or anything else that engages the imagination, should we want to follow their thread. A shield, for example, suggests a protective image, a covering for areas of the human body that are vulnerable; that it points upwards to the heavens in this simile might suggest that Phaeacia itself is in symbolic need of protection from the gods. (The reader who follows this idea through will later find that this is indeed the case, for Poseidon, the god of the sea, will exact vengeance on the Phaeacians for helping Odysseus who earlier blinded his son, the Cyclops.)

All this is to view the simile in limiting anthropocentric terms; what about the eagle—or the mountain? An eagle flying overhead might experience the protective ramifications of the mountains in two quite different ways: as the potential for a secluded eyrie for itself, or as the provider of protection in some way for the prey it seeks. We can push this further, for in the democracy of objects that grounds OOO,[19] an inanimate object still has the capacity to experience through its qualities of weight, hardness, bulk and shape; imagine, for example, something dislodging a stone from the mountainside the eagle is flying over, resulting in the stone's moving to a different physical position, losing some its atoms as it does so and thus altering its shape at an atomic level. By sidestepping the anthropocentric boundary, a metaphysical balance is restored in the universe. Experience, it turns out, is not the preserve of humans—nor even the privilege of the animate.

So, what does Pope do with the passage?

> Then swelled to sight Phaeacia's dusky coast
> And woody mountains, half in vapour lost,

> That lay before him, indistinct and vast,
> Like a broad shield amid the wat'ry waste.
> (5.357–60)

It is surprisingly easy to miss the reassignment of object qualities that Pope performs here, so smooth is his translation, only apparently faithful to the Greek; but OOO's insistence that we consider reciprocal qualities in a simile and then, if further interested, check for reciprocity in any extended or attached imagery draws attention straight away to what he has done. (In the context of a simile, qualities to the object-oriented ontologist are what motive is to the detective.) The accidental enshadowing quality of the mountains has here become transferred to the whole island—"dusky *coast*"—and further, Pope draws attention to a new quality he has ascribed to them, their woodiness, absent from the Greek. Another re-ascription appears when the misty quality of the sea is also transferred to Phaeacia's coastline—"half in vapour lost"—as if Pope wishes to enhance the mysterious nature of the island more than Homer does. But if nothing else, its shield-like qualities will certainly be practically expressed when Odysseus arrives on shore; for the reader/listener who knows what is to come, the image of Phaeacia as a welcome shield for Odysseus might coalesce into an enduring metaphor that says, "the island *is* a shield".[20]

The next example, taken from Book 9, offers a remarkable image of unconscious power, that of the Cyclops Polyphemus, opening for what passes as a door to the cave in which he is holding Odysseus and his men prisoners:

> "And, when he [Polyphemus] had finished eating, he drove his fat flocks out of the cave, easily moving aside the great door-stone; and then he replaced it, as one might put the lid on a quiver."[21]

Pope sticks to the Greek closely here, omitting only the adjective "fat" describing the flocks. Polyphemus

> …drives his flocks before;
> Removes the rocky mountain from the door
> And shuts again; with equal ease disposed,
> As a light quiver's lid is oped and closed.
> (370–3)

He does however add gloss to the adjective μέγαν (*megan*), great: this becomes expanded to a substantive phrase, "rocky mountain", chosen presumably to magnify the sense of Polyphemus' daunting physicality. By contrast, it takes but a single hand to pluck off the lid of a quiver, though we must assume that the size and vertical position of the cave's stone door would require two, even for a giant; the terrible unconscious ease with which Polyphemus performs a task utterly beyond the capacity of any man is emphasised by the lightness of a leather quiver top.

What are the sensual qualities in play here? The tenor—the stone—has two main accidental ones, the first of which, its weight,[22] is duplicitous: duplicitous, because that weight is only noticeable to Odysseus and his men, it being nothing to Polyphemus; and to the livestock which it pens in the cave it is nothing in a different sense, being to their more limited perception only an extension of the rest of the walls. Its quality of movement (in that it is amenable to being transported in a way that the cave in which it is situated is not) negates its apparently static nature and is not duplicitous, for moving it admits light and a means of egress for all, the animals included. Its capacity for being moved counts as an accidental sensual quality in that Odysseus and his men sense that this movement promises liberation.

The simile's vehicle—the quiver's lid—is a huge stretch, being so utterly different from a gigantic block of stone, but in the end, this is only a matter of degree, of its being farther along the spectrum of symmetry. We can demonstrate this by constructing a simile whose terms are so far apart as to make it non-reciprocal and thus non-functioning, creating an unbridgeable rift between the tenor and its vehicle, as here: "the great door-stone was like a bunch of grapes." This in effect breaks the simile apart; tenor and vehicle are so widely unlike as to render it nonsensical.

As regards the sensual qualities of the quiver's lid, its lightness is only of importance to human apprehension; to the arrows which it holds in check by acting like the stone at the cave's entrance, the weight of the small piece of leather of which it is made is irrelevant because only its position matters: the lid is either on or off. Contrast this with how Odysseus sees things: both weight *and* position of the stone are literally of life or death significance. This is a useful reminder of something cardinal in OOO that, concerned as we are here with just the detail of various accidental sensual qualities, behind this daunting block of stone and the protective leather of the quiver's top lie two real objects unreachable in the depths, irreducible to either their constituent parts and relations or to the sum of ways that anyone might choose (in Whitehead's words) "to indulge in brilliant feats of explaining away."[23]

The final example I want to consider here is the one that puts the most pressure on the symmetry of a simile. It occurs in Book 7 at the point where Odysseus is making his way through the magnificent palace of Alcinous, the Phaeacian king, taking note of the life within. He sees fifty girls busily at work, some of them spinning:

> …others [of the fifty servants] work at their looms, or sit spinning
> yarn, like the leaves of a tall poplar tree.[24]

It is a comparison that gives us pause: the gap between tenor and vehicle seems too wide, causing most translators to introduce a mediating object with its own qualities to bridge it—either hands or fingers. Although there is no mention of either in the Greek, Chapman, Hobbes, Fagles, Verity, Mitchell and Wilson all ascribe a fluttering to the girls' hands or fingers in imitation of the leaves, presumably anxious that the simile requires some support.[25] Pope not only agrees, but also personifies the wind to account for the leaves' movement:

> Some ply the loom; their busy fingers move
> Like poplar-leaves when Zephyr fans the grove.
> (7:134–5)

The adjective "busy" is a quality that Pope draws attention to, springing as it does from the new object of the hands he has introduced here, transferring attention away from the simile's tenor of the girls to a further new object, Zephyr, the god of the west wind. This makes the crucial ontological point that any relation immediately generates a new object, in this case because when Pope looks at the moving leaves, the agent he ascribes to their action is a unified entity, Zephyr, one that is irreducible and possessed of a reality deeper than any attempt to describe it. (This can even be pushed a stage further if one considers each leaf independently rather than as an aggregate, offering a host of individual smaller objects.) Unity—irreducibility—unfathomable depth: a triumvirate of quiddities that ratifies object status.

Lombardo and Lattimore however capture Homer's true sense of a group of individuals making constant small movements that create an impression of movement, without confining attention to hands or spindles. Lombardo offers "…twirling yarn on spindles/As they sat, fluttering like so many leaves on a poplar", while Lattimore has "…sitting restless as leaves as the tall black poplar".[26] Lattimore's fanciful translation is perhaps the most interesting, because of the two qualities to which he directs our attention: the colour of the poplar (its blackness) and a quality of the girls that he alone makes pivotal—their restlessness, without which for him these individual spinners would not be as they are. These qualities of restlessness and blackness which Lattimore alone has spun insinuate something deeper in these girls and this tree than we have previously considered. The qualities