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ODYSSEUS AND HIS BED. FROM SIGNIFICANT OBJECTS TO THING THEORY IN HOMER[1]

I. FROM SIGNIFICANT OBJECTS TO THING THEORY

Things in Homer cannot complain about a lack of attention. Nearly forty years ago, Jasper Griffin, in response to the oralist emphasis on composition and formulaic language, drew our attention to the many significant objects populating the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*.[2] Nestor's cup, for example, is so heavy that other men have difficulties to lift it; the cup illustrates the eminence of its owner who rubbed shoulders with the far greater heroes of the past. As Griffin demonstrated, Homer deftly uses the significance of objects to enrich many scenes of his narrative. While the sceptre, symbol of the king's power, underscores the sorry figure cut by Agamemnon in *Iliad* Book 2, the washing places that Hector passes when he tries to escape Achilles generate a powerful tragic contrast to the battlefield chase in which he is now involved. Following Griffin's lead, scholars have closely examined things and their role in Homeric epic, notably their commemorative function: weapons and other objects have biographies and are therefore an important means of evoking the past besides song.[3]

However, things do not have only symbolical value in Homeric epic. Most recently, scholars, inspired by thing theory, have assigned to them some sort of agency.[4] Whitley describes Homeric objects as entangled and calls them agents; he is, however, ultimately more interested in the relation between epic and the archaeological record than in a detailed assessment of the role of things in the narrative.[5] In a programmatic paper, the art historian Ruth Bielfeldt argues more extensively for a world-view in Homer in which 'things of nature, but also artefacts, can actively encounter humans in that they are constituted with intention'.[6] Alex Purves explores the liveliness of Homeric objects,

[1] For their stimulating comments, I wish to thank *CQ*'s anonymous reader, Lilah Grace Canevaro and the participants in the conference on 'Materiality, Representation, and Performance in Archaic and Classical Greek Poetry' (University of Edinburgh, June 2017). All translations of the *Odyssey* are taken, partly with modifications, from R. Lattimore, *The* Odyssey *of Homer* (New York, 1965).

[2] J. Griffin, *Homer on Life and Death* (Oxford, 1980), 1–49.

[3] J.-P. Crielaard, 'The cultural biography of material goods in Homer's epics', *GAIA* 7 (2003), 49–62; J. Grethlein, 'Memory and material objects in the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*', *JHS* 128 (2008), 27–51; A. Hartmann, *Zwischen Relikt und Reliquie: Objektbezogene Erinnerungspraktiken in antiken Gesellschaften* (*Studien zur Alten Geschichte* 11) (Berlin, 2010).

[4] Besides Homeric epic, Greek tragedy and comedy are further genres that have started to attract attention from scholars inspired by thing theory; see especially M. Mueller, *Objects as Actors: Props and the Poetics of Performance in Greek Tragedy* (Chicago, 2016); M. Telò, *Aristophanes and the Cloak of Comedy: Affect, Aesthetics, and the Canon* (Chicago, 2016). Being performed, drama offers an additional point of interest: props that were used on stage.

[5] J. Whitley, 'Homer's entangled objects: narrative, agency and personhood in and out of iron age texts', *CArchJ* 23 (2013), 395–416.

[6] R. Bielfeldt, 'Gegenwart und Vergegenwärtigung: dynamische Dinge im Ausgang von Homer', in ead. (ed.), *Ding und Mensch in der Antike: Gegenwart und Vergegenwärtigung* (*Akademiekonferenzen* 16) (Heidelberg, 2014), 15–48.

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especially the vibrant nature of weapons, which erases the boundary between man and matter.[7] In what is the first monograph devoted to objects in Homer, Canevaro studies things in the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* and how they define women and are also used by women to express themselves.[8]

But what exactly does the agency of things mean in Homeric epic? One of the most obvious starting-points for a reading of Homer through the lens of New Materialism is discussed by Bielfeldt: the description of Hephaestus' forge in *Iliad* Book 18. There are tripods with golden wheels which move automatically. The golden servants which serve Hephaestus as crutches are endowed with mind (νοῦς), speech (αὐδή) and energy (σθένος). Finally, the bellows work independently once Hephaestus has given his orders. Bielfeldt thus notes four forms of agency: the ability of things to move independently, mimetic vividness, ἐνέργεια and aesthetic presence.[9]

However, as Bielfeldt has to admit, Hephaestus' forge is a special case: 'In the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, we find only few devices which equal the artefacts and tools in the forge.'[10] Notably, the tripods are labelled a 'wonder to behold' (θαῦμα ἰδέσθαι, *Il.* 18.377). Even if Bielfeldt is right to note that 'the activity of things is not a direct consequence of their divine production, but a kind of "accommodating understanding" in the things, which makes possible their cooperation with the god',[11] it is hard to deny that such animated objects belong to the divine sphere. It is not in Troy or Ithaca but on Mount Olympus that we find gates which open without external agency and are able to moo (*Il.* 5.749 = *Il.* 8.393).[12] 'The gold and silver dogs' that keep watch belong to Alcinous' palace and are another 'wonder to behold' (*Od.* 7.91–4); they have been crafted by Hephaestus and are situated on an island which is beyond the reach of the Homeric heroes and bears traces of the Island of the Blessed. Furthermore, only the Phaeacians have ships which 'strain for their own purpose' (τιτυσκόμεναι φρεσὶ νῆες, *Od.* 8.556) and need no steering oars 'for they themselves understand men's thoughts and purposes, and they know all the cities of men and all their fertile fields' (ἀλλ' αὐταὶ ἴσασι νοήματα καὶ φρένας ἀνδρῶν, | καὶ πάντων ἴσασι πόλιας καὶ πίονας ἀγροὺς | ἀνθρώπων …, *Od.* 8.559–61).

That being said, there are things in the heroic orbit to which Homer ascribes agency.[13] Frequently, missiles 'leap' and 'spring' (for example ἆλτο δ' ὀιστός, *Il.* 4.125; πηδῆσαι ἄκοντα, *Il.* 14.455; ὀιστοὶ θρῴσκον, *Il.* 15.313–14). What is more, weapons seem to have intentions. While some spears stuck in the shield 'hanker to go further' (ὄρμενα πρόσσω, *Il.* 11.572), others, still in the air, are 'full of desire to sate themselves with skin' (λιλαιόμενα χροὸς ἆσαι, *Il.* 11.574). But is it true that, as Bielfeldt contends, such objects involve 'an ontological claim about the reality of the missile'?[14] It is impossible to pinpoint the manner in which these expressions were

[7] A.C. Purves, 'Ajax and other objects: Homer's vibrant materialism', *Ramus* 44 (2015), 75–94.
[8] L.G. Canevaro, *Women of Substance in Homeric Epic: Objects, Gender, Agency* (Oxford, 2018). For a gender approach to Homeric things, especially textile, see also M. Mueller, 'Helen's hand: weaving for *kleos* in the *Odyssey*', *Helios* 37 (2010), 1–21.
[9] Bielfeldt (n. 6), 23–31.
[10] Bielfeldt (n. 6), 32.
[11] Bielfeldt (n. 6), 32–3.
[12] A juxtaposition with the doors to Odysseus' storeroom is instructive in this case: 'creaking loudly like a bull' (*Od.* 21.48–9), these doors in the human world are only compared to an animal, and the animal-like sound they produce depends on an external agent who is opening them, in this case Penelope.
[13] Cf. M.M. Kokolakis, 'Homeric animism', *Museum Philologum Londiniense* 4 (1980), 89–113.
[14] Bielfeldt (n. 6), 37.

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understood by Homer's original audience, but there is evidence in Aristotle and other critics that at least in later periods they were unambiguously understood as metaphorical.[15] In *Rh.* 3.11, Aristotle cites several phrases in which things act and harbour intentions as examples of Homer's capacity to 'put things before the eyes' by 'presenting the inanimate as animate through metaphor' (λέγω δὴ πρὸ ὀμμάτων ταῦτα ποιεῖν ὅσα ἐνεργοῦντα σημαίνει … τὸ τὰ ἄψυχα ἔμψυχα ποιεῖν διὰ τῆς μεταφορᾶς, *Rh.* 3.11.2–3).[16] Even if we factor in that the ancient concept of metaphor was significantly broader than our own, the comments of ancient critics remind us that the description of things as animate do not necessarily indicate an animistic world-view; they may also be a poetic device to bestow vividness on the narrative.[17]

The agency of things in Homer thus seems to be less outright and harder to capture than Bielfeldt's pioneering discussion would have us believe. New Materialism encompasses a wide range of sometimes very different approaches to how things act. Graham Harman's Object-Oriented Ontology, Jane Bennett's Vitalism and Lambros Malafouris's Material-Engagement Theory, to name just three influential approaches, conceptualize the agency of things along very different lines.[18] Some New Materialists go very far in blurring the boundaries between things and humans, and even question the very distinction between animate and inanimate matter. Whatever the philosophical merit of such radical approaches is, their value is limited for an exploration of the role of things in Homer. Epic poetry puts heroes and their actions at its centre; things come into view chiefly in their relevance to heroes.[19] For the study of things in Homer, Alfred Gell's *Art and Agency*[20] is, I think, a better fit.[21] Gell's notion of agency has been criticized as not radical enough and ultimately anthropocentric,[22] but, as I hope to show, his distinction between intentional and

[15] See, for example, scholium bT *Il.* 4.126b ex., which argues that Homer 'transferred the eagerness from the archer to the arrow' (ἐμφαντικῶς δὲ τὴν τοῦ βαλόντος προθυμίαν εἰς τὸ βληθὲν μετήγαγεν). See also scholium bT *Il.* 21.169a ex.; bT *Il.* 13.562 ex.; bT *Il.* 4.217 ex. Cf. R. Nünlist, *The Ancient Critic at Work: Terms and Concepts of Literary Criticism in Greek Scholia* (Cambridge, 2009), 210–11.

[16] Bielfeldt (n. 6), 36–7 uses *Metaphysics* Book 8 to argue that Aristotle's description of ἐνέργεια as ἐνάργεια acknowledges an inherent agency of things: 'Sprachliche Vergegenwärtigung kann dann gelingen, wenn sie die den Dingen inhärente Tatkraft und ihr Streben nach Verwirklichung offenlegt und steigernd freisetzt.' ('Visualization through words can succeed, if it discloses, frees and reinforces the energy that is inherent in things and their striving for realization.'). However, it remains highly contended whether the *Metaphysics* can illuminate the meaning of ἐνέργεια in *Rh.* 3.11. In the *Metaphysics*, ἐνέργεια appears coupled with δύναμις. Not only is there no reference to δύναμις in *Rh.* 3.11, but it is also absurd that a metaphor which fails to achieve ἐνέργεια has δύναμις. Cf. C. Rapp (ed.), *Aristoteles: Rhetorik*, vol. 2 (Berlin, 2002), 906–7.

[17] For a perceptive discussion of metaphor in Homer as varying 'between the strikingly new and effective and the completely dead', see M.W. Edwards, *The* Iliad*: A Commentary*, vol. 5: *Books 17–20* (Cambridge, 1991), 50.

[18] G. Harman, *Tool-Being: Heidegger and the Metaphysics of Objects* (Chicago, 2002); J. Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham, NC, 2010); L. Malafouris, *How Things Shape the Mind: A Theory of Material Engagement* (Cambridge, MA, 2013).

[19] See, however, Purves (n. 7), who subscribes to a vitalist agenda.

[20] A. Gell, *Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory* (Oxford, 1998).

[21] Canevaro (n. 8) also draws on Gell in her analysis of things and women in Homeric epic.

[22] Gell's book, written in the course of a few weeks before the author's death, is not without problems. For critical assessments of Gell, see, for example, R. Layton, '*Art and Agency*: a reassessment', *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 9 (2003), 447–64; M. Rampley, 'Art history and cultural difference: Alfred Gell's anthropology of art', *Art History* 28 (2005), 524–51; H. Morphy, 'Art as a mode of action: Some problems with Gell's *Art and Agency*', *Journal of Material Culture* 14 (2009), 5–27; L. Chua and M. Elliot (edd.), *Distributed Objects: Meaning and*

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non-intentional modes of agency and his focus on the entanglement of things with humans provide an apt model for the role of things in Homer.

I will concentrate on a particularly intriguing case, the bed of Odysseus. Excellent work has been done to tease out the multifarious symbolic significance of the bed, but it can also be shown to play an active role in the plot. It provides a splendid case-study for teasing out the agency of things and its limits in Homer (II). I will then discuss similar objects: Odysseus' orchard and his bow further illuminate the kind of agency that Homer attributes to things (III). In a final step, I will compare the view of things in Homeric epic with the developments that gave rise to modern thing-theory. Homer's 'attentiveness to things', I will suggest, resonates in particular with reflections on things that preceded the present flurry of new theories and currently receive little attention (IV).

II. THE BED OF ODYSSEUS

The bed of Odysseus, as it is described in *Odyssey* Book 23, is a symbol of Odysseus' and Penelope's marriage.[23] It is made of a natural resource, 'an olive tree with long leaves growing | strongly in the courtyard' (θάμνος ἔφυ τανύφυλλος ἐλαίης ἕρκεος ἐντός, | ἀκμηνὸς θαλέθων …, 23.190–1), which has been worked on by a human agent: Odysseus 'cut away the foliage of the long-leaved olive, | and trimmed the trunk from the roots up, planning it with a brazen | adze, well and expertly, and trued it straight to a chalkline, | making a bedpost of it, and bored all holes with an auger' (καὶ τότ' ἔπειτ' ἀπέκοψα κόμην τανυφύλλου ἐλαίης, | κορμὸν δ' ἐκ ῥίζης προταμὼν ἀμφέξεσα χαλκῷ | εὖ καὶ ἐπισταμένως, καὶ ἐπὶ στάθμην ἴθυνα, | ἑρμῖν' ἀσκήσας, τέτρηνα δὲ πάντα τερέτρῳ, 23.195–8). The bed thus bears out the tension between nature and civilization that defines marriage: 'The bed in the *Odyssey* … retains its connection with the natural world from which it came, and thus represents the institution of marriage itself, which, centered on the biological realities of sexuality and procreation, nevertheless is configured in space and time as a social artifact.'[24] It is not only its material status but also its spatial location that endows the bed with symbolic significance. The bed lies in the centre of the bedroom which seems to be at the heart of the house, which is itself encircled by a courtyard with a fence. The position of the bed in the middle of several concentric circles shielding it from the outer world spatially mirrors the intimacy of marriage, which excludes other persons and simultaneously forms the core of the family. Perhaps most incisively, the immobility of the bed expresses the stability of the marital bond between Odysseus and Penelope. Followed by many modern scholars, an ancient commentator notes: 'When he says that the bed is unmoved, he seems to allude to the fact that the marital bed/bond needs to be undissolved'

Mattering after Alfred Gell (New York, 2013). R. Osborne and J. Tanner (edd.), *Art's Agency and Art History* (Malden, 2007) contain a couple of attempts to make Gell's approach fruitful for the study of the ancient world.

[23] See J. Starobinski, 'The inside and the outside', *Hudson Review* 28 (1975), 333–51; A. Bonnafé, 'L' olivier dans l' *Odyssée* et le fourré du Parnasse: reprises de termes et reprises de thèmes', *QS* 21 (1985), 101–36; S. Murnaghan, *Disguise and Recognition in the* Odyssey (Princeton, 1987), 140–1; M.A. Katz, *Penelope's Renown: Meaning and Indeterminacy in the* Odyssey (Princeton, 1991), 177–82; F.I. Zeitlin, *Playing the Other: Gender and Society in Classical Greek Literature* (Chicago, 1996), 19–52.

[24] Katz (n. 23), 181.

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(ἀκίνητον δὲ λέγων εἶναι τὸ λέχος, ἔοικεν αἰνίττεσθαι ὅτι τὴν γαμικὴν κοίτην ἀδιάλυτον εἶναι δεῖ, scholium *ad* 23.188).[25]

In her book, Canevaro goes beyond an analysis of the bed as a significant object and emphasizes the active role which it plays in the *Odyssey*'s plot: 'When Penelope uses textiles to pause time in Ithaca, the only object that can get time moving again is her and Odysseus's marital bed.'[26] Canevaro illuminatingly compares the bed with the other object crafted by Odysseus, namely the raft on which he leaves Calypso's island.[27] Both objects are made of wood, but 'the raft is quickly destroyed by Poseidon's storm, whilst the bed withstands the many intervening years.'[28] I would like to take up Canevaro's observation that the bed is pivotal to the progress of the plot and probe into its agency. In what way is the bed an agent? To answer this question, I will draw on Alfred Gell's anthropological approach to artworks.[29] First, Gell's concept of the art nexus will help me capture what kind of agent the bed is. Then, the notion of distributed personhood, which Gell adopts from other anthropologists, will permit us to understand why the bed is capable of having such an impact on the plot.

At first sight, it may strike especially readers unfamiliar with thing theory as counter-intuitive to view the bed as an agent. The bed lacks any intentions that may manifest themselves in actions. But agency does not necessarily imply intentions; it can be defined more broadly as effecting a change, as the transformation of one state into another, no matter whether or not intentions or consciousness are involved. Thus defined, agency also applies to things: while a barrier forces the car driver to slow down, a fence allows the shepherd to take a nap or go somewhere instead of controlling his herd.[30] Whereas a confinement of agency to humans lends support to considering things merely as passive objects, a definition that does not require intentions helps bring into view the powerful role that things play in our experience.

To repeat a provocative example from Gell:[31] we cannot hold the landmines in Cambodia morally responsible in the same way as Pol Pot's men sowing them in the earth. And yet, landmines kill and mutilate people; it is only through such weaponry that the soldiers can exert their terror. As drastic as this example is, it still concerns things that mediate human intentions—the landmines are produced and distributed in order to blow people up. But the agency of things need not enact human intentions. When, for example, someone carelessly drops a can and I stumble over it and twist my ankle or even break my leg, the thing has an effect on me which is not tied to human intention. It is in such cases, in which things interfere with our lives without realizing human intentions, sometimes even contrary to their intended use, that their agency is felt with particular strength.

While the uncoupling of agency from intentions and consciousness permits us to get a better sense of the salience of things in our world, one should not fall into the opposite trap and hypostasize their status by equating them with human agents. Things may have

[25] E.g. Zeitlin (n. 23), 22, 24.
[26] Canevaro (n. 8), 7.
[27] For another thought-provoking comparison, see A.C. Purves, *Space and Time in Ancient Greek Narrative* (Cambridge, 2010), 83, who juxtaposes the bed with the oar that Odysseus is supposed to carry in Teiresias' prophecy.
[28] Canevaro (n. 8), 75.
[29] Gell (n. 20).
[30] The example of the shepherd and the fence is taken from B. Latour, 'On interobjectivity', *Mind, Culture, and Activity* 3 (1996), 228–45, at 239.
[31] Gell (n. 20), 20–1.

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a profound impact on our lives, but they are not endowed with consciousness. Here, the distinction between primary and secondary agency introduced by Gell is helpful. While the former is predicated on intentions, the latter is not.[32] Pol Pot and his men are primary agents; the weapons on which they rely are secondary agents.

Gell's concept of agency is also helpful in that it is 'relational and context-dependent, not classificatory and context free'. Agents are defined through their relations with patients: 'in any given transaction in which agency is manifested, there is a "patient" who or which is another "potential" agent, capable of acting as an agent or being a locus of agency.'[33] Gell's approach thus allows for a change of roles, and Odysseus' bed illustrates that the same thing can inhabit different roles. First, Odysseus hews and trims the tree to become one of the bedposts. While here the bed is the patient which makes Odysseus into an agent, the tables are turned in *Odyssey* Book 23. The bed may not harbour intentions, but it is a secondary agent in Gell's sense: only the bed makes Penelope acknowledge Odysseus' identity and thereby helps overcome a major impasse of the plot. Note that this case of agency is not mediating human intentions, as the bed was not built to prove Odysseus' identity. Paving the way for the poem's central recognition scene, which has been deferred over the course of several books, the bed is a mighty agent in the *Odyssey*. None the less, this instantiation of action is intricate. A first step to tease out its nuances is a comparison with the other prominent bed in the *Odyssey*, Hephaestus' bed in Demodocus' second song.

The comparison in question here is suggested by the resemblance that has been noticed between Odysseus and Hephaestus:[34] the extended descriptions of how Odysseus construes the bed and the raft bespeak his skills as an artisan and show him to be an apt disciple of Hephaestus. In his account of the Polyphemus adventure, Odysseus highlights his similarity to Hephaestus: he compares himself, drilling the sharpened and heated olive tree into Polyphemus' eye, to a smith (*Od*. 9.391–3). Moreover, when the Phaeacians invite him to join an athletic contest, Odysseus excuses himself from the running, for the wanderings have weakened his limbs (8.230–3). In this regard, too, he resembles Hephaestus, who is handicapped and therefore, as an anonymous divine voice points out, unable to compete with Ares' speed (8.330–2). Inversely, Hephaestus is not unlike Odysseus when he relies on μῆτις to outsmart a physically superior opponent, namely Ares: he equips his bed with miraculous shackles which are invisible and bind the adulterers in flagrante, exposing them to the amused eyes of their fellow gods.

The beds of Odysseus and Hephaestus stand at nodal points in the plots of the *Odyssey* and Demodocus' second song respectively. The juxtaposition of the two beds is intensified by the reference to the crucial quality of Odysseus' bed in Demodocus' song. Odysseus' bed is 'firmly in the ground' (ἔμπεδον, 23.203), and thereby embodies the stability of his marriage. The adjective ἔμπεδος also occurs in Demodocus' song. Here, however, it is not the bed but the adulterers that are fixed. Hephaestus 'hammered out fastenings | that could not be slipped or broken, to hold them firmly in the ground' (κόπτε δὲ δεσμοὺς | ἀρρήκτους ἀλύτους, ὄφρ' ἔμπεδον αὖθι μένοιεν, 8.274–5). As Froma Zeitlin spells out, the repetition of ἔμπεδος juxtaposes two different forms of love: 'In an erotic context, the quality of steadfastness

[32] Gell (n. 20), 17–23.
[33] Gell (n. 20), 22.
[34] See especially R.M. Newton, 'Odysseus and Hephaestus in the *Odyssey*', *CJ* 83 (1987), 12–20.

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is represented as shifting between a positive and a negative pole: between a virtuous ideal and an unimpeachable emblem of shame, between stability and constancy on the one hand, and detainment, even imprisonment, on the other. It signifies the difference between a licit and an illicit sexuality.'[35]

The use of ἔμπεδος also draws our attention to another salient point, as it sheds light on the different forms of agency wielded by the two beds. Hephaestus fashions his bed 'to be very deceptive' (περὶ γὰρ δολόεντα τέτυκτο, 8.281). The 'artful' (τεχνήεντες, 8.297) bonds are produced by Hephaestus, but they bind the adulterous couple automatically without external agency. The case of Odysseus' bed is very different: the bed is not capable of binding its users; its point is simply that it has not been moved. Unlike Hephaestus' bed, Odysseus' does not bring about any physical changes. Its agency is far less direct and more sublimated. Other than the different moral orders, the juxtaposition of the beds underlines the different forms of agency of things in the divine and human worlds. It is divine, not human, objects that do something automatically: the shackles which chain Ares and Aphrodite to Hephaestus' bed, the bellows which work in Hephaestus' smithy without being touched and the gates of Mount Olympus which open when somebody wishes to enter.

There is another point which qualifies the agency of Odysseus' bed. It is not the bed alone that breaks up the deadlock and allows the action to move on. The bed has its effect only in conjunction with a story. Penelope's reference to the bed prompts Odysseus to give a detailed account of how he construed the object. Besides revealing why the bed is proof of Penelope's faithfulness, this narrative also compels Penelope to acknowledge that the man in front of her is Odysseus. Only through the story attached to it is the object invested with agency. While archaeologists have investigated the entanglement of things with stories,[36] Wilhelm Schapp, in a monograph that prefigured works on narrativization by David Carr, Paul Ricoeur and Hayden White, pointed out that humans are entangled with stories.[37] Odysseus' bed brings both approaches together and suggests a more complex and threefold entanglement: humans, things and narratives are interwoven with each other. Stories are the rope that ties humans to things.

So far I have elaborated on the limits of the agency of Odysseus' bed. The bed has its effect on the plot only through triggering a story. Moreover, Hephaestus' bed and its miraculous bonds highlight that the marital bed in *Odyssey* Book 23 does not feature any automatic devices. It is now time to describe the agency of the bed in positive terms. By what means does it exert such a power over the *Odyssey*'s plot? Penelope admits that the appearance of the beggar reminds her of her husband, as his hands and feet are strikingly similar (καί που Ὀδυσσεὺς | ἤδη τοιόσδ' ἐστὶ πόδας τοιόσδε τε χεῖρας, 19.358–9). She sees the scar and is admonished by Eurycleia and Telemachus to recognize Odysseus (23.70–9, 23.97–103), but it is only the bed and Odysseus' familiarity with it that are finally capable of convincing her. What bestows this power on an immobile object?

As we have already seen, the bed symbolizes Odysseus' and Penelope's marriage both spatially and materially. Like the institution of marriage, it brings nature together with civilization and, hidden from the eyes of others, defines the intimacy of the couple.

[35] Zeitlin (n. 23), 34.

[36] On Homeric epic, see Whitley (n. 5); more generally, see, for example, I. Hodder, *Entangled: An Archaeology of the Relationship between Humans and Things* (Chichester, 2012).

[37] W. Schapp, *In Geschichten verstrickt: Zum Sein von Mensch und Ding* (Hamburg, 1953).

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But the bed is also proof of Odysseus' identity beyond the level of semiotic signification. Linguistically this function comes to fore in the use of ἔμπεδος. Odysseus first mentions that there is a 'great sign' (μέγα σῆμα, 23.188) in the bed's construction and then wonders whether it is still 'fixed on the ground' (ἤ μοι ἔτ' ἔμπεδόν ἐστι, 23.203). Homer goes on to conflate both statements and lets ἔμπεδος slide from its literal to a metaphorical meaning: Penelope 'recognized the clear (fixed on the ground) signs that Odysseus had given' (σήματ' ἀναγνούσῃ, τά οἱ ἔμπεδα πέφραδ' Ὀδυσσεύς, 23.206).[38] The fact that the bed is ἔμπεδος seamlessly merges into the σήματα ἔμπεδα of Odysseus' identity: the signified and the signifying coalesce. Through its stability, the bed gives substance to who Odysseus is; it materializes his identity as a husband. Fusing together bed and Odysseus, ἔμπεδος signals a close entanglement of man with thing.

The bed thus provides an example of what Gell and other anthropologists call distributed personhood.[39] In Melanesian society, personhood embraces the objects with which a person is entangled as well as the actions in which he is engaged. The bewilderment that this concept may trigger in us bespeaks the powerful grip on us of the Cartesian notion of the subject. The definition of the person as a subject in opposition to objects is deeply ingrained in our imagination. However, the recognition scene in *Odyssey* Book 23 illustrates that an aggregative notion of personhood can be found at the core of the European tradition. There are of course crucial differences between the Melanesian society and the Homeric world. The *Odyssey* does not feature the ceremonial exchange system of *kula* in which, as Mary Strathern has argued,[40] people pass on parts of themselves through gifts. And yet, it is not Odysseus himself but an object and Odysseus' familiarity with it that evidence who he is. Odysseus' identity as Penelope's husband does not lie in himself but is tied up with an object.

The simile illustrating Odysseus' rejuvenation by Athena powerfully expresses the entanglement of Odysseus with the bed (23.159–62):

> ὡς δ' ὅτε τις χρυσὸν περιχεύεται ἀργύρῳ ἀνὴρ
> ἴδρις, ὃν Ἥφαιστος δέδαεν καὶ Παλλὰς Ἀθήνη
> τέχνην παντοίην, χαρίεντα δὲ ἔργα τελείει,
> ὣς ἄρα τῷ κατέχευε χάριν κεφαλῇ τε καὶ ὤμοις.
>
> And as when a master craftsman overlays gold on silver,
> and he is one who was taught by Hephaistos and Pallas Athene
> in art complete, and grace is on every work he finishes;
> so Athene gilded with grace his head and his shoulders.

Zeitlin astutely observes that the simile aligns Odysseus with his bed.[41] The overlaying of gold on silver that illustrates Odysseus' metamorphosis echoes the construction of the bed which Odysseus adorns with the very same materials, gold and silver and, in

[38] Cf. Zeitlin (n. 23), 42.

[39] Besides Gell (n. 20), ch. 7, especially 103–4, see, for example, M. Strathern, *The Gender of the Gift: Problems with Women and Problems with Society in Melanesia* (*Studies in Melanesian Anthropology* 6) (Berkeley, 1988); R. Wagner, 'The fractal person', in M. Godelier and M. Strathern (edd.), *Big Men and Great Men: Personifications of Power in Melanesia* (Cambridge, 1991), 159–73.

[40] Strathern (n. 39).

[41] See also Zeitlin (n. 23), 41–2 in vigorous opposition to analytical scholars who excised 23.157–62 as a mere repetition of 6.230–5. On the contested authenticity of these verses, see also Heubeck *ad loc.*, in J. Russo, M. Fernández-Galiano and A. Heubeck (edd.), *A Commentary on Homer's* Odyssey. *Vol.*

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addition, ivory. The description of the maker in terms of his object drives home the fact that the object forms part of his identity; it is thus more than an object, and, inversely, Odysseus less (or rather more?) than a subject. If 'human subjects depend on inanimate objects to establish their sense of identity',[42] as the thing theoretician Bill Brown puts it, then the dichotomy of active subject vs passive object breaks down and is replaced by an entanglement of humans with things that precedes and even contributes to the constitution of the subject. The rejuvenation which is compared to the kind of adornment applied to the bed does not suffice to achieve the *anagnōrisis*. Even after Odysseus' transformation, Penelope fails to see her husband in him. The recognition requires the thing and the story with which it is entangled. Comparison may highlight the entwinement of man with thing, but it falls short of capturing a relation that goes deeper and is metonymic rather than metaphorical. As I will spell out in the final section, Homer can stimulate the 'new thoughts' for which Brown asks, 'new thoughts about how inanimate objects constitute human subjects, how they move them, how they threaten them, how they facilitate or threaten their relation to other subjects'.[43]

We are now in a better position to appreciate the role of the bed in *Odyssey* Book 23. The bed is not only a multifaceted symbol of Odysseus' and Penelope's marriage; it propels the plot which has got stuck through Penelope's reluctance to recognize Odysseus. While not effecting any physical changes, the bed brings about the recognition. Its power relies on Odysseus' entanglement with it which is manifested in his account of its construction. In providing better evidence for Odysseus' identity than his own body, the bed bespeaks an understanding of personhood which is different from the Cartesian idea of the subject. A person is defined not so much in itself and as a subject in opposition to objects but rather in and through his interaction with things. Odysseus' identity as a husband is stored in the marital bed that he himself crafted. As the product of Odysseus' agency, the bed forms part of his extended self and becomes itself an agent when proof of this identity is required.

The agency of things and distributed personhood may be both conspicuous in many premodern societies and, upon closer inspection as the final section of this paper will show, also surface in our world, but they describe distinct phenomena. The fact that things bring about changes is not necessarily linked to an idea of personhood that is tied up with things. The *Odyssey*, however, entwines them narratively: the agency of the bed, the *peripeteia* it effects in the plot, rests on the role that the bed plays for Odysseus' identity. Since Odysseus is entangled with the bed, the bed has the capacity to prove his identity and, when this proof is needed, actually moves the plot forward. The connection between the agency of things and distributed personhood in the *Odyssey* is thus not an intrinsic one but motivated by its specific plot.

At first sight, my argument may seem like a return to Snell's view of Homeric man as disjointed. For a long time, Snell's work was a favourite bashing ground especially of Anglophone scholarship, but lately there have been sophisticated attempts to reassess it in the light of contemporary theory. Alex Purves in particular has suggested tracing

III: Books XVII–XXIV (Oxford, 1992). See also N. Austin, *Archery at the Dark of the Moon: Poetic Problems in Homer's* Odyssey (Berkeley, 1975), 211–13; Newton (n. 34), 17 n. 19.

[42] B. Brown, 'Objects, others and us (the refabrication of things)', *Critical Inquiry* 36 (2010), 183–217, at 191.

[43] B. Brown, 'Thing theory', *Critical Inquiry* 28 (2001), 1–22, at 7, and 3–5 on the differences between things and objects.

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'a full circle from "prehuman" to "posthuman"':[44] Snell's argument that Homeric man is not yet a unity but an aggregate of separate parts seems to chime with approaches that challenge the Cartesian concept of the human being in general. I fully agree that Homer's view of man deviates crucially from the Cartesian conception, but the focus of my argument differs from Snell's. Whereas Snell concentrates on ideas of body and soul, arguing for their absence in Homeric epic, I have tried to elucidate an aspect of the heroes' identity. Unlike Snell, I do not claim that Homer lacks a sense of self. There is a sense of self in Homeric epic, which, however, is different from the Cartesian notion. Instead of envisaging it in a teleological framework as does Snell, I focus on an aspect, namely man's entanglement with things, which, I think, with due qualification is also valid today.

III. ODYSSEUS' ENTANGLED IDENTITY: BOW AND ORCHARD

However, before elaborating on this resonance of the Homeric view with current theory, I would like to corroborate my thesis with further examples. Other recognition scenes provide further examples of things which are entangled with Odysseus and thereby become agents in the plot. Yet, the arguably most famous recognition scene, Eurycleia's recognition of Odysseus, does not hinge on a thing. When Eurycleia washes Odysseus' feet, she touches the scar left by a wild boar on his leg when Odysseus was on the brink of manhood. Skin has been variously described as the interface between body and world and as a precarious boundary between self and society,[45] but I would be hesitant to consider Odysseus' scar a thing. The mark of the boar's tusks in Odysseus' leg belongs to his body.[46] This being said, this recognition scene parallels some of the aspects that I have found in Penelope's *anagnōrisis*. Like the bed, the scar evokes a story. Whereas Odysseus himself recounts the building of the bed, it is Homer who narrates the story of the scar. No matter whether or not the story of the scar is internally focalized by Eurycleia,[47] in both cases the entities triggering the recognition are bound up with stories. Moreover, the scar, like the bed, is highly appropriate to the person recognizing Odysseus. While the marital bed allows Penelope to recognize her husband, the scar marks the transition from childhood to a heroic life, a crucial point for the woman who took care of Odysseus as a child. This appropriateness demonstrates that these recognition scenes are about more than *anagnōrisis*. They reveal parts of Odysseus' identity, notably parts that pertain to the person recognizing him.[48]

The closest parallel to the *anagnōrisis* of Odysseus by Penelope is the *Odyssey*'s final recognition scene. In Book 24, Odysseus goes to his father in the countryside.

[44] Purves (n. 7), 78. See also B. Holmes, *The Symptom and the Subject: The Emergence of the Physical Body in Ancient Greece* (Princeton, 2010).

[45] For a survey, see E. Schildkrout, 'Inscribing the body', *Annual Review of Anthropology* 33 (2004), 319–44; for an illuminating case-study of tattooing on Polynesia, see A. Gell, *Wrapping in Images: Tattooing in Polynesia* (*Oxford Studies in Social and Cultural Anthropology: Cultural Forms*) (Oxford, 1996).

[46] See, however, Purves (n. 7), who analyses weapons and argues that their vibrant nature dissolves the boundary between human being and matter.

[47] As argued by I.J. de Jong, 'Eurykleia and Odysseus' scar: *Odyssey* 19.393–466', *CQ* 35 (1985), 517–18; J.J. Peradotto, *Man in the Middle Voice: Name and Narration in the* Odyssey (Princeton, 1990), 125–6.

[48] Cf. J. Grethlein, *Die* Odyssee*: Homer und die Kunst des Erzählens* (Munich, 2017), 180–3.

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Laertes is clad in rags, but Odysseus has no difficulties identifying him. Inversely, Laertes fails to recognize his son, who first introduces himself as a certain Eperitus and reports that he hosted Odysseus four years ago in Alybas. Only when Laertes faints after hearing this piece of news about his son does Odysseus reveal his true identity. Laertes asks from him an 'unmistakable sign' (σῆμά τί μοι νῦν εἰπὲ ἀριφραδές, 24.329). Odysseus first shows his scar and then adduces the trees in the orchard which he received from Laertes as a boy. Now 'Laertes' knees and the heart within him went slack, | as he recognized the signs, fixed in the ground, that Odysseus had given' (... τοῦ δ' αὐτοῦ λύτο γούνατα καὶ φίλον ἦτορ, | σήματ' ἀναγνόντος τά οἱ ἔμπεδα πέφραδ' Ὀδυσσεύς, 24.345–6).

In both scenes, the same material serves as evidence: wood. In the Laertes scene, it is not cut and trimmed but also not without human touch: the orchard is a cultivated piece of land, in Odysseus' approving words: 'Everything is well cared for, and there is never | a plant, neither fig tree nor yet grapevine nor olive | nor pear tree nor leek bed uncared for in your garden' (ἀλλ' εὖ τοι κομιδὴ ἔχει, οὐδέ τι πάμπαν, | οὐ φυτόν, οὐ συκῆ, οὐκ ἄμπελος, οὐ μὲν ἐλαίη, | οὐκ ὄγχνη, οὐ πρασιή τοι ἄνευ κομιδῆς κατὰ κῆπον, 24.245–7). While the hewn tree embodies the character of marriage between nature and culture, the well-tended orchard is an apposite figure for the procreation and continuance of a family line. Here, too, the sign of recognition expresses the central aspect of Odysseus' identity in his relation to the one recognizing him: being part of Odysseus' patrimony, the orchard defines Odysseus as a son.[49] Like the bed, the orchard is thus linked to Odysseus metaphorically. As Purves points out, the image of the orchard as a symbol of the family's continuance can build on the frequent comparisons of Homeric heroes to trees.[50] Whereas, however, many of these metaphors and similes emphasize human fragility, in the Laertes scene the growth of the trees figures the chain of generations.

More powerful than this figuration is the metonymic bond between Odysseus and the orchard. As in the case of the bed, ἔμπεδος oscillates between a literal and a metaphorical meaning: the firmly fixed trees in the ground are simultaneously a firm proof of Odysseus' identity (24.346). The orchard is part of who Odysseus is. His appearance does not suffice to establish his identity. Whereas Odysseus immediately recognizes his father despite the sorry state he is in, Laertes fails to identify his son when he sees him. Not even the scar, it seems, is sufficient proof. Odysseus needs to complement this sign incised in his body with the orchard for Laertes to believe that he is facing his son.[51] The orchard not only symbolizes Odysseus' status as a son; its role in the *anagnōrisis* drives home that, like his bed, the trees also form part of who he is. The metaphorical link between the son Odysseus and trees signals a deeper metonymic bond. Odysseus is entangled with the orchard as well as with the bed. It is on account

[49] Cf. Grethlein (n. 48), 187–9.

[50] See Purves (n. 27), 222–8, who not only interprets the trees in the orchard in light of the comparisons of falling soldiers to trees, but also brings them together with ships, which also consist of trees, albeit in a horizontal, not a vertical, arrangement. On Homeric tree and plant similes expressing human fragility, see further J. Grethlein, *Das Geschichtsbild der* Ilias*: Eine Untersuchung aus phänomenologischer und narratologischer Perspektive* (Göttingen, 2006), 85–94.

[51] On the parallel to Penelope, who is not satisfied with the scar, see Katz (n. 23), 181. S. Murnaghan, 'Farming, authority, and truth-telling in the Greek tradition', in R.M. Rosen (ed.), *City, Countryside, and the Spatial Organization of Value in Classical Antiquity* (Leiden, 2006), 93–118, at 96 shows that speaking about farming establishes authority in antiquity and emphasizes that Odysseus' identity is bound up with the familiarity with farming.

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of this entanglement with Odysseus that the orchard can become an agent and, while only a thing, effects the recognition of Odysseus through his father.

There is a further parallel with the Penelope scene at play here, in that the orchard's agency is also unlocked through a story. Penelope accepts Odysseus as her husband when he narrates how he built their marital bed. In order to convince Laertes, Odysseus does not simply list the trees in his orchard, but recounts how Laertes walked with him through the orchard and named all the trees for him. The things with which man is entangled are themselves bound up with stories. The entanglement with things which fixes man's identity manifests itself in stories. The orchard as well as the bed illustrates that narrative is the rope that entangles man with things.

One more object is relevant in this context. In Book 22, the beggar unveils his identity as Odysseus to the suitors and begins his revenge. This scene differs from the recognition scenes and is thus often absent from the discussion of them,[52] but Odysseus' revelation of his identity before the suitors affords yet another example of Odysseus' entanglement with a thing that perhaps is also made of wood, namely his bow.[53] The bow is a significant object, distinguished by a genealogy which is unfolded at the beginning of Book 21: Odysseus received the bow from Iphitus, who had inherited it from his father Eurytus (21.11–38). Homer deftly uses this genealogy to generate scenic irony, as a gift from a host becomes the means by which a violation of the laws of hospitality is punished.[54] The fact that Odysseus stores the bow in his attic and does not take it to war further highlights its special status (21.38–41).

In addition to this symbolic significance, the bow occupies a pivotal position in the *Odyssey*'s plot. It is the instrument with which Penelope's new husband is supposed to be selected. None of the suitors, however, is able to string it. Only Odysseus can do this: once he has the bow in his hands, he carefully weighs and checks it over. He then shoots Antinous, unveils his identity, albeit without giving his name (22.35–41), and continues to kill further suitors with arrows. Having been introduced as a device to select Penelope's husband, the bow becomes the instrument of Odysseus' revenge.

The coincidence of the use of the bow with the revelation of Odysseus' identity highlights his entanglement with the weapon. The fact that only Odysseus can string the bow appears to be more than a question of physical strength: Telemachus, who is at the threshold of adulthood, would have been able to string it in a fourth attempt had Odysseus not signalled him to stop (21.125–9). It is as if the bow responded only to Odysseus'—and potentially his son's and heir's—hands, showing that he is

[52] Cf. Murnaghan (n. 23), 56–8.

[53] In *Od*. 21.395, Odysseus tests his bow 'to see if worms had eaten the horn in the master's absence'. F. Eckstein, *Handwerk* (*Archaeologia Homerica* vol. 2, L1) (Göttingen, 1974), 41 n. 287 contends that 'horn' is here used only metaphorically to signify the two tips of the bow, but Pandarus' bow in the *Iliad* is said to be made of horn (4.105–11). None the less, several scholars assume that Homeric bows are 'of "composite type": that, made out of wooden staves reinforced by inset strips of horn (keratin) on the inner side and sinew on the outer side, all bound together'. (G.S. Kirk, *The* Iliad*: A Commentary*, vol. 1 [Cambridge, 1985], on *Il*. 4.110 with further literature.) H.-G. Buchholz, *Kriegswesen: Ergänzungen und Zusammenfassungen* (*Archaeologia Homerica* vol. 1, E3) (Göttingen, 2010), 241 assumes that only the apices are made of horn, but this leaves open the question of whether the middle piece consists of wood or of metal. I thank Leslie Kurke for drawing my attention to the discussion of the material of Homeric bows.

[54] Cf. S. Reece, *The Stranger's Welcome: Oral Theory and the Aesthetics of the Homeric Hospitality Scene* (Ann Arbor, 1993), 174–5; Grethlein (n. 3), 42–3.

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Penelope's rightful husband and that nobody else is entitled to wed her.[55] The bow is active in resisting the hands of other men. Just as the bed is known only to Odysseus, the bow can be handled only by him. Like the bed and the orchard, the bow forms part of Odysseus' extended *persona* and can thus play a role in the *Odyssey*'s plot. While the bed defines him in relation with his wife and the inherited orchard in relation with his father, the bow substantiates his identity as a hero. By means of the bow Odysseus re-appropriates and enacts his identity as the master of the house.[56]

The bow does not only illustrate the entanglement of thing with story through its genealogy. When the beggar takes the bow, Homer compares him to a singer and the weapon to a lyre (21.404–11):

> ἀτὰρ πολύμητις Ὀδυσσεύς,
> αὐτίκ' ἐπεὶ μέγα τόξον ἐβάστασε καὶ ἴδε πάντῃ,
> ὡς ὅτ' ἀνὴρ φόρμιγγος ἐπιστάμενος καὶ ἀοιδῆς
> ῥηϊδίως ἐτάνυσσε νέῳ περὶ κόλλοπι χορδήν,
> ἄψας ἀμφοτέρωθεν ἐϋστρεφὲς ἔντερον οἰός,
> ὡς ἄρ' ἄτερ σπουδῆς τάνυσεν μέγα τόξον Ὀδυσσεύς.
> δεξιτερῇ δ' ἄρα χειρὶ λαβὼν πειρήσατο νευρῆς·
> ἡ δ' ὑπὸ καλὸν ἄεισε, χελιδόνι εἰκέλη αὐδήν.
>
> But now resourceful Odysseus,
> once he had taken up the great bow and looked it all over,
> as when a man, who well understands the lyre and singing,
> easily, holding it on either side, pulls the strongly twisted
> cord of sheep's gut, so as to slip it over a new peg,
> so, without any strain, Odysseus strung the great bow.
> Then plucking it in his right hand he tested the bowstring,
> and it gave him back an excellent sound like the voice of a swallow.

This simile has been interpreted along many different lines;[57] for my reading it is striking that it transforms the entanglemet of thing with story into a metaphor. As we have seen, things have biographies and are tied up with stories. This metonymic link becomes metaphorical when the bow is likened to the instrument that accompanies the singing of stories, perhaps indicating that it is the means which will produce new stories.

Together with Odysseus' bed, his bow and orchard illustrate that things matter in Homeric epic. They are not only significant objects but also agents in the plot. This agency, however, is not magic or automatic. On the contrary, bed, bow and orchard are explicitly 'patients' of human agency: the bed was built by Odysseus, the bow stores the value of its users and the orchard requires care. At the same time, these things become agents in that they effect major shifts in the plot. Their agency is narratively entwined with the idea of distributed personhood. The scenes discussed reveal that Homer does not envisage Odysseus as a subject in the Cartesian sense. His identity

[55] Cf. C.P. Segal, 'The Phaeacians and the symbolism of Odysseus' return', *Arion* 1 (1962), 17–64, at 51: 'His closer bond to the bow represents the innate and acquired lightness of his claim to the kingship and Penelope. It is part of his nature and his heritage as good king and gentle father.'

[56] Cf. J.L. Ready, 'Why Odysseus strings his bow', *GRBS* 50 (2010), 133–57, who argues that the stringing of the bow embeds Odysseus in relationships of *xenia* and reinvests him with kingly power.

[57] E.g. Segal (n. 55), 50–2; W.G. Thalmann, *Conventions of Form and Thought in Early Greek Epic Poetry* (Baltimore, 1984), 175–6; R.B. Rutherford, 'At home and abroad: aspects of the structure of the *Odyssey*', *PCPhS* 31 (1985), 133–50, at 143; S. Goldhill, *The Poet's Voice: Essays on Poetics and Greek Literature* (Cambridge, 1991), 66; Ready (n. 56), 149–56.

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is tied up with things: the bed defines him as a husband, the orchard as an heir and the bow as a hero. Owing to this entanglement, the bed, orchard and bow have the capacity to propel the plot when Odysseus needs to reveal his identity.

IV. MODERN THING-THEORY AND HOMER'S ATTENTIVENESS TO THINGS

Let us finally take a step back and consider the resonances of thing theory with Homeric epic. An important source for the current sway of thing theory is anthropology.[58] In the course of my argument, we have already encountered Alfred Gell, who expounded on the agency of artefacts in a wide range of non-Western cultures. Another salient example is Arjun Appadurai, who criticized purely economic concepts of commodity goods and alerted us to the social life of things visible, for example, in the *kula* system in Melanesia.[59] However, as in the case of other theories, the success of thing theory is due not least to its heuristic potential in our world: things also matter a great deal in Western societies. One of the pioneers of this idea has been Bruno Latour. In his studies of science labs, Latour first demonstrated the active role of technical artefacts in the production of scientific knowledge.[60] Machines not only are instruments but also crucially shape the results of scientific research. On this basis, Latour developed the actor-network theory, a framework for the analysis of artefacts and their agency at large.[61] 'We have never been modern'—the provocative title of one of Latour's books aptly condenses the thesis that our relation to things is not that different from the belief in magic of so-called primitive societies.

As the sweeping success and broad reception of his approach shows, Latour has hit the nerve of our time. The explosive increase of things with which we interact on a daily basis makes their impact on our lives tangible. The process of digitalization in particular seems to have lifted the agency of things to a new level: our mobile phones alert us to deadlines; our watches count our steps and convey our bio-data to insurance companies; the algorithms of Grindr and Tinder select with whom we may become intimate; and the GPS in our car dictates us the roads we take. There are already operative cars that drive entirely by themselves.

The ships of the Phaeacians provide a neat Homeric parallel to driverless cars today, but, as we have seen, automatic vehicles and machines do not form part of the ordinary heroic cosmos; they belong to the fabulous world of the Phaeacians and the divine sphere. The agency which I have detected in the heroic world is strictly confined. Odysseus' bed, his bow and his orchard neither harbour intentions nor bring about physical changes. They only act in that they prove Odysseus' identity and thereby move forward the plot. While not conforming to the radical assertions of some New Materialists who question the very difference between things and humans, the agency of these things highlights an idea of selfhood that is strikingly different from the

[58] Cf. Brown (n. 42), 188–9.

[59] A. Appadurai, 'Introduction: commodities and the politics of value', in id. (ed.), *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective* (Cambridge, 1986), 3–63.

[60] B. Latour and S. Woolgar, *Laboratory Life: The Construction of Scientific Facts* (Princeton, 1979).

[61] E.g. B. Latour, *Nous n'avons jamais été modernes: Essai d'anthropologie symétrique* (Paris, 1991); id., *Enquête sur les modes d'existence: Une anthropologie des Modernes* (Paris, 2012).

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Cartesian subject. A person is not seen as a subject in opposition to objects; he is defined less as an individual than through the things with which he is entangled.

Modern thing-theory opens up a new and fruitful perspective on Homeric epic, but Homer's attentiveness to things seems to have different roots. It is neither the explosion of things nor their technical craft which secures them Homer's attention. The idea of distributed personhood, which endows things with weight in the *Odyssey*, seems to be closer to the Melanesian societies explored by anthropologists like Strathern.[62] And yet, as Gell claims, social relations between things and humans can also be found in our world. His example is cars: 'But it is in fact very difficult for a car owner not to regard a car as a body-part, a prosthesis, something invested with his (or her) own social agency vis-à-vis other social agents.'[63] The following comparison, however, rather undercuts the claim: 'Just as a salesman confronts a potential client with his body (his good teeth and well-brushed hair, bodily indexes of business competence) so he confronts the buyer with his car (a Mondeo, late registration, black) another, detachable, part of his body available for inspection and approval.'[64] Of course, cars reflect on their owners, but putting them on a par with bodily features such as teeth and hair strains and ultimately weakens the argument, even in California.

At the same time, Odysseus' entanglement with things strikes a chord with another stratum of modern thing-theory that currently does not occupy centre stage and may even be felt to be uncanny by some—namely the critique of the modern disenchantment of things in the Heideggerian tradition.[65] For Heidegger, the Cartesian juxtaposition of subject and object is a major step in the history of the oblivion of Being which he wishes to overcome. In reducing things to the status of objects, the modern era occludes the fact that they are primarily and essentially embedded in the world as we are. Heidegger's thinking about things and notably his terminology change considerably from *Sein und Zeit* (1927) to the essay *Das Ding* (1950),[66] and yet there is a constant in Heidegger's take on things: the critique of the modern objectivization which falls short of the status and capacities of things.

Another thinker, who meditated piercingly on things from this perspective without adopting what most would consider the forbidding terminology and esoteric stance of Heidegger, is Erhart Kästner. A librarian by profession and after 1950 the director of the famous Wolfenbüttel library, Kästner also wrote essays which couch philosophical reflections and observations about the status quo in a highly elaborate literary style. If Kästner is still known today, then he is mentioned for his descriptions of contemporary Greece, but the modern disregard for things is a prominent topic that surfaces in several of his books. In a central chapter of *Aufstand der Dinge*, Kästner notes that things have become the slaves of the modern era. Forcefully criticizing this oppression of things,[67]

[62] Strathern (n. 39).
[63] Gell (n. 20), 18.
[64] Gell (n. 20), 18.
[65] One of the few prominent thing-theoreticians today who is engaging with Heidegger is Brown. See, for example, B. Brown, 'How to do things with things (a toy story)', *Critical Inquiry* 24 (1998), 935–64; id. (n. 43); id. (n. 42). I thank Lilah Grace Canevaro for reminding me of Brown's engagement with Heidegger.
[66] M. Heidegger, *Das Ding*, Gesamtausgabe, 1. Abteilung: Veröffentlichte Schriften 1910–1976, vol. 7: Vorträge und Aufsätze, ed. F.W. von Herrmann (Frankfurt a. M., 2000 [1950]), 165–88.
[67] E. Kästner, *Aufstand der Dinge: Byzantinische Aufzeichnungen* (Frankfurt a. M., 1973), 160–1: 'Die Dinge für grenzenlos unterdrückbar, rechtlos, willenlos, fühllos und unbedürftig der Selbst-Bestimmung zu halten, das kann bloß, wer meint, daß sie weder Leben noch Macht hätten.

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he speculates about a strike and a sedition in which the things may rise.[68] In fact, on Kästner's diagnosis, the retaliation of things has already started: after terminating the contract with things, man is now suffering the fate of the tyrant—he is lonely.[69]

While being a model of what Bennett termed 'attentiveness to things', Kästner's meditations differ from many approaches subsumed under the label of New Materialism not only in tone.[70] Kästner does not erase the line between humans and things: he does not 'vitalize' things nor does he attribute to humans the same ontological status as to inanimate matter. At the same time, Kästner has a keen sense of the dignity of things and their roles which exceed that of objects. His approach is therefore congenial to Homer's view of things. What Kästner ultimately deplores is that the modern era has abolished the entanglement of man with thing that is narratively disseminated in Homeric epic: Odysseus does not simply use things as objects; he does not only sleep in his bed, wield his bow and harvest the fruits of his orchard, but, as we have seen, bed, bow and orchard form part of who he is and therefore become powerful agents in his *nostos*.

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Sie haben es. Wovon sonst hätten die Gedichte, die Bilder, Verse, die Geschichten, die Träume von jeher gesprochen als eben von ihrer Gewalt? Es ist der Herren-Wahn unserer Neuzeit, zu meinen, man könne die Dinge ohne Maß, ohne Grenze ausspähen, ausforschen, ausbeuten, und es werde schon keine Rechnung deswegen ins Haus kommen. Sie täuscht sich, die Neuzeit.' ('That things can be infinitely repressed, be without rights, without will, without sentiment and without the need for self-determination, this can only be assumed by someone who believes that they have neither life nor power. But they do. What else would poems, pictures, verses, stories, dreams of all times have talked about if not their power? It is the delusion of dominion held by our modern era to think one could spy out, explore, exploit the things without limits, and that in the end there would be no bill to be settled. The modern era errs.') See also id., *Griechische Inseln: Aufzeichnungen aus dem Jahre 1944*, ed. H. Gremmels (Frankfurt a. M., 1975), 124: 'Wir sind im Begriff, die Welt bloß noch angefüllt mit Gegenständen zu sehen; es sind aber Dinge. Über einen Gegenstand kann man verfügen, ihn ausrechnen, anstellen, abstellen. So werden Dinge, denen man ihr Wunder, ihr Rätsel, also ihre Macht wegnahm, zu Gegenständen über die wir wie über Sklaven verfügen.' ('We are in the process of seeing the world filled only with objects; these objects are however things. Of an object one can dispose, one can calculate it, switch it on and off. This is how things, deprived of their miracle, their mystery and hence their power, become objects of which we dispose as of slaves.')

[68] Kästner (n. 67 [1973]), 158–9: 'Kann man glauben, die Dinge dächten niemals an Aufstand, seien zur Volks-Erhebung nicht fähig? Hätte man nicht an die uralte Waffe der gepeinigten Unterdrückten denken sollen: an die Möglichkeit eines General-Streiks der Dinge? Brauchten sie mehr zu tun, als sich abzuwenden? sich zuzuschließen? einfach bloß zu verstummen? nur sich wegzuziehen?' ('Can one believe that the things would never think of a sedition and would not be capable of an uprising? Should one not have remembered the very old weapon of those tormented and oppressed: the possibility of a general strike of the things? Would they have to do more than to turn away? To lock themselves up? Simply to become mute? Just to pull themselves aside?').

[69] As Kästner states in an earlier work (*Die Lerchenschule* [Frankfurt a. M., 1964], 161): 'Das verfluchte Wort Objekt war es, was so viel Kälte in diese Welt einließ.' ('It was the cursed word 'object' that let so much coldness enter this world.').

[70] Kästner is sometimes viewed, alongside Heidegger, Schmitt and Jünger, as part of 'the conservative revolution', but his conservative stance needs to be qualified: he is not pleading for a restoration of what came before and does not believe that developments can be reversed: e.g. Kästner (n. 67 [1973]), 165. Cf. H.-H. Gander, '"Wirklich sind nur die bedichteten Dinge": über Erhart Kästners Ethos des Schreibens', in G. Figal (ed.), *Erhart Kästner zum 100. Geburtstag: Die Wahrheit von Orten und Dingen* (Freiburg, 2004), 22–44, at 36. For more on Kästner, see H.-H. Gander, 'Martin Heidegger und Erhart Kästner', *Heidegger Studies* 3 (1987/8), 75–88; J.M. Nauhaus, *Erhart Kästners Phantasiekabinett: Variationen über Kunst und Künstler* (*Rombach Cultura* 32) (Freiburg, 2003) and the contributions to G. Figal (ed.), *Erhart Kästner zum 100. Geburtstag: Die Wahrheit von Orten und Dingen* (Freiburg, 2004).

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