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Homeric joints and the marrow in Plato’s *Timaeus*: Two logics of the body

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Abstract

The notion of culture as an entity is problematized in this article by the study of two different logics of the body, both present in the same culture, that of ancient Greece. The first logic, analyzed in the *Iliad*, organizes the body in relation to joints and tendons, while the second defines the body in terms of its openings, of the idea of envelope, and of the inside–outside dichotomy; it clearly appears in Plato’s *Timaeus*. Crucial to the jointed-body in the *Iliad* is the word *thumos*, with the notions of relation, interval, mobility and plurality. By contrast, the *Timaeus* is primarily concerned with stabilizing matter and with unifying the body into an all-englobing and singular whole.

The phrase ‘cultures in contact’ implies the possibility of interaction between cultural entities. I will problematize this issue by looking for differences within one culture, that of ancient Greece. My enquiry will consist of analyzing two distinct logics of the body: the first logic is concerned with joints, tendons and mobility, as they appear in the *Iliad*. The second logic puts the emphasis on the openings, the envelope and the containers in the body; it is remarkably present in Plato’s *Timaeus*. Thus, my article deals with specific ways of thinking, reading and organizing the concept of body. The body in the *Iliad* is closer to that in *Beowulf*, for instance, than to that in the *Timaeus*, even though Homer was obviously closer in time and space to Plato than to any Anglo-Saxon poet. Otherness and sameness are in this respect distributed differently: the ‘Other’ is the cultural ‘Same’.

In my recently completed doctoral thesis, I tried to understand the logic of what I call the jointed body despite its being so drastically different from that prevalent in Western contemporary cultures. Today the body is commonly organized in relation to its openings (eyes, ears, nostrils, mouth, breasts, navel, anus, vagina, urethra, penis), to the inside–outside dichotomy, and to
the notion of envelope. Such is not the case with the jointed body, where the 'central' parts are perceived as being the junctions of the bones (jaws, neck, shoulders, elbows, wrists, finger joints, vertebrae, hip joints, knees, ankles, toe joints). The typical events that occur in the body when conceptualized as an envelope are penetration and/or expulsion, whereas the typical events that take place in the jointed body are junction and/or disjunction. I was led to such a conclusion through my analysis of the Iliad, of Beowulf, of Chrétien de Troyes' Chevalier de la Charrette, and of the legend of Weland.

In the jointed body, tendons are conceived as strings having the essential function of maintaining the junction of the bones. As Beowulf's fist in his powerful grasp, the tendons spring apart (seonowe onsprungon, 817 b) and the 'locks of the bones' (i.e., the joint) burst (burston bånlocan, 818 a): the shoulder is dislocated. In the Iliad, a great number of wounds are inflicted at the level of joints.2 Hector himself dies of an articular wound: Achilles aims at the clavicles (κληθές), which are said to support the neck from the shoulders (ἀπ' ἀμφω αὐχέν' ἔχουσι, XXII, 324). The staging of Hector's mortal wounding stresses the significance of a bone (the collarbone) which connects two joints (the neck and the shoulder).

Aeneas's wound is similarly interesting:

τῷ βάλεν Αἰνείαο κατ' ἴσχιον, ἐθανά τε μηρὸς ἴσχύω ἐνστρέφεται, κοτύλην δὲ τὲ μὴν καλέουσιν. θλάσσε δὲ οἱ κοτύλην, πρὸς δ' ἀμφω ῥῆξε τένοντε. ὡσε δ' ἀπὸ τὸ ῥυνὸν τρηχὼν λίθος. 
(V, 305–308)

['He (Diomedes) threw it (a boulder) at Aeneas's hipbone, where the thigh revolves in the hipbone, a spot which is called cotyle 'socket', he smashed the socket, severed both tendons, and the rough rock tore the skin away.]

The importance of joints in the Iliad appears clearly in this passage. The narration follows a specific order: first the point of junction of the femur and of the hipbone is designated, and the socket of the pelvis is given its anatomic name. Then the tendons are said to spring apart, and finally the skin is torn away. The order of narration runs counter to the chronology of the event, since the socket is necessarily reached after the skin is ripped. This narrative order follows a logic which privileges the point of contact of bones.

Other such descriptions specify that tendons are severed in the process. For instance, Diomedes strikes Dolon across the neck and cuts both tendons (Ἀπὸ δ' ἀμφω κέρας τένοντε, X, 456). The recurring phrase 'both tendons' suggests that a joint was conceived as being maintained on two sides by the supple physiological strings. Moreover, murder is most frequently expressed by the formulas 'he unbound his knees' (γοώνατ' ἔλυσα, XXII, 335) and 'he
unbound his joints' (λύσε γύια, XI, 260). These formulas are used even when the lethal wound is not articular. For death implies the unbinding of joints, whether joints and tendons are directly injured or not.

Additionally, the equivalent of the singular and all-inclusive word 'body' does not exist in the Homeric vocabulary. This exclusion led the Hellenist Bruno Snell to state that 'the body' does not exist in Homer (Snell 1955). Robert Renehan contradicted Snell with the argument that the word σῶμα, meaning 'corpse' in Homer and later acquiring the meaning 'body', could signify in Homer already 'body in general' and not only 'corpse' (Renehan 1981). Snell's and Renehan's arguments indicate that they think about the body as an envelope and a unit, and not in terms of connections and junctions, despite the fact that Snell noticed the importance of joints in early Greek art (Snell 1987: 49–50). Snell considers that the numerous references to distinct parts of the body prove that Homer conceived of the body as an aggregate of pieces. The term 'aggregate' implies a lack of coherence. Snell also uses the term 'deficiency' to refer to the 'physical terminology' in Homer (Snell 1987: 51). In my thesis, I have listed the physical parts named in the Iliad, and found that the textual synthesis—which is the Iliad—of these anatomic designations creates a more precise and complete vision of the human body than in any other Western epic. The absence of a single word for 'body' is not necessarily a deficiency.

Indeed, the Homeric body is strikingly coherent, for it is a structure elaborated by means of points of junction and seen as a set of relations. For example, Ajax kills Archelochus by throwing his weapon into the junction (ἐν συνέχειᾳ) of the head and the neck (κεφάλης τε καὶ αὐξένος), the last vertebra (νείατον ἀστράγαλον), and he severs both tendons (ἀπὸ δ’ ἄμφω κέρας τέινοντε) (XIV, 465). The last vertebra is designated as the point of junction of the head and the neck. Its significance derives from its location and the relational role it plays in the body.

A word in the singular referring to the body as a unit cannot be found in Homer precisely because the Homeric body is constructed through plurality. The center of the body is paradoxically plural: it is any one of the areas of junction and separation of the bones. The plural centers of the body are any one of the intervals in virtue of which a joint is a joint.

The importance of the notion of junction/separation appears as well in the word φρήν. This term may be understood as referring to any conjunctive membrane of the body. It separates at the same time as it creates a junction by being a dual surface of contact. Crucial to the jointed body in the Iliad is also the θυμός. The meaning of this word has been, and remains, a subject of controversy. Many translations have been offered, such as 'soul', 'life', 'breath', 'organ of movement', etc. When death occurs, the θυμός is possibly exhaled, it can also exit the limbs or leave the bones; it manifests itself when
a person is seized by a sudden burst of energy, and it is sometimes located in the chest as well as in the φρένες (Caswell 1990).

Research on this word has often consisted of trying to localize the θυμός in the body, and of deciding in what organ or area the θυμός was located or to what substance or specific physical manifestation it corresponded. It seems to me that the salient characteristic of the θυμός is precisely that it cannot be localized; it cannot be confined within an organ, or circumscribed in one unique manifestation. In other words, it can only be understood in terms of a non-organicist logic of the body. For the θυμός can increase or decrease in intensity, and it is eminently dynamic. To stabilize the θυμός is to annihilate it. In Homer, σῶμα – singular and global – means the dead body, the body that has been immobilized, pinned down, delineated. And when death occurs, the θυμός does not fly away to a new abode, like the ψυχή to Hades; the θυμός simply ceases to exist.

The θυμός is not anchored to a substance or an organ, for – like the jointed body – it has to do with the notion of relation. It is fundamentally involved with self-perception. One of the Ajaxes becomes aware that his θυμός is eager to fight, and he feels his feet and arms moving about him (XIII, 73). His discourse is about himself being the stage of the manifestations of his θυμός. To be alive in the Iliad is to keep one’s joints jointed and to be in relation to the manifestations of one’s θυμός: a θυμός which precisely sets the joints in motion, supplying the person with a dynamic and non-circumscribable network of sensations.

Manifestations of the θυμός may be, for instance, the modification of the muscle tone, the acceleration of breathing, the cramping of the stomach, etc. These events are then interpreted and verbalized as a desire to fight, as excitement or anxiety or joy, as hunger or fear. This whole process is the θυμός. The θυμός exists in the relationship of the person to her/his proprioceptive and intersensory sensations. This explains why the loss of consciousness implies the absence of θυμός. The person keeps breathing, his/her heart keeps beating, but s/he is unable to be in contact with these physiological events and with the sensations that result from them. Finally, a person refers to his/her θυμός to give an account of his/her actions and thoughts, for the θυμός plays a role in the sense of cohesion or unity of the person. When, after a loss of consciousness, the θυμός comes back, it is gathered, reassembled: the verb used is ἐσ-αγεῖρω (XV, 240; XXI, 417). This suggests that the absence of θυμός is equivalent to a loss of cohesion. The θυμός is a non-circumscribable network of psycho-physical events that creates a sense of cohesion through plurality.

While mobility and plurality are central in the Iliad, a major preoccupation in the Timaeus is to unify and stabilize matter. Plato’s Timaeus stages the telling of a myth about the creation of the universe. The myth includes the
creation of the body (τὸ σῶμα), and of the soul (ἡ ψυχή), which is in this text the locus of plurality. In opposition to the Homeric body, the body in the Timaeus is organized around the idea of a single center. On the other hand, the importance given to the idea of binding echoes Homeric preoccupations, with the difference that the bonds — unlike tendons — are intangible.

In Plato’s cosmogonic myth, materiality emerges from the combining of particles which are in the shape of triangles — particles of fire, air, water and earth. The marrow is made by the demiourgos by means of such particles. Subsequently, the marrow is the substance through which bones and flesh are made: All bones and flesh had their origin in the genesis of the marrow (τὸ τοῦ ἔντατος ἀρχή μὲν ἢ τοῦ μυελοῦ γένεσι). For it was in the marrow that the bonds of life by which the soul is bound to the body were fastened (οἱ γὰρ τοῦ βίου δεσμοὶ τῆς ψυχῆς τῷ σώματι ἑνδομένης), and the roots of the mortal kind were implanted (ἐν τούτῳ διάδομενοι κατερρίζουν τὸ θνητὸν γένος). The demiourgos fashioned the marrow and engendered therein ‘the kind of the souls’ (τὰ τῶν ψυχῶν γένη) and bound them down (73 B–C).

The soul is thus plural; there is an entire species, a γένη of souls. The soul, however, becomes single in the text when it is explained that the demiourgos binds the soul to the body within the marrow. In the Timaeus, plurality is intangible, by opposition to the physical plurality in the Iliad. Since plurality is not material anymore, it may as well be subsumed under the singular. This unmarked shift from plural to singular skillfully introduces the one soul/one body dichotomy, and plurality is undone. However, ‘the bonds of life’ are plural. They are the tying together of the soul to the body in the marrow: these bonds are located in matter and they constitute the roots of the mortal kind. In order to express the binding of the intangible (the soul) to the tangible (the body), a metaphor is needed: the bond is a root. The root-metaphor emphasizes the idea that the bonds are tightly caught within an all-englobing substance. And mobility is undone.

Later on in the text, death is explained: it occurs when the bonds that maintain the triangles of the marrow become loose, so that ultimately the bonds that attach the soul to the body are released, setting free the soul, which flies away (81 D). Interestingly, the verb λύω, meaning ‘to untie, to loosen’, is used here, as in Homer, to explain death. In the Iliad, however, bones are unfastened by the severing of concrete bonds, the tendons, while in the Timaeus the untied bonds are intangible links, metaphorical roots, which are trapped within matter.

To revert back to the passage in which the body is fashioned, the Deity gives shape to the marrow in the form of the brain and the spinal cord. The brain is moulded in the shape of a perfect globe (ἐν αὐτῇ περιφερή
πανταχῇ), and it is designed to house the divine seed (τὸ θεῖον σπέρμα). The spine is given a rounded and elongated shape and is described as the point of departure of the bonds of the whole soul (πάσης ψυχῆς δεσμοὺς) which the demιουργός casts out as if from anchors (καθάπερ ἐξ ἀγκυρών βαλλόμενοι). Around this He finally fabricates (ἀπειργάζετο) the whole of this body of ours (ἐφύμπαν ἥπη τὸ σῶμα ἡμῶν), after constructing around it as shelter (στέγασμα) a framework all of bone (ἐξυμπηγνὺς περὶ ὅλου ὀστέυνον) (73 C–D).

The body is thus organized from the inside toward the outside. The center, i.e., the marrow, has an inside: it contains the divine seed and the bonds of life, and it is moulded into the shapes of a perfect globe – the brain – and of an elongated column – the spine. From this shaped substance new bonds are cast towards the exterior to become ‘the body’, our human body, our whole body: it is specified that the body is complete, ἐφύμπαν τὸ σῶμα, and that it is ours, ἡμῶν. The new containing and binding center is then surrounded by a shelter, a protective structure designed to contain the central and primal substance of the marrow. This shelter is the skeleton.

The first and foremost function of the skeleton here is to sustain; the skeleton is not conceived primarily as a system of junctions as is the case in the Iliad. A good illustration of this distinction can be found in Russian dolls and mobiles (such as those of Calder). Russian dolls are a set of containers defined by their capacity to have an inside and to englobe. Mobiles, on the contrary, have no inside, they exist through junction and binding, and their purpose is to move, not to contain. In the Timaeus, binding is of crucial importance, but the general logic of the body has to do with the inside–outside dichotomy, and with the idea of envelope. The body is made of a succession of englobing layers. Its main purpose is not to move: the bonds are like anchors, they stabilize matter.

Nevertheless, bones are supplied with joints. The demιουργός moulds vertebrae, and sets them, like pivots or hinges (στροφίγγας, 74), in a vertical row throughout the trunk, beginning at the head. In order to protect the marrow, which englobes the divine seed, He encases it in a hard cover, namely the bones. But the bony structure is dangerously stiff and inflexible. For this specific reason, the Deity makes joints (ἐμποιῶν ἄρθρα, 74).

The demιουργός makes joints by using (προσχρώμενος) the power (τὴς δυνάμεως) of the Other (θετέρου) as an intermediary, literally: as that which is placed in the middle (ὡς μέση ἐνισταμένη). He uses the power of the Other in the joints for the sake of movement and bending (κυνήγεως καὶ κάμψεως ἐνεκα) (74). Again, in order to make joints, the demιουργός uses the power, the dynamis, of the Other and places it in the middle. Earlier in the text, the Other is explained to be that which can be divided, by opposition to the Same which cannot be divided, and cannot differ from itself (35). In
other words, the Deity needs difference and alterity to create joints and consequently movement. And otherness is placed in the middle as a mediation between the sameness of the bones. The sameness of the bones protects the divine seed but would cause its destruction if the power of the Other was not placed in-between, to allow difference and movement.

Once this is done, the demioourgos covers the already existing succession of layers with additional layers made this time of sinews and of flesh (74 B). The sinews bind all limbs together, tightening and relaxing around the pivots of the vertebrae, thus enabling the body to bend and stretch. And finally, the Deity shrouds the body all over with flesh, and skin is created out of flesh, supplying yet another englobing layer. Thus, the body in the Timaeus is made of a succession of envelopes starting at the center and going towards the exterior. The most important part of the body is located at a unique center, and the rest of the body is created only to protect and shelter this center.

To contain and to englobe are so important in the Timaeus that cognition is explained by means of the same ideas. Cognition is inscribed in space. It is defined as depending on the quantity of soul within and on the quantity of flesh over the bones. The demioourgos encloses the bones that have the most soul in them (ἐμψυχοτάτα) in the least amount of flesh. He encloses with the most dense flesh the bones which are the most deprived of soul (ἀψυχοτάτα) inside. He covers the junction of the bones (ἐμμοιλαστὶ τῶν ὀστῶν) with little flesh, to avoid the risk of hindering flexions and movements (74 E). The density of the flesh, if heavily concentrated over the joints, would produce insensitiveness (ἀνασθησίαν), and thereby cause the parts of the body associated with cognition to be most forgetful and most obtuse (δυσμηνομενοτέρα καὶ κωφότερα τὰ περὶ τὴν διάνοιαν πολλὰς). Not unproblematically, the flesh made the parts around the action of thinking (περὶ τὴν διάνοιαν) most forgetful (δυσμηνομενοτέρα) and most obtuse (κωφότερα) (74 E). For this reason the thighs and the shins, the region around the hips, the bones of the upper and lower arm, all our other parts which are jointless (ἀναρθρα), and all the bones which are void of intelligence (κενά ἐστὶ φρονίσεως) – owing to the small quantity of soul in the marrow – all these are abundantly supplied with flesh (75). In short, certain parts of the body not only move better but remember and think better than others. The non-jointed parts are obtuse and forgetful.

In this strange account of cognition and of the body, joints are considerably important, and yet the logic of the body here is dominated by the ideas of containment and envelope. The body as an envelope, in the Timaeus, goes along with the materialization of cognition. Cognition depends on quantity, quantity of flesh and of soul. Even though the soul is intangible, it is quantified and contained. This differs from the Homeric θύμος which may increase and decrease in intensity, not in quantity. The θύμος is a relation; it
cannot be circumscribed or materialized by being located in one given organ or physical manifestation. Whereas the body in the Timaeus is about matter, shape and unity, the body in the Iliad is narrated in terms of events, relations and plurality. And we are confronted by the paradox that the material body – that of the Timaeus – requires the use of metaphors, while the relational body – that of the Iliad – is a literal one. Interestingly, the Timaeus uses the phrase ξυμβολάς τῶν ὄστων (74 E) to say ‘junction of the bones’: joints are material symbols. In the Iliad, joints are literal intervals.

Finally, it is important to notice that a corporeal logic is not to be equated solely with its characterizing motifs. The reference to joints does not imply that the logic of the jointed body is in use in the text. A corporeal logic appears in the way the body is explained and organized: Aeneas’s hipsocket is more significant than the skin that covers the area (the flesh is not even mentioned). Joints and the skeleton in the Timaeus and in the Iliad serve different purposes. In Homer, bones are central because the body is constructed by means of points of junction. In the Timaeus, bones are primarily meant to contain the marrow. Joints are created at a later moment, and their purpose still remains to protect the marrow. First matter is moulded, then joints are fitted in the structure of the bones. The interval is subordinated to matter; it is inserted in the continuity of the bones. In the jointed body, quite on the contrary, the body results from the existence of intervals. The interval is prior to the whole, which is made possible by the existence of separations and junctions. The very notion of body here is unthinkable without the ideas of gaps and contacts.

I would like to suggest that a similar shift of focus may be applied to thinking about the problem at stake in this volume. One may either subordinate contacts to cultures or subordinate cultures to contacts. In the first case, cultures are self-containing, they are wholes, and contacts are imagined to issue from them; in the second case, contacts bring cultures to existence, and the idea of cultures becomes thinkable only because relations are taking place.

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Notes

1. I am very grateful to Professors Charles Méla, Paul Beekman Taylor, Brian Stock, Gregory Polletta, and Philippe Borgeaud for their help and comments on my thesis, the title of which is ‘Le corps articulaire. Etude littéraire d’une logique corporelle archaïque’.
2. I do not want to imply any historical transmission from the Greek epic to the Anglo-Saxon poem.
The hamstringing of the mythical smith Weland – who is referred to in Beowulf – corresponds to the same type of wound: tendons are severed. For the legend of Weland, see the Poetic Edda, Deor, and The Saga of Thidrek of Bern, which I analyzed in my thesis.

3. Throughout this paper translations from the Iliad and from the Timaeus are my own.

4. See Garland (1981) for an exhaustive enumeration of these two formulas in the Iliad. τὰ γυῖα exists only in the plural in Homer. R. J. Cunliffe translates by 'a joint' and 'limbs'. The root of this word is γυῖ-, 'to bend', which indicates that the most exact translation is the first, i.e., 'a joint', since the joints are precisely the points at which the body bends.

5. Norman Austin has demonstrated the crucial importance of the idea of relation in Homer: 'We prefer the all-purpose prosaic generalization, but Homer's visual acuity and his own kind of logic lead him to locate things and events within the nexus of their relationships. The use of directional enclitics ..., and the great variety of untranslatable particles remind us that Homer is a poet who thinks in terms of structural relations' (1975: 114).

6. For the most interesting interpretations of thumos, see Austin (1975), Redfield (1975), Garland (1981), and Caswell (1990).

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