theories and methodologies

Helen's List

JACQUES LEZRA

THE BATTLE IS NOT YET JOINED, AND THE POET HAS LISTED FOR US THE ARRAY OF WARRIORS, OF SHIPS, OF FORCES. "TELL ME NOW," THE POET OF *The Iliad* has sung, in Richmond Lattimore's translation, "you Muses who have your homes on Olympos. / For you, who are goddesses, are there, and you know all things, / and we have heard only the rumor of it and know nothing. / Who then of those were the chief men and the lords of the Danaäns?" (2.484–88). Then the catalog: the list. In the Homeric tradition, a catalog unrolls under the guarding eye of the Muses, the witnesses, under the keeping and inspiring eye of divine and distant figures who have seen the scene, whose witnessing we imagine, from whom we borrow the faint authority we wear when we begin our own songs. These Homeric lists seem to us scattershot today—this ship here, that one there, a warrior next to another warrior simply on the grounds that, yes, there he stands. And yet to the extent that they turn on the authority of the fact, of a divine witness who reports this disorder and from whom we take the rumors of the fact, Homer's lists are at core structured, signed, legitimated. *The Iliad* is not only the story of the encounter between Trojans and Achaeans; it is also the story of the encounter between two phenomenologies—one envisioning orders of events, names on a list, as they present themselves to us, rumored, accidentally, contingently; another envisioning the order of what presents itself according to the signature of the presiding Muse, according to an immanent principle of structure derivable, if at all, from the totality of the list. These two encounters and these two phenomenologies don't line up; they're fought on different fields and at different levels; they have different scopes. One phenomenology is in principle endless—there's always another matter at hand; we cannot foreclose the possibility that another ship will appear; and the chaos of the battle always means that another figure, foe or friend, may step before us when we least expect it. The other is always bounded, limited on both sides by the immanent unfolding of its principle: that this or that friend or foe should have appeared makes manifest, sub specie aeternitatis, the reason for his, or her, appearing.

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How do we read, today, the encounter between these two orders of encounter, the thematic order on which Achaeans and Trojans meet, and the structural order on which *The Iliad*'s two phenomenologies meet?

This is my analogy, my little conceit. Reading now, after Helen Tartar, means thinking about Helen's list as a list or as a catalog: it means, to echo and pervert the title of Peter Brooks's *Reading for the Plot*, reading for the list. Reading for the list means taking account of the astonishing catalog of books, thoughts, scholarly adventures, accidents of circumstance, great victories, occasional setbacks—some great, some small—that Helen Tartar set before us, over the span of her glorious career. Reading for the list means trying to read from the perspective of the signature that gives its hidden, immanent, witnessing structure to Helen's list. Reading for the list means reading her list and reading other works through her list—that is, reading with the conceptual tools that her authors developed over the years, with her help and under her guidance. We'd be reading, say, *The Iliad* with and through Judith Butler's work, or with and through the work of the critics on today's panel. Reading for the list, we would now ask ourselves to account for the additional mediation that makes our reading happen: not just *The Iliad* in dialogue with another critic's work, a three-part story, ourselves, Homer, and a third whose work, from Helen's list, we trust to help in our encounter with Trojans and Achaeans. Not just three parts but four—indeed a network, three works or names or little ships and a fourth that walks always by their side, Helen's signature in the critical work we read. And Helen's signature brings in a fifth signature and many more, as well as other works from Helen's list and contiguous works and names and little ships and great warriors brought into contact with one another by her signature.

In principle we could, and should, follow this procedure of reading for the list broadly: if we read in this way, if we accept that reading for the list is a methodological procedure opened for us in part by Helen's list, we'll be asking ourselves to read criticism and literature, whether it is published by Stanford or Fordham, by a university press or by a trade press, as if it were indeed part of a catalog, a list. We'll ask after the catalog of signatures and names that accompany the works we read; we'll ask after the contingencies that range this name and this thought by that one, and after the ghostly signatures of the editor in the work. A rhizomatic, networked form of mediation is the outcome; reading for the list opens the experience of reading to the accidents of contiguity and of circumstance, to the determining work of the market on our reading, to the subtly definitive work of the editor in creating the reading-experience horizon, and of the editor's list in creating the worlds of our reading experience. When we read for the list in this sense, we read works across catalogs and in their listed shape. We find ourselves, and we lose ourselves, in this forest of lists.

As for me, I've twice found myself on Helen's list—my first book, *Unspeakable Subjects* (1997), from Stanford, and a recent one, *Wild Materialism* (2010), from Fordham. We had talked about two more books she'd see through, like little ships we projected floating toward port—one, to follow *Wild Materialism*, was to be the second of a trilogy; the other a collection of essays on subject effects. Helen and I had talked about these books for her list in the desultory, careless way one talks about things when one has all the time in the world—when the catalog of hours and days spreads forth, its end unthought, its principle of structure unimagined, untallied.

If in reading for the list, for Helen's list, we ask after her signature, we're asking, What did she see on the field before her? What did her keen eye diagnose about the chaotic scene, battle as well as idyll, about that messy landscape where armies and actors, ignorant of their strengths or allegiances or goals or weapons,

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a grand chaos of ships tossed in disciplinary bathtubs and inland seas, came and clashed? What she saw, and what she brought into her list, made sense, for a moment, for Helen: the figures ranged themselves with her and for her into a list. What is her signature, then?

Let me turn for a kind of answer to one of Helen's last books, Barbara Cassin's *Sophistical Practice: Toward a Consistent Relativism*, which I had the privilege of recommending to Helen and then of reading for the press at different moments. Cassin's book collects among many other luminous essays a brief chapter on Mephistopheles's line, from Goethe's *Faust*, "Du siehst, mit diesem Trank im Leibe, / Bald Helenen in jedem Weibe" 'As soon as that drink is in you, you will see / Helen in every woman' (1.2604; my trans.).

Seeing Helen in every woman. Cassin asks, "[H]ow has Helen been constructed since Homer, such that she is seen in every woman? In gathering together her textual world, one notices a red thread: in a rather striking manner, her reality, her consistency, are entirely linked to language in all its forms" (59). This then is one answer, from Helen's list, about how we should read her textual world, the world of texts she gathered about her and into which she knit her red thread. When we read for Helen's list, we acknowledge that our Helen is linked to language and links us to language, in all its forms: reading closely, with attention to language; writing clearly about reading closely; thinking through our relation to language, through our being in language. In this sense, then, Helen's list remains open—her textual world outlasts her, and new works knit themselves into that list with her red thread even after she is gone, in ways she couldn't have foreseen; almost accidentally, works find their way into contiguity with others in the rumorous clamor of Helen's absence. No principle we can know watches over this knitting of works past, present, and to come. If it is a sort of mediation we envision when we read in this way for the list, the mediation is at odds with any sense of completeness: a third walks at our side, a fourth, others we do not know but whose works inform what we are reading and how we read, yet more to come, from the backlist and from its sequels, linked to language in all its forms: but who is to say what forms language will take, has taken, is taking?

There is another way, too, of reading for Helen's list. What else do we mean when we say that language in all its forms runs like a red thread through Helen's list? We mean that this was what Helen attended to, that this was Helen's care in building her list and in leaving it open for us; but we mean something else as well. Here the language of phenomenology seems less wanting to me. Let me give you an example. It's the old story. A group of leaders, older men, warriors once, gossiping and murmuring: a hum of resentment. "Those who sat with Priam" on the battlements of Troy, as Helen approached the group, intrepid, wrapped in shining garments, were no longer fighters, "yet they were excellent / speakers still, and clear, as cicadas who through the forest / settle on trees, to issue their delicate voice of singing" (3.146–52). From where they sit they command the field, these elders, buzzing and singing; they see stretched before them the armies of Troy and Greece; their song is hidden inside the poet's song like a pastoral rumor, resentful, full of blame for Helen, full of fear for the warriors below, for the costs of war, for their safety. Priam alone does not blame Helen and asks her instead to tell him—since his eyesight fails him—who the figures below the walls are. She knows: they are her kin, her countrymen. Helen's list here is not, in the expected sense, an epic catalog: it's too short, and the principle of organization is neither accidental nor immanent to Helen herself. The old man says to her, "Could you tell me the name of this man who is so tremendous; / who is this Achaian man of power and stature?" (166–67). And Helen, "the shining among women" (171),

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answers, "This now will I tell you in answer to the question . . . : / That man is Atreus's son Agamemnon" (177–78); "[n]ext again the old man ask[s] her, seeing Odysseus, / 'Tell me of this one also, dear child'" (191–92); and after she answers him, he asks, "Who then is this other Achaian of power and stature / towering over the Argives by head and broad shoulders?" (226–27). "Aias," she answers (229). It is Aias who stands there, above his fellows.

An expanded catalog, a short list. Helen's list here is something mysteriously different from the lists we hear elsewhere in Homer's great poem—the catalogs of ships and names bearing the rumored trace of the Muse's witnessing, catalogs held together by a signature or open catalogs of experiences that present themselves pell-mell to our sight, the two phenomenologies of the poem. Here Helen is listing and describing fearlessly, against the buzzing murmurs of the tribe's elders; but she is also gathering for Priam a world that he can no longer see. Helen lists; she sees them "all now, all the rest of the glancing-eyed Achaians, / all whom I would know well by sight, whose names I could tell you" (234–35). "[Y]et nowhere," says Helen, nowhere does she see, but still she lists their names for us, "those two . . . Kastor, breaker of horses, and the strong boxer, Polydeukes, / my own brothers, born with me of a single mother" (236–38). "So she spoke," so Helen spoke, caring for her living countrymen, for the dead, for family and foe and blind Priam in listing her list, "but the teeming earth lay already upon them, / away in Lakedaimon, the beloved land of their fathers" (243–44). Reading for the list: reading for the traces of Helen's care.

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