

Comments on the thinking of Nick Allen about myth and epic

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Résumé: Cet essai analyse la relation entre mythe et épopée en effectuant principalement une étude de deux traditions poétiques apparentées, la grecque et l'indienne. Dans le cas des traditions grecques, l'accent est mis sur les poèmes homériques, l'Iliade et l'Odyssée. Dans le cas de la tradition indienne, il est mis sur le Mahābhārata. On fait valoir que ces deux traditions représentent non seulement des dieux mais aussi des héros dans des rôles qui correspondent aux trois "fonctions" sociales selon la formule de Dumézil, dont la théorie de la "trifonctionnalité" a été affinée à travers le modèle élargi "pentadique" de Nicholas Allen. On fait aussi valoir que le modèle d'Allen rehausse notre compréhension des relations traditionnelles entre les dieux et les héros.

Mots-clés: mythe, épopée, dieux et héros, Iliade, Odyssée, Mahābhārata, George Dumézil, Nicholas Allen, trifonctionnalité, modèle pentadique.

Abstract: This essay studies the relationship of myth and epic by analyzing primarily two cognate poetic traditions, the Greek and the Indic. In the case of the Greek traditions, the focus is on the Homeric Iliad and Odyssey. In the case of the Indic, it is on the Mahābhārata. It is argued that both of these traditions represent not only gods but also heroes in roles that correspond to all three social "functions" as formulated by Dumézil, whose theory of "trifunctionalism" has been refined by way of Nicholas Allen's expanded "pentadic" model. It is also argued that Allen's model enhances our understanding of the traditional relationships between gods and heroes.

Keywords: myth, epic, gods and heroes, Mahābhārata, Iliad, Odyssey, George Dumézil, Nicholas Allen, trifunctionalism, "pentadic model".

Part I

150. The lamented death of my friend Nicholas Justin Allen on 21 March 2020 has taken away from me the intellectual delight of debating with him *viva voce*, time and again, about matters of intense mutual interest.¹ In particular, our amicable debates tended to center on the works of Georges Dumézil about myth and epic. One particular piece of writing by Dumézil stood out for us: it was Part I of Volume I of Dumézil's *Mythe et épopée*, originally published in 1968, about the epic poetry of India, exemplified especially by the *Mahābhārata*. To console myself as I contemplate the cruel loss of further opportunities for "live" debate with Nick Allen, I attempt here, in the first part of a bipartite essay, to re-engage with his lively mind by offering

1. This article is a preprint version of Part I and Part II, appeared in Nagy, 2022a and b.

some comments on his thinking in a relevant article he published,² where he concentrates on making adjustments to the “trifunctional” theories of Dumézil as applied to the Indic *Mahābhārata*.³ In the same article, Allen then goes on to apply these adjustments of his, formulated in terms of what he used to call his “pentadic” theory, to his own analysis of the Homeric *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. Here in Part I of my bipartite essay, I start by commenting on some insightful observations made by Allen in comparing the *Mahābhārata* with Homeric poetry,⁴ and I will deal with these observations in their order of importance, as I see it, while citing the most relevant pages in Allen’s article. Later, in Part II, I will go on to make further comments on some aspects of Allen’s adjustments as they apply to Greek epic.

I§1. According to the model of “trifunctionality” that we see being formulated by Dumézil in his many publications (I concentrate for the moment on his book published in 1968), various languages classified as “Indo-European” show inherited traces of three “functions” in social organization. For Dumézil, the male representatives of these “functions” can be described, in “ideological” terms, as {1} sovereigns/priests, {2} warriors, {3} producers of prosperity, vegetal and/or pastoral. In the case of the third “function,” I should add, it is in some cases important to make further distinctions. For example, “herding” can be nomadic or, instead, it can be tied to a homestead; also, more generally, there are also cases where the category of “producers” includes or excludes artisans. In any case, Allen refers to these three “functions” simply as F1 F2 F3.⁵ But Allen removes from the category F1 the designation that I have just described as “sovereigns,” arguing that sovereignty—let us refer to it hereafter more simply as “kingship”—can be a characteristic not only of F1 but also, for example, of F2. I will return to this matter at I§4.

I§2. Allen adds to these three functions two more, F4+ and F4-,⁶ and these additions give us the essence of his “pentadic” theory. He explains F4+ in terms of “transcendence,” and F4- in terms of “devaluation.” As we will see at I§4 in the case of F4+, Allen’s formulation applies in situations where a hero can be assigned to more than one function. As for F4-, we will see in Part II of this bipartite essay that it applies in situations where a negative rather than a positive aspect of a function is emphasized.

2. Allen, 2014, following up on an earlier work, Allen, 2011.

3. Dumézil, 1968.

4. Allen, 2014 ; also in his book, published in 2020.

5. Allen, 2014, p. 3.

6. *Ibid.*

I§3. The five main heroes of the *Mahābhārata*, known as the Pāṇḍava-s, are fathered by gods who clearly represent the three male-centered functions of priest, warrior, and producer-of-prosperity:

{1} Yudhiṣṭhira is priestly, fathered by the god Dharma, who personifies whatever is sacral and who represents both ritual and the morality of ritual.

{2a} Bhīma is warlike, fathered by the god Vāyu, who personifies violent windstorms that destroy productivity.

{2b} Arjuna is also warlike, fathered by the god Indra, who personifies violent thunderstorms that can either destroy productivity or promote it by bringing rain.

{3a} and {3b} The twins Nakula and Sahadeva are generally helpful to humanity, fathered by twin gods known as the Aśvin-s, who are personifications of unimpeded productivity for vegetation and herds.

I§4. But these five heroes of the *Mahābhārata*, whose epic identities I have just tried to describe in terms of functions represented by their divine fathers, can also be identified in terms of different functions, as Allen argues throughout his article. The most obvious example is the fact that all five heroes are warriors who fight in war—not only Bhīma and Arjuna. Here, then, is a case of “transcendence,” in terms of the category that Allen calls F4+. Another example, specially highlighted by Allen, is the fact that Indra, the father of Arjuna, is actually the king of the gods in Indic mythological traditions, and that Arjuna finds himself in epic situations where he is more kingly than Yudhiṣṭhira, who is king only by virtue of his priestly knowledge and his being senior by birth.⁷

I§5. Such differences in function, as I will argue in Part II of this bipartite essay, can be explained in part by way of Allen’s “pentadic” theory—but there are aspects of Allen’s explanatory model that need to be debated, as we will see, especially in the light of the comparative evidence we find in Homeric poetry.

Part II

II§0. In Part I of this bipartite essay, I have highlighted an article by Nicholas J. Allen where he adds two more “functions” to the three mythological “functions” posited in Volume I Part I of a book by Georges Dumézil about Indo-European

7. *Ibid.*, p. 4.

traditions of mythmaking in epic.⁸ As we saw, the terms used by Allen for these two additional functions are “transcendence” and “devaluation.” Now we will see that Allen applies both these terms to the epic roles of the ancient Greek heroes Achilles and Odysseus in the Homeric *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. And I will argue here, in Part II of my bipartite essay about Nick Allen’s rethinking of Dumézil’s theories, that Allen’s categories of “transcendence” and “devaluation” can be rethought further in terms of a mythological principle that I describe as “dyadism” with reference to the epic roles of Achilles and Odysseus.

II§1. In terms of Dumézil’s model of trifunctionalism, as we have seen in Part I of my bipartite essay, at I§1, the three “functions” of heroes and gods in mythological traditions mediated by Indo-European languages are clearly visible in the epic roles of the Pāṇḍava-s, central heroes in the greatest epic of India, the *Mahābhārata*. The roles of these heroes in that epic correspond to the three mythological “functions” of the gods who fathered them in the narrative. Using Allen’s abbreviations F1 F2 F3, I review here the relevant roles of the divine fathers in terms of the three “functions”:

{F1} The first-born hero, Yudhiṣṭhira, is fathered by Dharma, who can be viewed in the *Mahābhārata* as the god of whatever is sacral.

{F2} The next two heroes, Bhīma and Arjuna, are fathered by Vāyu and Indra, in that order of birth, who can both be viewed together as gods of war.

{F3} The last two heroes, Nakula and Sahadeva, are twins fathered by gods named the Aśvin-s, who are twins in their own right and who can be viewed together as gods of productivity.

II§2. As we have also seen, however, in Part I of my bipartite essay, at I§2, Nick Allen adds to these three functions two more, F4+ and F4-,⁹ and these additions give us the essence of his “pentadic” theory. He explains F4+ in terms of “transcendence” and F4- in terms of “devaluation.” As I pointed out already in Part I, at I§4, the category that Allen calls F4+ applies in situations where a hero can be assigned to epic roles that are typical of more than one function; as for the category that Allen calls F4-, it applies in situations where a negative rather than a positive aspect of a function is emphasized. As we will see in what follows, both these two additional “functions,” F4+ and F4-, are relevant to what I describe as the “dyadism” of Achilles and Odysseus in the Homeric *Iliad* and *Odyssey*.

8. Dumézil, 1968 ; Allen, 2014, also his book, published in 2020.

9. Allen, 2014, p. 3.

II§3. In the case of *transcendence*, which is Allen's category F4+, I have already noted in Part I at I§4 the most obvious example in the *Mahābhārata*, where all five of the Pāṇḍava-s are viewed as warriors, F2, not only Bhīma and Arjuna.

II§4. But I have yet to deal with *devaluation*, that is, Allen's category F4-. I start by focusing again on the warrior heroes Bhīma and Arjuna, both of whom—when they are paired together—can be classified as F2. But now I note that one of these same two heroes has a different function as well, in terms of Allen's pentadic model-building. That warrior hero is Bhīma, whose different function is an example of *devaluation*, F4-. By contrast with the warrior hero Arjuna, who represents what is seen as the positive aspects of war—where violence is regulated by the protocols of warfare—this other warrior hero Bhīma represents the negativity of violence in general.

II§5. There is a comparable contrast to be seen in the pairing of the gods Vāyu and Indra, who respectively fathered Bhīma and Arjuna according the epic narrative of the *Mahābhārata*. In earlier Indic poetry, both Vāyu and Indra are pictured as stormgods, but the violence of windstorms caused by Vāyu, whose name is 'wind' personified, is conventionally elemental, whereas the violence of thunderstorms caused by Indra as king of the gods is more personalized, pictured as helpful for the society that Indra protects—and harmful only for whatever enemy the god wishes to destroy.

II§6. To illustrate the positive picturing of Indra as stormgod, I turn to an old Indic hymn praising him, *Rig-Veda* 1.32, as translated and interpreted by Jaan Puhvel.¹⁰ In this hymn, even the thunderbolt wielded by this stormgod Indra is pictured as a life-giving force (1.32.1-2, 8, 11). The word for this thunderbolt is *vájra-* (1.32.5). The thunderstroke of Indra's *vájra-* releases the waters of the world, which are penned up like cattle (1.32.1-2, 8, 11). As Puhvel describes it,¹¹ the violent thunderstorm of Indra is "a heroic deed that somehow meshes with the release of the pent-up rainclouds (the breaking of the monsoon), so that [...] it is sometimes hard to tell where thunderheads leave off and bellowing herds take over." Thus the rain released by the storm god waters the land, and the watering allows for grazing of herds—primarily herds of cattle. In another project,¹² I have argued that even the verb-root of the noun *vájra-*, this specialized word for the thunderbolt of the thundergod, conveys the idea of life-giving power. My argument depends on whether I

10. Puhvel, 1987, p. 51-52.

11. *Ibid.*, p. 51.

12. Nagy, 2010, at « W 253 ».

am right in explaining etymologically the root *vaj-* of the Indic noun as a cognate of the root *ueg-* of the Latin verb *uegeō*, which means ‘enliven’, that is, ‘vivify’—as for example in references to the enlivening of vegetation; even the Latin origins of this word “vegetation” go back to the meaning of *uegeō* as ‘vivify’.

II§7. In the Vedic hymn that I have just cited (*Rig-Veda* 1.32), on the other hand, the creative force of Indra’s thunderbolt is matched by its destructiveness, since the thundergod strikes the enemy with his thunderstroke in a singularized act of cosmic violence. This enemy is the demonic dragon *Vṛtra*, whose name is a personification of the noun *vṛtra-*, which means ‘holding-up’, derived from the verb-root *vṛ-*, meaning ‘to hold up’—with reference to the holding-up of cosmic flow. But this same verb-root *vṛ-*, meaning ‘to hold-up’, can also mean ‘to uphold’, reflected in the etymology of the noun used for the name of the Vedic god *Varuṇa*:¹³ the function of this god *Varuṇa* is to ‘up-hold’ cosmic stability by way of maintaining ritual correctness and morality (as in *Rig-Veda* 5.85, a hymn composed in the god’s honor).

II§8. Thus we could say, in Dumézil’s terms, that the god *Varuṇa* in his positive function of ‘up-holding’ cosmic stability and morality can be categorized as a representative of the first function, F1, which is a priestly domain. But we could also say, again in Dumézil’s terms, that the demon *Vṛtra*, in his negative function of ‘holding-up’ the cosmic flow of life-giving forces that promote good vegetation—and thus good grazing—can be classified as a representative of the third function, F3, which is the domain of producers such as cultivators and herdsmen. In this case, however, the classification F3 can operate only negatively, in terms of the function F4-.

II§9. Here, then, is where Dumézil’s functions F1 and F3 can be reconciled with each other in terms of Allen’s two additional functions, F4+ and F4-. For Allen, the aspects of the god *Varuṇa* as a representative of F1 in a positive sense and the aspects of the demon *Vṛtra* as a representative of F3 in a negative sense can be reconciled by way of qualifying both F1 and F3 in terms of F4+. If F1 is interchangeable with F3 and if F3 is interchangeable with F1, then the meaning, as signaled by the category F4+, is that these two functions are interchangeable in a positive (+) sense, which transcends differences between F1 and F3. In a negative (-) sense, on the other hand, transcendence is not possible, since the demon *Vṛtra* is exclusively a negative force, as signaled by the category F4-. To be contrasted with the negativity of the demon *Vṛtra* is the positivity

13. Puhvel, 1987, p. 48-49.

of the god Varuṇa, who is transcendent: even if this god may be linked with traits that are negative in other contexts, such traits will be seen as positive in his own domain. Such is the case with *māyá*, which is a negative force, to be translated as ‘illusion’—that is, “bad magic”—in the domain of demons who are defeated by Indra (as in *Rig-Veda* 8.14.14). But *māyá* remains a positive force—that is, “good magic”—in the domain of Varuṇa (as in *Rig-Veda* 5.85.5). So the negative aspects of *māyá* as linked with demons are secondary and are therefore subsumed by the positive aspects as linked with gods like Varuṇa— aspects that are primary. Even if Varuṇa were capable, as a god, of occasionally inducing *māyá* in a negative sense of ‘illusion’, such negativity would not and could not be exclusive as it is in the case of demons who are representatives of *māyá* as ‘illusion’ in an exclusively negative sense.¹⁴

IIŠ10. A comparable pattern of transcendence is evident in the basic opposition between the god Indra and the demon Vṛtra. The god, in striking the demon with his thunderstroke, is a representative of the second function, F2, since he wields his thunderbolt as a weapon, just as warriors wield their own weapons of war against their enemies. But the demon who has been struck by the god’s thunderstroke is a negative representative of the first and the third functions, that is, his function is F4- with reference to both F1 and F3, since he obstructs not only the stability of the cosmos, maintained by the gods of F1, but also the cosmic flow promoted by the gods of F3, who preside over the thriving of vegetation and the grazing of herds. Thus the striking of Vṛtra by the thunderbolt of Indra transcends the function of the stormgod as a warrior, F2, and this function becomes interchangeable with F1 and F3. That is, this function of F2 is the F4+ of transcendence. Similarly, the function of Indra’s *vájra*- as a weapon of destruction in the domain of a warrior, F2, becomes in its own right transcendent, F4+. And that is because the divine weapon can now be seen also as a divine instrument of two other functions. Now there is cosmic stabilization, a function that fits F1, and there is also cosmic revitalization, a function that fits F3—since the *vájra*- brings the cosmos back to light and life by way of restoring vitality for cultivators and herders.

IIŠ11. Having applied Allen’s “pentadic” theories in the general case of Indic gods and demons in early Vedic poetry, I will now apply, briefly, these same theories in the specific case of the Indic heroes Bhīma and Arjuna in the later epic poetry of the *Mahābhārata*. To start with the obvious, I note that both heroes, as warriors, represent the function abbreviated by Allen as F2, but only

14. Again, Puhvel, 1987, p. 48-49.

one of them, Arjuna, transcends F2. Like his Vedic father Indra, who is king of the gods, Arjuna is more kingly than Bhīma, as I noted already in Part I, at I§4. As such, his function is transcendent, fitting Allen’s category F4+. Conversely, the function of Bhīma is devalued, fitting Allen’s category F4-. And here is where the term “dyadism,” as I introduced it at IIS0 above, becomes applicable. IIS12. So also in the ancient Greek epic traditions of Homeric poetry, the term “dyadism” can be applied to the two main heroes of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* respectively, who are Achilles and Odysseus. But here the dyadism of these two heroes is inversely symmetrical in the two epics. Odysseus in the *Odyssey* is more kingly than Achilles, but Achilles in the *Iliad* is more kingly than Odysseus. IIS12a. The first point that I have made here, that Odysseus in the *Odyssey* is figured to be more kingly than Achilles, is likewise made by Allen (2014), who goes on to describe the kingliness of Odysseus in terms of *transcendence*, category F4+, to be contrasted with what happens to the status of Achilles in the same epic, the *Odyssey*. Allen views this contrasting status in terms of *devaluation*, category F4-. The devaluation is made explicit in *Odyssey* 11.489-491, where the shade of Achilles in Hades declares that he would rather be alive than dead *even if the living Achilles were a lowly serf working the land*, that is, even if he belonged only to the third function, F3; even such a lowly status, says the dead Achilles, would now seem more valuable to him, now that he is dead—more valuable even than being king of the dead. So, Achilles here in the *Odyssey* opts for *devaluation* into the third function, F3, over *transcendence* into the category signaled as F4+ by Allen.

IIS12b. As for the second point I have made, that Achilles in the *Iliad* is figured to be more kingly than Odysseus, here I differ with Allen, who thinks that the function of Achilles in the *Iliad* is to be viewed in terms of *devaluation*, classified as F4-.¹⁵ I disagree here. I think that that there is *transcendence*, F4+, to be seen in the fact that, in the “Embassy Scene” of *Iliad* 9, Odysseus avoids reporting to Achilles a claim made by Agamemnon at lines 160–161, before the Embassy gets underway. In those lines, Agamemnon declares that he is more kingly than Achilles. The fact that Odysseus, speaking first in the “Embassy Scene,” avoids reporting this claim means, I think, that he recognizes that the claim of Agamemnon is not valid—and that Achilles would firmly reject such a claim if he, Odysseus, were to report it. As I have argued in some detail in my commentaries on *Iliad* 9, the fact that Odysseus does not repeat to Achilles the claim made by Agamemnon actually devalues the status of Odysseus

15. Allen, 2014.

himself in the *Iliad*.¹⁶ It seems to me that Odysseus knowingly suppresses what Agamemnon claims about kingly superiority because he knows that the premise of the claim is wrong. Agamemnon had made explicit his motive for offering gifts of compensation to Achilles: acceptance of those gifts, Agamemnon assumed, would prove that he is more kingly than Achilles. If Achilles had accepted on such terms the offer of Agamemnon as incompletely reported to him by Odysseus, then the principal hero of the Homeric *Iliad* would have been aborting his own epic—and his own transcendence.

II§13. I should add that the dyadism of Achilles and Odysseus on the level of meaning is reflected, on the level of form, in the evolution of the formulaic system that produced, ultimately, the Homeric *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. The statistical evidence for the formulaic dyadism of the names ‘Achilles’ and ‘Odysseus’ in Homeric diction is most persuasively presented in *Classical Continuum* by Gregory Crane.¹⁷

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16. Nagy, 2016–2017.

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